Stonewall ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is produced by Stonewall, a UK-based charity that stands for the freedom, equity and potential of all lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people.

At Stonewall, we imagine a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can live our lives to the full.

Founded in London in 1989, we now work in each nation of the UK and have established partnerships across the globe. Over the last three decades, we have created transformative change in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, helping win equal rights around marriage, having children and inclusive education.

Our campaigns drive positive change for our communities, and our sustained change and empowerment programmes ensure that LGBTQ+ people can thrive throughout our lives. We make sure that the world hears and learns from our communities, and our work is grounded in evidence and expertise.

To find out more about our work, visit us at www.stonewall.org.uk

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INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNERS TOOLKIT

Storytelling, Reclaiming and
Reacting and Community
Mobilisation

Stonewall
Acceptance without exception

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNERS TOOLKIT

Storytelling, Reclaiming and Reacting and Community Mobilisation

LEARNING FROM LGBT RIGHTS
CAMPAIGNERS IN ARMENIA, BELARUS,
GEORGIA, KYRGYZSTAN, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

Written by **Liz Jacobs** Stonewall

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FOREWORD

Reflecting on the last century, there has undoubtedly been progress for lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) people worldwide. But experience has taught us that the movement towards equality is never straightforward.

While the quality of life for some LGBT people has improved, for others progress has stagnated, and in some cases this progress is going backwards with LGBT communities fighting to be heard. One of the regions where this is clearest is Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, where LGBT movements face some of the most challenging contexts in the world.

In this region, LGBT communities face extremely high levels of violence and discrimination, and perpetrators of anti-LGBT abuse rarely face justice. Laws restricting freedoms of expression, association and assembly – for LGBT people, and for human rights movements generally – have been rolled out across the region since 2010.

Local LGBT movements have also struggled to gain international recognition and support, despite the challenges they face. 'Anti-propaganda' laws – which restrict public expressions of support for LGBT rights – have been enacted or proposed in at least ten countries in the region.

The situation is serious and can make for deeply upsetting reading. At Stonewall we're committed to providing continual support. We also firmly believe that international support works best when it involves listening, affirming and recognising the power of local LGBT movements to drive change.

This toolkit spotlights some of the incredible work LGBT movements are doing in this region to press for respect, tolerance, and ultimately, acceptance.

I find huge inspiration in the case studies in this toolkit. They show how LGBT movements, in countries from Armenia to Kyrgyzstan, are refusing to believe that change is impossible, and are using creative and strategic campaigning techniques to get their message out. They are having an impact, and the examples they set can teach all of us lessons about how to make real change happen.

Ruth Hunt.

Ruth Hunt, Chief Executive

INTRODUCTION

Context: Common themes from the region

This toolkit aims to bring to life the work of LGBT rights campaigners in one of the most challenging regional contexts for LGBT rights in the world – Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

It focuses particularly on Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Ukraine. Whilst the situation in each country is unique, human rights defenders share a number of serious challenges including: a lack of respect for – and sometimes legal restrictions on – LGBT freedoms of assembly, association and expression, hostile public attitudes towards LGBT people and high levels of anti-LGBT violence.

COMMON THEMES:

ANTI-PROPAGANDA LAWS:

There has been an increase in these laws across the region since 2010. They are designed to silence and stigmatise any public appeals for LGBT rights under the pretext of safeguarding 'traditional values'. These laws fit into a wider narrative that paints LGBT (and other human rights) as part of a 'Western led' agenda, often spearheaded by conservative religious groups and backed up by legal systems. These attempts to repress free speech are key battlegrounds for campaigners in these countries, who are fighting to articulate their basic human rights as simply about tolerance, respect and ultimately acceptance. You can see case studies of this in action from Armenia (page 15) and Kyrgyzstan (page 16).

SOCIAL ATTITUDES:

Negative attitudes towards LGBT people are highly prevalent throughout the region. In Armenia, research shows that 97.5 per cent of people think it's unacceptable for a same sex couple to kiss in public.[1] In Ukraine, a 2016 survey showed 60 per cent of people had a negative attitude towards LGBT people – and only four per cent a positive one. However, it is worth highlighting that almost a third of these respondents regarded LGBT people with indifference. It is often this group of people, the 'moveable-middle', that doesn't feel any particular way towards LGBT people, that campaigns in the region try and target.[2] In engaging with this 'moveable-middle', many of the campaigns profiled move away from LGBT-specific messaging and take a broader human rights approach. This is perhaps most clearly explored in case studies from Russia (page 12) and Armenia (page 18).

SUPPRESSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

The region's LGBT movements are not alone in facing hostility from governments and the public. Human rights movements generally, as well as a range of minority struggles, have also often faced restrictions on their ability to organise around issues of equality. At the same time, LGBT movements are often limited in the allies they can look to for support. Moreover, LGBT movements are also themselves incredibly diverse – to create and sustain community mobilisation, they need to engage on a broad range of inequalities; not just LGBT rights. In this context, it can become strategic, safer and more sustainable to recognise and articulate that LGBT equality campaigns make part of a broader struggle for human rights and basic freedoms. As in Belarus (page 11) where campaigners focused on shared values of love and family or in Kyrgyzstan (page 10) where campaigns successfully hooked LGBT rights appeals to broader shared values around free speech.

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[1] *Pink Armenia (2016) From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes towards LGBTI People in Armenia https://issuu.com/pinkarmenia/docs/from_prejudice_to_equality_english*

[2] *Andrii Kravchuk and Oleksandr Zinchenkov, LGBT Human Right Nash Mir Center (2016) A New Beginning: LGBTI Situation in Ukraine http://gay.org.ua/en/blog/2017/02/06/a-new-beginning-LGBTi-situation-in-ukraine-in-2016/*

Similarly, many of the case studies also show that by mixing appeals to acceptance with artistic projects, including the use of creative campaigning techniques involving documentary, film and photography, can also offer ways to foster dialogue with broader publics – where appeals to political rights fail, appeals to artistic and intellectual freedoms can sometimes be successful. This is perhaps most clearly shown in case studies from Ukraine (page 17) and Russia (page 13).

The LGBT movement in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus is wide and diverse. Although many of the organisations pushing for LGBT equality in the region have support from larger international organisations, the reality is that most local movements tend to be small and grassroots. Even in largely hostile legal and social situations, activists might speak of slow progress, but it is progress none the less. Whether it's through attracting international support, appealing to broader human rights issues or building new alliances, LGBT campaigners are doing vital work to advance equality – work we hope will inspire LGBT rights campaigners seeking to make change in countries around the world.

International Campaigners Programme

Stonewall has been working with LGBT rights campaigners in this region since October 2014, principally by organising programmes and events focused on sharing campaigning skills, knowledge and networks, encouraging support and diplomatic action from the UK Government, and by supporting regional movement-building efforts.

In November 2016, we welcomed 36 LGBT rights campaigners from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Ukraine to London for a week-long programme focused on core aspects of campaigning methods. The following year we held a two-day *International Campaigners Conference* in Kyiv, which brought together over 70 frontline LGBT rights campaigners from 30 different organisations and six countries. The main point of the Kyiv Conference was to give space to campaigners to share their campaigning work and expertise with each other within the region itself. Campaigns we profile in this toolkit are drawn from the delegates' presentations, and together showcase the vital and innovative work they are doing throughout the region. These case studies are based on follow-up interviews with campaigners from the following organisations: Pink Armenia, Dotyk, LGBTQI Association TEMIDA, Labrys, Kyrgyz Indigo, Russian LGBT Network, Service Project for Transgender People and their Close Ones T9 NSK, KyivPride and Insight.

Who is this toolkit for?

First and foremost, this toolkit is for LGBT human rights campaigners.

The case studies highlighted show best practice examples of campaigning in very challenging contexts that we hope will be of inspiration to campaigners working in situations where change, at times, might seem impossible. But we also hope that campaigners working in relatively free legal and social contexts will also find inspiration.

This toolkit also contains learnings for larger international human rights organisations looking to better understand the region, especially when supporting local actors within the LGBT movement. It is also for anyone who works with vulnerable groups through support services, advocacy programmes and community-based roles. But really, this toolkit is for anyone who wants to learn about the demanding campaigning done by activists working towards LGBT equality worldwide.

What do we mean by campaigning?

Campaigning can take many forms; from public protests, to story-focused social media appeals, to efforts to raise community awareness.

At Stonewall we believe in a broad and inclusive definition of campaigning – everything that LGBT rights campaigners do to appeal more broadly for equality and acceptance counts. In this toolkit we're particularly interested in what some call 'public-facing campaigning work'; campaigns and communication appeals in whatever format they take, which – through reaching broader public audiences – encourage greater dialogue, inclusion, visibility and space. In this region, where activists regularly face severe state restrictions on freedom of expression, hostile public attitudes, and inaccessible mainstream media, this kind of work can sometimes seem unachievable. Not only that, but organisations are often already overwhelmed with providing direct support services and immediate advocacy to the communities who need them. Nonetheless, there are clear examples of diverse campaigns from across the region showing that creative campaigning responses can be effective in very challenging positions.

The following chapters offer three distinct ways of looking at campaigning work in the region. The first chapter profiles approaches involving storytelling in some way – as a means of humanising LGBT people, and abstract rights issues, and of tapping into empathy to create social action.[3] The second chapter focuses on 'reacting and reclaiming' where – in the face of immediate challenges, scarce resources, or assaults on community space – campaigners have strategically responded to various forms of injustice. The third chapter looks at campaigning models involving community mobilisation and the strategic importance of LGBT spaces.

These campaigns focus on a variety of target audiences and use a range of methods. They reveal how campaigning can encourage diverse groups of people to connect with an issue or topic they wouldn't normally engage with. The more people engage in these movements, the closer equality is for all of us.

[3] *Abigail Scott Paul (2017) Social Change: Are we Telling the Wrong Stories*
https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/social-change-are-we-telling-wrong-stories

CHAPTER 1: STORYTELLING AS CAMPAIGNING

Introduction

Over the past decade, storytelling – as well as the use of emotional appeals and the strategic use of 'framing' by campaigners – has become a major focus for campaigning practitioners and critics.

Framing or frames are mental structures used to communicate the views of a person, organisation or campaign.[4] By connecting on an emotional level and by humanising abstract issues, campaigns can hopefully touch groups of people that might otherwise feel indifferent to – or disconnected from – certain political topics and issues. Storytelling as a method used in campaigning allows activists to frame personal accounts and experiences in ways that try and tap into an audiences' empathy.

For example, two of the campaigns in this chapter, from Belarus and Russia, touch on the topic of 'traditional values'. Interestingly, the two campaigns take different approaches to tackling this narrative; one that avoids discussing 'traditional values' altogether, in order to deliver a broader message of love, the other directly engaging with these ideas to turn them on their head.

The other two campaigns featured in this chapter, from Kyrgyzstan and Russia, address a slightly different set of issues. They move away from a focus on LGBT-specific campaigning and put the focus instead on hate speech as a destructive force for all marginalised groups of people. In doing so, they highlight the broader cost, for all, of allowing violent communication to flourish, therefore encouraging people to see respect for LGBT people as part of a broader, kinder, project of benefit to everyone.

Though different in approach or context, these campaigns recognise the power of sharing personal experiences of discrimination.

[4] *Elena Blackmore and Bec Sanderson, ILGA-Europe and PIRC (2017) Framing Equality Toolkit*
https://www.ilga-europe.org/communicationsresources/framingequality

CASE STUDY 1:
We Are Against Discrimination (Kyrgyzstan)

In 2013, the Coalition for Justice and Non-discrimination was formed to lobby for anti-discrimination legislation. However, they quickly realised they could be more effective changing public attitudes about discrimination, rather than engaging an uninterested government.

This change in direction led to a rebranding of the coalition, now called the Coalition for Equality, and the *We Are Against Discrimination* campaign. This campaign conveyed a simple, single message through storytelling: everyone, no matter their background or identity, experiences discrimination.

To reach a larger audience, the Coalition for Equality decided to focus on the personal stories of discrimination that women, children of migrants and disabled people had faced. These stories were shared via the campaign's Facebook group, a published article and their official website. Perhaps one of the most exciting parts of the campaign was a short video played on a national television channel. The 50-second video shows a woman being told she can't participate in a football match and a young man being bullied in school, but both people refuse to let others hold them back. It ends with the woman scoring a goal and the man graduating from school. Showing the video on the national channel meant that they could tap into the empathy of people all over Kyrgyzstan to promote their message of anti-discrimination.

Although they didn't feature LGBT stories specifically this was a strategic move to get larger Kyrgyz society thinking about how painful the experience of discrimination is for anyone. Through building empathy by telling the stories of different communities, the campaign will hopefully contribute to acceptance for all, including LGBT people.

CASE STUDY 2:
Family Campaigners (Belarus)

Still from #stophateby
Credit: Dotyk - www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xb89ErLtuvw

For two years Dotyk worked closely with a peer support group for parents of LGBTQ people at their LGBTQ community centre. What started as a meeting space allowing parents to pose questions to, and better understand their LGBTQ children, became the inspiration for the #stophateby campaign implemented by Dotyk in cooperation with Journalists for Tolerance.

At the end of 2017, Dotyk engaged with five relatives of LGBTQ people ready to speak out on behalf of their families. Although initially worried the relatives would back out due to widespread anti-LGBTQ sentiment, Dotyk and Journalists for Tolerance were able to shoot a series of video interviews and write supporting articles as part of the #stophateby campaign against homophobia and hate speech.

The response was surprising.

Expecting a negative backlash from the media, much of the coverage was in fact described as neutral in their reporting of the campaign – no publications insulted the campaign. The video interviews themselves received over 200,000 views and the articles got more social media 'likes' than 'dislikes'. While negative comments were still common, it was clear that people were listening to the stories of these relatives. When asked why the stories of family members seemed to generate less negative attention than LGBT people themselves, a representative of Dotyk said: 'No matter how homophobic or biased [a commenter] is, there are less reasons to attack parents as compared to when they direct their assault toward LGBTIQ people…'.

To promote the campaign, Dotyk and Journalists for Tolerance held a public presentation of the videos inviting 30 organisations and journalists from across Belarus to hear in-person accounts of those engaged with the project. The family members described their processes of acceptance and their difficulty in witnessing their loved ones being discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Nominated by the Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC) for best civil campaign of the year, #stophateby won with its positive, emotional and simple message that love can overcome hate.

CASE STUDY 3:
We Are Traditional (Russia)

Refusing to be defined as 'other' and 'non-traditional', the Service Project for Transgender People and Their Close Ones T9 NSK's campaigns subvert the typical 'tradition' narrative often used to supress LGBT people.

A project of both T9 NSK and the Russian LGBT Network, the campaign is titled *We Are Traditional*. This campaign takes the current Russian understanding for the word 'queer' as 'non-traditional' and counters it through a series of photographs depicting LGBT people doing 'traditional' practices such as shopping together, caring for each other, and having fun together.

Promoting simple images of LGBT people having 'traditional' experiences had two goals. The first goal was to amplify the message that LGBT people are just like anybody else. The second was to tackle internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia within the LGBT community itself. Organisers explained that discriminatory attitudes towards LGBT people run so deeply throughout Russia that many LGBT people find themselves thinking they are 'bad' or 'other' – so the campaign was designed to counter these feelings of exclusion, whilst articulating a more inclusive message more broadly.

Predominantly a social media campaign, the response to this new way of framing LGBT people was positive, with more than 300 online publications of the photos and over 2,000 social media 'likes'. The campaign's popularity spread to neighbouring countries, including Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, where campaigners used the hashtag #мытрадиционны to also promote LGBT equality in their own contexts.

Due to capacity issues the campaign hasn't been continued by T9 NSK. However, their most recent campaign also appeals to 'traditional values' through the *I'm Here for You* campaign.

I'm Here for You is a campaign based on the acceptance of LGBT people by their brothers and sisters. Starting by hosting a focus group for brothers and sisters of LGBT people, T9 NSK collected their stories of love and acceptance to share with the larger LGBT community as well as their allies.

Although the *I'm Here for You* campaign is still in the beginning stages, it mirrors the sentiment of *We Are Traditional* by directly engaging with broader ideas about traditional values.

Campaign photo from We Are Traditional. Credit: T9 NSK

CASE STUDY 4:
Interactive Connection (Russia)

Slovo is a six-minute online interactive documentary created by the Russian LGBT Network and the Interactive Arts Workshop, which proclaims: 'the story told in this film is just as personal as your own experience of interacting with it and just as infinite as every individual's inner world'.
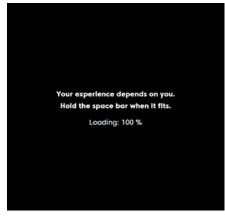
Throughout the documentary nine people from different vulnerable social groups in Russia read real examples of hate speech collected from the internet without any preparation. At one point in the documentary, one of the participants asks the camera, 'May I please not read this?' delivering the effective message that hate speech is hurtful and destructive no matter who it impacts.

At the beginning of the documentary, the viewer is prompted with a line encouraging people to interact with the film, saying: 'Your experience depends on you. Hold the space bar when it fits.' At any point during the documentary, holding down the space bar brings the viewer to a different video stream playing news footage of acts of injustice and hate. By interacting with the document, the viewer is no longer passive, but rather someone who is actively engaging with various forms of hate speech and how it impacts them.

Framed as an art project and not as a human rights documentary, with the aim of reaching a larger audience, the Russian LGBT Network didn't attach their name to it, hoping more people would engage with it without dismissing it right away. In part due to the provocative content of the documentary, the response was mixed. While there was an expected negative online response from far right and anti-LGBT groups, there was a small section of people who were concerned about the participants' and viewers' wellbeing, as much of the hate speech could be deemed as triggering. However, the positive feedback was overwhelming with viewers describing the documentary as revealing because they didn't realise how impactful hate speech could be. The reactions from the participants in particular illustrate how words and actions are interconnected and reinforce each other, revealing how violent language fuels persecution.

The reactions to the documentary speak to the emotional impact storytelling has on people. The emotional chord it struck with varying audiences proves its effectiveness. So far, there have been over 20,000 visits to the website to view *Slovo,* and the number continues to grow.

Stills from Slovo.
Credit: Russian LGBT Network
http://slovo-film.com/en/

CHAPTER 2: REACTING AND RECLAIMING

Introduction

Often campaigns require time and planning before significant action can take place, but in some cases new threats require immediate action. LGBT campaigners in the region often expect backlash from opponents on the far right, but sometimes it is not direct antagonism they face, but rather, more subtle forms of censorship by local government or religious authorities. The case studies in this chapter explore how campaigners have responded creatively to attempts to silence communities and restrict public space claims.

For example, in Armenia, campaigners effectively tackled censorship of LGBT content in film and on billboards, leading to more positive visibility for LGBT issues. Or in Kyrgyzstan, where government censors unknowingly gave LGBT organisations the tool to create a new symbol to rally around.

In responding to censorship, LGBT groups are also expanding their fight and making these silencing acts about freedom of speech and expression, rather than discrimination against LGBT people. Again, this secures a wider reach to non-LGBT audiences. By reacting and reclaiming spaces, LGBT organisations are refusing to be silenced, and are pushing for sustainable safe spaces.

CASE STUDY 1:
Listen to Me (Armenia)

In *Listen to Me: Untold Stories Beyond Hatred,* one of the subjects states: 'It is not foreign for me to respect you and for you to respect me'.
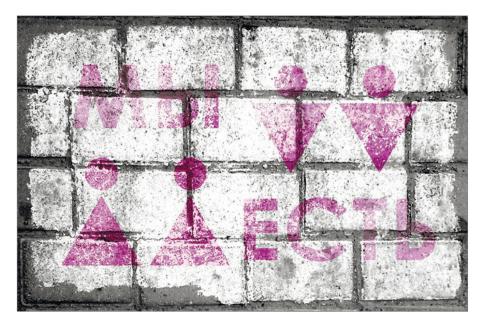
Listen to Me is a documentary by Pink Armenia depicting ten representatives of the LGBT community in Armenia that agreed to come out in the open and talk about their experiences in front of the camera. Originally scheduled to play at the 2017 Golden Apricot Yerevan International Film Festival – an annual film festival held in Yerevan, Armenia – the documentary was withdrawn from the festival because of its LGBT content, reportedly due to pressure from the Armenian Church. Pink Armenia also noted that *Listen to Me* was not the only LGBT-themed film that was withdrawn from the festival. The screening of *Apricot Groves,* an Armenian-Iranian fictional film was also stopped.

Refusing to be silenced, Pink Armenia quickly organised parallel screenings of the film, online petitions, a public demonstration and media debates during the Golden Apricot festival. Engaging with filmmakers, anti-censorship campaigners and patrons of the film festival, Pink Armenia framed the removal of the documentary as not only an LGBT issue, but also a problem of free speech. The aim was to reach people who are not active LGBT rights supporters, but do care about free speech and censorship; prompting them to act on behalf of an issue that deeply impacts the LGBT community, as well as everyone else. The campaign drew comparisons to the treatment of the famous Armenian and bisexual film director Sergei Parajanov who was repeatedly persecuted and imprisoned by the Soviet Union for his politics, art and sexuality. This individual case connected issues of sexual orientation with those of highly politicised state censorship, in a way which would resonate with broader audiences.

Pink Armenia's swift response brought local and international attention to this act of suppression, which ultimately led to the amplification of the voices intended to be censored by the Church and anti-LGBT groups. Pink Armenia's campaign has since prompted a broader discussion about the Armenian film industry and brought a wider understanding of Armenian LGBT lived experiences into public view.

Still from Listen to Me. Credit: Pink Armenia - www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFMgzclB9po

CASE STUDY 2:
White Square (Kyrgyzstan)

Photos from White Square. Credit: Kyrgyz Indigo

LGBT civil society organisation Kyrgyz Indigo and other members of the LGBT community secretly went in the middle of the night to paint pro-LGBT messages such as 'we exist' and 'families are different' around the capital city of Bishkek. Garnering media attention for this public declaration from the LGBT community, the government reacted by painting over them to cover the positive messages of love and solidarity.

Enter the white square.

Initially used by the local government as a tool to censor the LGBT community, the white square of paint that was the result of covering the messages was quickly reclaimed by activists as a symbol of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan refusing to be silenced. This was a particularly compelling tactic because it could resonate with LGBT people and other minorities who have had to reclaim symbols and words of hate. One extremely powerful example of this, that certain audiences might draw parallels with, is the reclamation (and inversion) of the pink triangle used to identify LGBT people in Nazi Germany by early gay liberation activists.

What is unique about the white square is that it is a distinctly Kyrgyz symbol. As Kyrgyz Indigo and the larger Kyrgyz LGBT movement continue campaigning around this symbol, more people are learning what it means within the community and its visibility is growing as a result. More than 1,000 people in the LGBT community in and around Bishkek as well as those people reached through online platforms now know that when they see a white square, it is content that will recognise and validate them as an LGBT person. As one activist said, 'This will be ours'.

CASE STUDY 3:
Words Hurt (Ukraine)

'The language of hostility is a statement that supports or justifies the hatred of a group of people.'
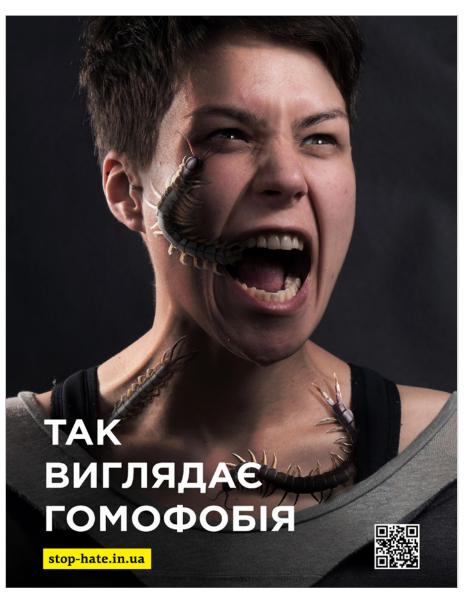http://stop-hate.in.ua/

Walking around Kyiv in October 2017, many people would have been struck by images scattered on billboards around the city, of people emotionally shouting while insects crawl out of their mouths. These images were part of the *Words Hurt* campaign which features striking images showing how painful racist, sexist and homophobic language is.

Developed by the LGBT organisation Insight, *Words Hurt* is a response to the use of violent language in everyday life. Insight's creative approach was to show something so shocking that people passing by the billboards would remember it and search for information on it.

Interestingly, their approach to tackling forms of racist, sexist and homophobic hate speech at the same time proved difficult. In Ukraine, social attitudes generally accept sexist and anti-LGBT language as normal, however racism is more widely acknowledged as unacceptable. As we've seen in other campaigns, intersectional approaches are strategically employed to reach a wider audience. In *Words Hurt* the audiences were not as ready to make the connection through the general social 'understanding' that racist language was hurtful, but sexist and anti-LGBT language wasn't. It did however, reach 25,000 people online and offline, planting the seeds for future campaigns.

While Insight plans on a slightly different approach in the future, *Words Hurt's* success has provided a platform for the campaign to continue in counteracting violent communication for marginalised communities in Ukraine.

Words Hurt poster.
Credit: Insight

CASE STUDY 4:
Happiness for Everyone? (Armenia)

In 2017, LGBTI organisation Pink Armenia wanted to build a platform for public discussion around the themes of 'love' and 'happiness' for everyone.

To achieve this, they organised a campaign aimed at raising awareness and promoting acceptance of LGBTI people through social media posts. Having no access to public television, Pink Armenia started by sharing a series of short videos online appealing to these themes. However, concerned they were only reaching a narrow audience, they negotiated a deal with a local advertising company to put posters on billboards around the centre of Yerevan – something that hadn't been done before.

Pink Armenia wanted to target the portion of the Armenian population which doesn't have access to the internet, as well as people just passing by. For three days, the billboards were up and displayed messages in the streets of the capital, such as: 'Do you want everyone to be happy? Then wish us happiness'; 'LGBT people are not invisible, you see them everywhere'; and 'Trans people are a part of our society'. After three days the local municipal government banned the posters and promptly removed them, claiming organisers didn't have permission to put them up in the first place. According to organisers, municipal authorities not only banned any further publication of the posters, they also warned other advertising companies not to work with Pink Armenia, using threats regarding future business problems.

Although the desired effect of banning the posters was to silence the LGBTI community, Pink Armenia was able to bring more attention to and visibility for the LGBTI community because of the restrictions than if the billboards had just been left alone. In their response, the group submitted a claim to the Administrative Court of Armenia to challenge the municipal government on grounds of freedom of expression and anti-discrimination – a case that could bring real, sustainable, long-term change for the LGBTI community in a very different way than the intended impact of the poster campaign. In the first hearing, the representative of the municipal government was obliged to provide proof on how, and on what legal basis, the demand to remove the posters had been presented, and to show that their action had no discriminatory intent. The next hearing is in March 2018.

Still from Listen to Me.
Credit: Pink Armenia

CHAPTER 3: COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Introduction

Community mobilisation is about bringing people together in pursuit of a shared goal, and usually involves the creation of new, safe community spaces. This is not always easy, especially in contexts where physical as well as verbal violence is a regular threat for LGBT people. For many organisations in the region, building community within LGBT groups is the first priority before trying to reach out to potential allies in hostile environments. Not only are strong and diverse communities essential for campaigning, they can also be an end in themselves.

As the case studies here demonstrate, even when legislation might be in place to protect marginalised communities, securing safe spaces for LGBT communities is still a major challenge. For example, in Ukraine, one of the few countries in the region to have held a pride march, Kyiv Pride organisers have had to work carefully to ensure the state acts to ensure space for pride marches.

While social media and other forms of online communication allow LGBT organisations to mobilise more effectively, the risks around this are still high. All of this said, many local LGBT organisations remain optimistic they will get more safe meeting spaces, marches and demonstrations in the future. As one LGBT campaigner said of the upcoming Kyiv Pride 2018, this year, 'It will be bigger and better'.

CASE STUDY 1:
Kyiv Pride (Ukraine)

Founded in 2012, Kyiv Pride began at a time where there was a spike in anti-LGBTI sentiment provoked by ultranationalist and far-right religious groups, as well as Ukraine's first draft law to prevent 'homosexual propaganda' that was introduced in late 2012.

Five years later, a lot has changed.

Initially this Pride was a small, private event for safety and security reasons. In 2018, Kyiv Pride is expecting a large public march, but the path to this point has not been easy. In 2015, there was a total refusal from local authorities and police to cooperate with Kyiv Pride organisers. Unexpectedly, last minute high-level support came from Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, who said publicly that it was a constitutional right for Ukrainians to be able to participate in Pride. While this statement opened space for the march to occur the next day, the 300 participants – flanked by police on all sides – were attacked by far-right protesters, resulting in almost 20 people being injured, including a police officer who suffered near fatal injuries.

Since then, Kyiv Pride organisers have been able to liaise more effectively with police officers and relevant policy-makers due to their efforts to develop an appropriate security strategy around the march, and for community visibility within it. This year, the head of the patrol police has already asked Kyiv Pride to provide training and workshops to the police force on LGBT issues and equality. With 5,000 people from all over Ukraine and Europe expected to attend Kyiv Pride 2018, the increased openness and willingness of police and local officials to cooperate is an example of how much progress it has made in the last few years.

The evolution of Kyiv Pride reflects the changes happening in Ukrainian society for the LGBTI community. According to Kyiv Pride, 90 per cent of Ukrainian people think they don't know anyone who is LGBTI, but their work mobilising communities through awareness raising and education of target audiences, including the media and police forces, is gradually undoing this perception. Kyiv Pride's growing persistence and presence is proof that community-based events are still one of the most effective ways for furthering social change.

Photo of Kyiv Pride
Credit: Kyiv Pride

CASE STUDY 2:
Against Violence (Georgia)

Photo from IDAHOBIT demonstration
Credit: Dato Naskidashvili

Despite a degree of success achieved in recent years, LGBTI communities represent one of the most marginalised, least visible and discriminated against groups in Georgia. Even with the adoption of the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2014, social attitudes have been slow to follow legislative change. Anti-LGBT violence is also a very pervasive problem in the country.

In 2013, a small group of LGBTI rights campaigners were attacked by thousands of protestors backed by the Georgian Orthodox Church, during a rally organised to contest activists' actions for the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) on May 17. The violent attack resulted in the injury of 17 people. It provoked unprecedented international media coverage and marked a key moment in the history of the Georgian LGBTI movement – for a start, public demonstrations for IDAHOBIT did not happen again for four years.

In the lead up to May 17 in 2017, four LGBTQI organisations – Equality Movement, Women's Initiative Supporting Group, Identoba and LGBTQI Association TEMIDA – focused their work on one collaborative campaign to stop an attack from happening again: *Against Violence.*

This show of solidarity within the LGBTQI community for IDAHOBIT included a social media campaign that ran the month before a planned public demonstration, where videos, posters and photographs were shared across Facebook and Instagram across all of the organisations networks. Aimed at active social media users aged 18 to 45, the posts displayed stories of discrimination LGBTQI people in Georgia had faced.

The organisation of the public demonstration involved many difficult conversations, as organisers pressed the government for a guarantee of safety during the event. Through concerted action from the four organisations, and following the success of the social media campaign, the local government reluctantly supported the event and 400 LGBTQI activists – along with their family members – were able to gather and protest against the violence the LGBTQI community faces.

The *Against Violence* campaign was unique in that it represented several firsts in Georgia. One, it was the first time the four LGBTQI organisations had worked together on a single campaign; two, it was the first time a campaign covered multiple regions outside of the capital of Tbilisi – including Kutaisi and Batumi, and; three, it was the first LGBTQI public demonstration in the centre of the city since the attack in 2013. The campaign's success was apparent from the over 20,000 comments on video and photo materials from their Facebook page, as well as the increased visibility in the Georgian media, that began to cover cases of anti-LGBTQI violence and discrimination.

While the LGBTQI community still faces considerable violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, the successful demonstration on IDAHOBIT 2017 showed that community mobilisation and organisational collaboration can create safe spaces for LGBTQI people.
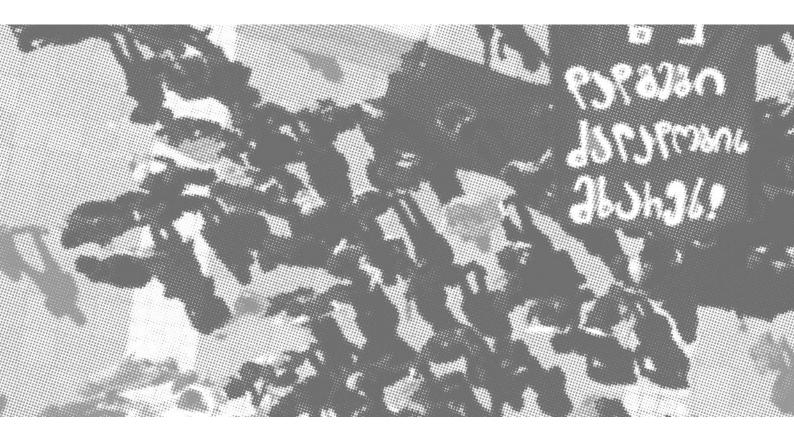
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Whatever the campaign approach – storytelling, reacting and reclaiming, and community mobilisation – LGBT rights campaigners are making progress in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

So where do campaigns go from here?

Hostile legal contexts, violent social environments and a lack of resources remain challenges for the LGBT community, but the quick actions of campaigners refusing to be silenced gives voice, not only to the LGBT community, but often to other marginalised groups as well. These responses are strengthened by appeals to a broader human rights approach, and the continued growth of digital tools which help LGBT organisations to reach and mobilise a wider audience than ever before.

The fight for LGBT equality is far from over. As campaigning continues to evolve in new and creative ways, we all have a role to play in supporting the LGBT campaigners who are driving and leading change around the world.

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