

# Being LGBTIQ+ in another country







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Being a human rights organization, People in Need sees first-hand the suffering, injustice and discrimination people in various countries around the world endure every day. The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy – People in Need works in countries with dictatorships and countries where the experience of transition to democracy is similar to that of the Czech Republic. We work in 20 countries and regions: Eastern Europe (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), Central Asia, Latin America (Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela), North Africa (Egypt, Libya) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam), thus we also know the great courage, dedication and energy that comes from local civil society actors trying to protect their communities and defend their fundamental rights and freedoms.

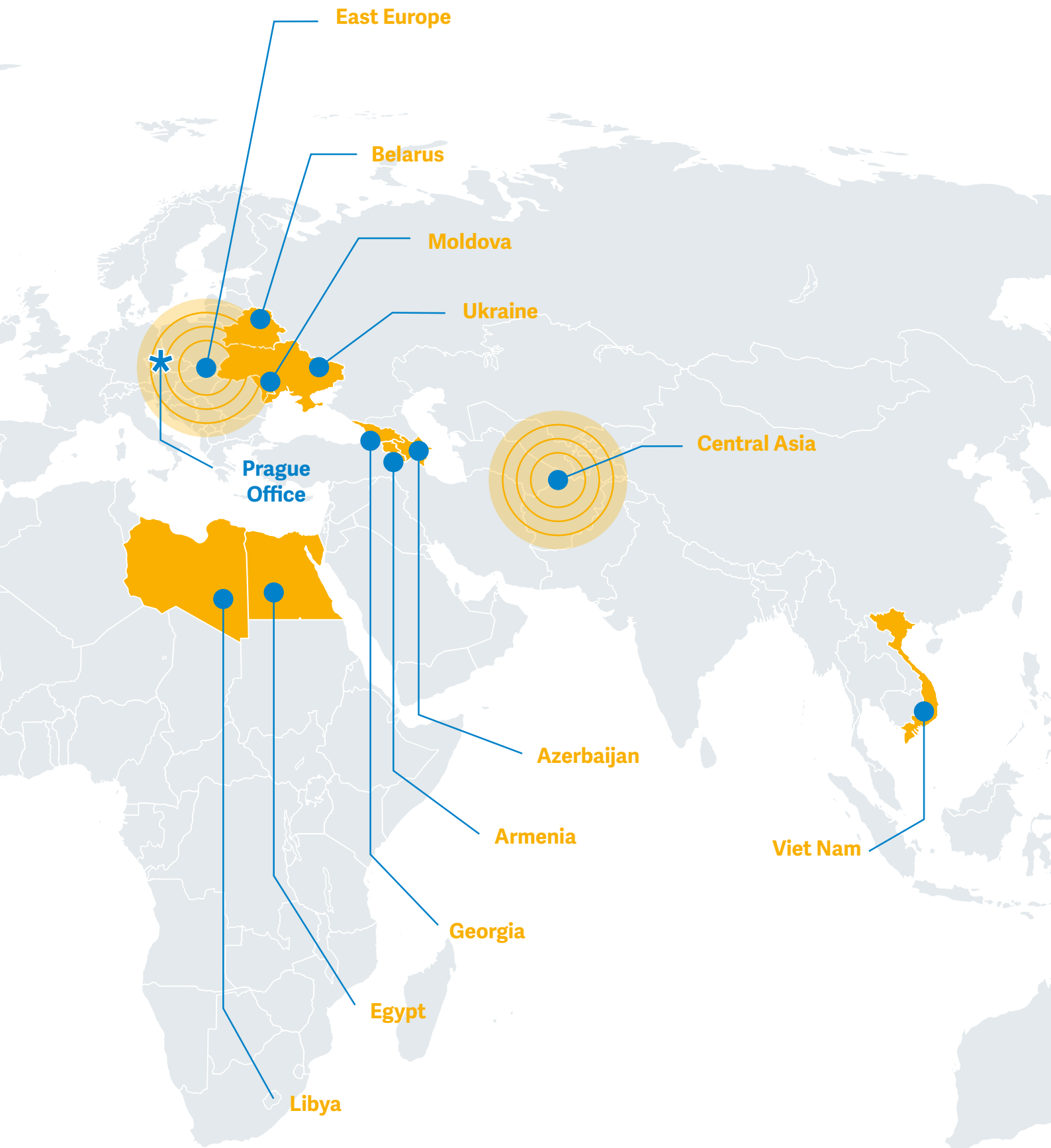
LGBTIQ+ communities belong to the most vulnerable groups of society: from Libya, where sexual intercourse between people of the same sex is illegal, to Viet Nam, where LGBTIQ+ activism is considered as one of the least sensitive issues, to countries on the path to equality (like Ukraine) but still with a long way to go. This booklet looks at LGBTIQ+ rights in the countries we work in and what we do to protect and promote LGBTIQ+ rights in those countries. None of our work would be possible without the courageous, sometimes dangerous, but always hard and hopeful work of local civil society organisations, activists and allies who decide to dedicate their lives to the fight for equality and justice for all. We owe them our gratitude, as we hope that thanks to them we will all see the day when inequality and discrimination remains a vague memory.

Nadiia Ivanova  
Director of the Centre for  
Human Rights and Democracy



# Where does our Centre for Human Rights and Democracy work?







# Being LGBTIQ+ in Latin America

The rights for LGBTIQ+ people in the Latin American region (LATAM) face social, political and cultural barriers to their implementation. Many countries in the region share a history characterized by a conservative and religious culture, which has resulted in the predominance of principles of heteronormativity, cis-normativity, and gender binary. This creates unfavourable conditions for the establishment and respect of legislation that protects the rights of LGBTIQ+ people because there is substantial resistance from a large part of the population and groups with significant political power within society.

Although, in the few last years, there has been considerable progress regarding legal protection (some countries have legalized same-sex marriage and taken affirmative measures) Latin America still leads global statistics for hate murders, with trans women being disproportionate victims. LGBTIQ+ individuals still face police abuse, social discrimination and violence. Transgender people are especially at risk and accessing proper, gender-affirming health care continues to be a major challenge.

## Cuba

After the approval of the "Family Referendum" in 2022, Cuba ratified same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex couples. This is an important step in a country that has since 1979 decriminalised relations between people of the same sex. Many challenges remain, with LGBTIQ+ individuals still facing discrimination, especially the transgender population. One of these challenges is representation in public office. According to PIN's collaborators, "there is no member of the LGBTIQ+ people that the state has granted the responsibility of holding public office", a fact that evidences the denial of their right to political participation.



### **What is it like to be an LGBTIQ+ activist in Cuba?**

*After 1959, Fidel Castro's government ramped up discrimination, abuses and stigmatization against the LGBTIQ+ population, limiting our social rights and access to political and administrative positions.*

*Like every Cuban child, I grew up hearing on the radio, in school, in the community and in my own family the idea of praising and giving thanks to Fidel for his great heroic deed. We believed this until we became disillusioned through our experience of reality.*

*The first disappointing experience with Cuban communism and its cynical manipulation that discriminates, stigmatizes, and excludes LGBTIQ+ individuals was when I arrived with teaching documentation, asking to get a job, at the Provincial Committee of the Cuban Communist Party of Holguin. I waited a week for them to finish the investigative process that work centres always complete before hiring. After that week, the head of human resources singled me out to inform me that because I was "effeminate" and gay, I could not participate in the workers' training programme in the Party headquarters, demonstrating the discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people.*

## Ecuador

In Ecuador, the fragility of the rule of law and the lack of protection for LGBTIQ+ people continue to be deeply concerning issues. Like in the rest of Latin America, fear and violence mark the lives of LGBTIQ+ people. In 2021, 15 LGBTIQ+ individuals were murdered, a number that increased to 25 in 2022. Despite this panorama

of violence, resilience, unity, and courage also stand out, reflected in the complaints of mistreatment and the demands in public spaces to call attention to injustices. These efforts have strengthened the work between LGBTIQ+ organizations and groups.

At a state level, the approval of equal marriage by the Constitutional Court in June 2019 was a critical juncture that has opened the doors to embracing respect for diverse families. Beyond all this, the main challenge for Ecuador is to achieve the normalization of respect for sexual and gender diversity, a dream that is still very far from the national reality.

## El Salvador

In El Salvador, legislation does not penalize consensual relationships between people of the same sex, but there is widespread violence against LGBTIQ+ people. The state of emergency that the authorities have maintained for more than a year, officially introduced to combat the violence in the country, has worsened the situation of transgender men and LGBTIQ+ people who are victims of violence by the police, military, and criminal gangs. There are reports of illegal arrests, abuses of power and physical aggression against these people. Transgender people continue to experience discrimination due to a mismatch between their gender expression and official identity documents, especially concerning health, employment, voting, and banking.

Despite this backdrop, it is important to highlight that the work of LGBTIQ+ activists and organizations in El Salvador remains active. The election in 2009 of an openly gay Mayor in the town of Intipucá, who promoted an agenda of inclusion and respect for LGBTIQ+ people, as well as the candidacies for seats in Congress in 2021 of a transgender woman and a gay man are encouraging actions that encourage organizations and activists to continue their work in El Salvador.

## Guatemala

In Guatemala, the Constitution declares all persons equal before the law and prohibits discrimination by state and non-state actors based on gender, marital status, or political opinion. However, it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression. Also, it does not recognize LGBTIQ+ individuals, couples, or families. Violence against LGBTIQ+ people is a persistent problem. The LGBTIQ+ population experience persecution and the threat of murder motivated by their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTIQ+ individuals are often abused by the police. They are extorted, harassed and accused of being sex workers. They experience social and institutional discrimination when accessing education, health care, employment and housing services. And, although it is not reported to the authorities, it is known that there are cases of forced marriages and "corrective rapes" against lesbians and bisexual people.

## Honduras

Several human rights organizations report that in Honduras, the police or other government agents incite, perpetrate, condone, and tolerate violence against LGBTIQ+ people. Street gangs carry out "corrective violations" against lesbian or transgender people. Even though the law criminalises discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and it is an aggravating penalty when these are the motives for a crime, the rate of impunity for this type of complaint is very high. Government institutions and private employers have discriminatory hiring practices. Transgender women are particularly the constant victims of discrimination when it comes to getting a job or accessing education.

Given the non-existent response from the State, the work of organizations and activists is crucial in defending the rights of the LGBTIQ+ population. Precisely for its work for the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Honduras, la Red Lésbica Cattrachas (Cattrachas Lesbian Network) received the EUROPA Human Rights Prize in 2021, recognizing its important work and ratifying the need for the existence of this type of organization.

## Nicaragua

In Nicaragua LGBTIQ+ people continue to be silenced and persecuted. After the civic insurrection of April 2018, activists working in the promotion and defence of LGBTIQ+ rights have faced arbitrary detentions and organizations have had their legal status revoked. This has caused a loss of safe spaces for gathering and sharing. Others have even had to emigrate to safeguard their lives and safety. The political situation makes Nicaragua an insecure place for those who have been able to stay and has forced many people and organizations into exile.

During the first quarter of 2023, the Observatory of Human Rights Violations Against LGBTIQ+ people of the CSO La Corriente documented 10 cases in which physical aggressions, digital and sexual violence stand out. In most cases, these aggressions are not even reported and when they are, they are judged by the authorities as minor assaults or common homicides. The current legal system does not contemplate hate crimes.

In exile, mostly from Costa Rica, many Nicaraguan LGBTIQ+ organizations and activists continue to work to advocate for the human rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Nicaragua, but also for those who have had to go into exile. This is the case of the Mesa de Articulación LGBTIQ+ en el Exilio Costa Rica (LGBTIQ+ Articulation in Exile Costa Rica), which provides different types of support to LGBTIQ+ migrants in Costa Rica.

Source: Miguel Andrés







### What is it like to be a Nicaraguan LGBTIQ+ organisation?

As of February 2019, the Mesa de Articulación LGBTIQ+ en el Exilio Costa Rica (MesArt) is one of the organizations forced to relocate outside Nicaraguan borders. From Costa Rica, MesArt brings light upon the different realities and vulnerabilities that sexually diverse Nicaraguans experience because of forced displacement.

MesArt is a space for Nicaraguan and migrant LGBTIQ+ activists in exile. Its purpose is to organize, plan, inform, provide training tools, implement advocacy actions, and manage resources that respond to specific needs, as well to provide spaces for discussion and debate on public policies that concern LGBTIQ+ people.

MesArt recognizes the stigmatization, exclusion and rejection that LGBTIQ+ migrants face in Costa Rica and works for the fulfilment of their rights by providing a safe network among sexually diverse people where they help others exercise their rights. Additionally, MesArt also provides psychosocial attention.

Source: MesArt





## Venezuela

Venezuela is one of the few Latin American countries that has not made any progress concerning the protection of LGBTIQ+ Human Rights; this renders this section of the population socially vulnerable. There are no legal protections against discrimination of LGBTIQ people, marriage equality or gender identity.

This lack of legal protections contributes to a national environment of generalised discrimination and harassment towards the LGBTIQ+ population in Venezuela, enabling frequent violations of their Human Rights. Sexually diverse individuals, and those that live outside the heteronormative gender binary, experience high levels of fear, insecurity and distrust. As there are few or no safe spaces, elements such as the free expression of personality, equal rights, dignity and freedom of people are compromised.

The precariousness of the legal framework and the reluctance of the institutions of the Venezuelan State to guarantee the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals has forced Civil Society Organizations and Human Rights Defenders to become the only protectors of this social group able to help people affected by discrimination and violence.

### *What PIN does to promote LGBTIQ+ rights in Latin America?*

People in Need has been working closely with LGBTIQ+ activists and organizations from Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Venezuela to defend and promote their rights. Through financing and accompaniment in the implementation of the projects of LGBTIQ+ organizations, it has been possible to increase the impact of the work they carry out. Psychosocial support has been provided to LGBTIQ+ activists who are victims of discrimination, persecution and other human rights violations. Likewise, advocacy initiatives have been supported to make visible the human rights situation of the LGBTIQ+ population in these countries, as well as to communicate their stories of valuable work and their contributions for a more just and inclusive Latin America.







Source: País Narrado





# Being LGBTIQ+ in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Efforts to advance LGBTIQ+ inclusion in Eastern Europe continue to face significant challenges, and the protection of sexual orientation and gender minorities can be severely different depending on the country. Across Eastern Europe, there is significant resistance to introducing legislation and policies designed to advance LGBTIQ+ inclusion. In many of the countries in the region there are high levels of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, and hate crimes and abuse are common. LGBTIQ+ human rights are generally neither acknowledged nor recognized by authorities and civil society.

LGBTIQ+ individuals also face police abuse, social discrimination and violence. Transgender people are especially at risk and accessing proper, gender-affirming health care continues to be a major challenge.

The situation is much worse in Central Asia: despite legal frameworks ostensibly offering some protection, LGBTIQ+ people live under daily threat of discrimination, persecution, violence and imprisonment. There is a fundamental lack of laws prohibiting discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, and same-sex marriage is illegal throughout the region. Gender reassignment is legal in many countries, but is socially unacceptable, making transgender people regular victims of violence.

## Armenia

Life for LGBTIQ+ people in Armenia, a socially conservative society where homophobia remains entrenched, is not easy.

The difficulties are multiplied for those living outside the capital, where society is even less tolerant towards LGBTIQ+ people. Socialising is particularly difficult, with no LGBTIQ+ -friendly venues and few public places where gay people can be sure they will not be subject to abuse. LGBTIQ+ people in Armenia face hate speech, threats and harassment on a regular basis. Physical violence targeting LGBTIQ+ people, often exercised by family members, remains a significant issue. The justice system remains rigid and ineffective in prosecuting these crimes effectively.

## Azerbaijan

LGBTIQ+ groups and individuals regularly face cyber-attacks and hacking efforts in an attempt to silence their voices. There also are reports of increasing violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, particularly transgender people. On February 22, LGBTIQ+ activist Avaz Hafizli was killed by his cousin, who decapitated him and sexually mutilated and dismembered his body. A far-right youth movement called "TamizQan" (Pure Blood) has used the secure messaging app Telegram to target LGBTIQ+ people in Azerbaijan. Cases of gay men and transgender women being murdered, beaten, interrogated and forced to undergo medical examinations have been reported in recent months and years.

LGBTIQ+ people have generally refused to lodge formal complaints of discrimination or ill-treatment with law enforcement bodies for fear of social stigmatization or reprisals. Activists reported that police often refused to investigate crimes committed against LGBTIQ+ people.



**What is it like to be an LGBTIQ+ activist in Azerbaijan?**

*The most important thing is that I'm home with my cats. But my friends, my community are still in danger of being harassed by Azerbaijani police.*



On May 24, 2023, Javid Nabiyev was arrested at the protest against police violence against LGBTIQ+ people in Azerbaijan. Later, he was fined 180 USD on bogus charges of hooliganism and illegal possession of drugs.

On his Instagram page, Nabiyev described a nightmarish night spent in a police station, marked by degrading and dehumanizing treatment. He spoke out about his personal experiences of discrimination and violence, shedding light on the systemic prejudice faced by LGBTIQ+ people in the country.

The distressing experiences he encountered at Baku police station included: being verbally abused and handcuffed, witnessing police officers using napkins to avoid touching the same surfaces as LGBTIQ+ activists, being subjected to medical tests without a court order, being forced to physically demonstrate the absence of a hidden razor under his tongue. Moreover, police officers were taking pictures and videos of the activist to share with their friends, making abusive jokes about LGBTIQ+ people.

*"My fight is justified. This time, you won't be able to kill that flame inside me! I am proud, I am resilient! Instead, I am filled with anger!"*

Nabiyev expressed his determination to continue the fight for equality and justice, despite the mistreatment he has endured.

These revelations from the LGBTIQ+ rights defender highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms within the Azerbaijani police force and the protection of LGBTIQ+ people from discrimination and violence.

## Belarus

Although there is no anti-discrimination law in Belarus, there are multiple instances where victims of homophobia have been unable to get help from law enforcement authorities. In 2017, Belarus adopted the "Law on the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development", which can be used to restrict the dissemination of neutral or positive information about LGBTIQ+ people on the grounds that it "discredits the institution of the family".

Hate speech has increased exponentially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and again during the post-election protests. Most of the content accuses LGBTIQ+ people of having a negative influence on society or is used to discredit political opponents. In some cases, police detained LGBTIQ+ people and forced them to confess to crimes and declare their sexual orientation on camera, then published the recording online.

## Moldova

LGBTIQ+ people in Moldova face unique legal and social challenges and discrimination not experienced by the rest of the population. Households headed by same-sex couples are not eligible for the same rights and benefits as households headed by opposite-sex couples. Same-sex unions are not recognized in the country; consequently same-sex couples have little to no legal protection. Nevertheless, Moldova bans discrimination based on sexual orientation in the workplace, and same-sex sexual activity has been legal since 1995. During recent years, the situation of the LGBTIQ+ people in Moldova has been improving. 2022 marked Moldova's 21st Pride Festival, featuring its largest and longest Pride march to date. 500 people attended the Pride march, including six MPs. The Pride march was held on 19 June and no attacks were recorded. Nevertheless, several participants were verbally harassed by police officers.

A poll commissioned by GENDERDOC-M found that 55% of Chisinau residents have a positive or neutral attitude towards LGBTIQ+ people, compared to 33% just three years earlier. The rate of those strongly opposed to LGBTIQ+ people also significantly decreased.





Source: Centrul GDM

## Ukraine

The Ukrainian Criminal Code provides harsher penalties for crimes committed with prejudice based on race, religion and nationality but omits sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for protection. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has bolstered support for the recognition of same-sex unions in Ukraine, both in terms of public opinion and authorities. In March 2023, MP Inna Sovsun proposed to pass a bill that would legally recognize same-sex partnerships, stating that "Ukrainians can no longer wait for equality. We must do it immediately."

Unfortunately, in the context of war, Ukrainian LGBTIQ+ refugees and asylum seekers are often at increased risk of exclusion, exploitation, violence and abuse and face significant protection risks. This increases their difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid, safe housing, appropriate healthcare, education and/or livelihoods. As LGBTIQ+ people are perceived as not conforming to prevailing socio-cultural norms, they may be excluded from traditional support networks within displaced and host communities.



## Central Asia

Compared with Eastern Europe, the situation for LGBTIQ+ rights in Central Asia is much worse. People live under the daily threat of domestic physical violence, discrimination, persecution, and imprisonment. Sexual and romantic relations between men are illegal in two Central Asian countries, punishable with up to three years in prison, and in several countries LGBTIQ+ people are subjected to psychiatric treatment and conversion therapies.

There is a distinct lack of laws prohibiting discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, and same-sex marriage is illegal throughout the region. Gender reassignment is legal in some countries but is socially unacceptable, and transgender people are regularly the victims of violence.

### **What is it like to be an LGBTIQ+ activist in Central Asia?**

*Being an LGBT activist and a human rights activist and at the same time belonging to the community in Central Asian is challenging.*

*My life is led undercover. I live a life of lies and fears and am constantly scared that my identity will be revealed in a blink of an eye. My identity presents a threat as it can be easily used as a weapon to blackmail against my activism and against who I am.*

*I decided to become an LGBTIQ+ activist because I experienced all the stages of fear, hatred, homophobia. LGBTIQ+ people are people in the shadows in Central Asia. They are permitted to live as long as the traditional part of society allows it. Their rights are oppressed and they are separated from the rest of the "correct hetero-people."*

*As for me, for a long time I did not accept myself, my identity. I suffered from internalised homophobia and was convinced that I was seriously ill. At that time, we did not have organizations, specialists who could explain, support and understand me. I came to these realisations only having reached 30, through internal intuitive analysis and seeking out relevant literature. I realized that human rights equal the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. It was the human rights aspect of protecting the rights and freedoms of LGBTIQ+ people that interested me. Providing psychological help to people in the community to overcome the doubts and fears that I had in my youth became part of my life and work. I was motivated to do this so that they did not have to follow the same long path I had to, to accept myself for who I am.*

*Engaging in activism and human rights in Central Asia is a kind of quest. You will never be able to understand how and when one will face pressures, threats and blackmail. And it becomes even more difficult when you yourself are a representative of the community. Moreover, it is twice as hard when you are LGBTIQ+, invisible and literally whispering, not daring to say who you are out loud.*

*The constant deception, in which I operate daily, worries me the most. I cannot openly and calmly walk around the city holding hands with my partner. I cannot tell my neighbors and relatives the truth about who this woman who lives with me is. You have to hide everything and involve children in this process; teach them not to say too much to people and to speak carefully whenever they are outside the house.*

*However, despite the obvious difficulties and insecurity, I love my work, which I have devoted 10 years of my life to. I love freedom and my country, and I believe that equality and freedom will reach us soon.*

### **What PIN does to promote LGBTIQ+ rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia?**

People in Need provides protection in cases when an LGBTIQ+ person is persecuted, is harassed or threatened by the authorities, community or his family. We also provide mental health and psychosocial support to individuals experiencing trauma and emotionally challenging situations. People in Need also provides capacity building programmes and small-scale financial support to LGBTIQ+ initiatives and organisations across the region. Additionally, People in Need works to improve levels of tolerance for LGBTIQ+ people by including reference to them in its capacity building work with other civil society actors. This includes implementing a code of conduct for all programme participants that sets out expected behaviour and prohibits harassment or insults on the grounds of sex, gender, or sexual persuasion.

## Being LGBTIQ+ in MENA region

In the Middle East and North Africa, LGBTIQ+ people not only face harassment coming from cultural, religious, or legislative roots but also do not have any granted rights and tools of protection. In former French colonies homosexuality is criminalised in the penal code. In former British colonies, meanwhile, while homosexuality itself is not directly criminalised, other laws are used to punish or detain homosexuals. For example, anti-sodomy laws are used to attack people who visually differ from the norm. Men who present outside of heteronormative cultural standards – having long, bleached, or dyed hair, wearing bright colours or fashionable clothes - have a high probability of being stopped by the police in the street on suspicion of being gay. This results in detention and humiliating examination procedures, including searching mobile phones and social media. There is a presumption of guilt until proven innocent, which is extremely difficult to prove. For LGBTIQ+ people, having a phone searched by police can lead to the arrest of friends and acquaintances identified through the data and contacts. There is no access to justice or police protection: individuals experiencing homophobic street harassment and violence do not report these incidents to the authorities due to fear of further violence and abuse from the police. This leaves LGBTIQ+ individuals vulnerable, with no legal protections, and subjected to high levels of psychological, and often physical trauma.

Trans people experience even higher levels of vulnerability, forced into the margins of society. There are almost holistic barriers to self-expression across the region. There are no legal mechanisms for gender recognition or legal routes to secure gender-affirming care for either hormonal treatment or surgery. The only options for trans people are via the black market or overseas. However, this renders trans people even more vulnerable due to discrepancies between gender expression and identity documents.

### Libya

Libya is a conservative society with a predominantly Muslim population. Same-sex sexual activity is criminalised under Libyan law. Homosexuality is viewed as taboo, and LGBTIQ+ individuals often face significant social stigma, discrimination, and violence.

The legal framework in Libya does not provide protections for LGBTIQ+ individuals, and there are no specific laws addressing discrimination based on sexual and romantic orientation or gender identity. Same-sex sexual activity is prohibited under Penal Code 1953, which criminalises 'indecent acts' and 'illicit sexual intercourse'. These provisions carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment.

Due to the prevailing social and legal climate, LGBTIQ+ people in Libya live their lives largely underground, with limited visibility and support networks. LGBTIQ+ people often experience fear, secrecy, and isolation, as disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity can have serious consequences, including rejection from family, community, and even violence.

The lack of legal recognition and protections for LGBTIQ+ people, coupled with societal intolerance, poses significant challenges to their well-being and access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. It also restricts their ability to express their identity openly and seek support.

# Egypt

In Egypt, LGBTIQ+ people live within a hetero-normative society that does not acknowledge gender and sexual diversity and which promotes hatred environment for individuals who deviate from this norm. LGBTIQ+ people struggle with stigmatization and lack of acceptance in a society where homosexuality/queering, in general, is unaccepted. This results in threats on a daily basis. This is fuelled by the criminalisation and religious prohibition of homosexuality/queering, which is considered 'haram' – an Arabic word for 'forbidden' or 'sinful'–, although no law strictly prohibits same-sex relations.

LGBTIQ+ persons can be charged with “debauchery”, “publicizing an invitation to induce debauchery” or “incitement to debauchery”. Public authorities target both men and women alike. Most recently, the new Cybercrime Law has been used to apply many vague charges against LGBTIQ+ members in Egypt. Fake profiles on online dating sites have also become a means used by the authorities and the police to repress this minority. It has reached such a high level that Grindr (a gay dating app) was warning its users in Egypt about fake accounts by police officers during the spring of 2023.

In prison, LGBTIQ+ people subjected to inhuman conditions. During interrogation, they often experience ill-treatment and physical abuse by prison guards, who try to persuade people to “come out” as gay or lesbian. Even if legal charges are dismissed, any individual accused of an LGBTIQ+-related offence can be marginalized by family or lose medical care and employment. Additionally, trans people also often face medical neglect.

The lack of legal recognition and protection for the LGBTIQ+ minority, coupled with high levels of social intolerance, conceals and renders the well-being of LGBTIQ+ people invisible. This makes this group a low priority for government. It also limits their ability to express their identity openly and seek support, leading to isolation, loneliness and mental health issues.



## What is it like to be an LGBTIQ+ activist in Egypt?

*Sarah Hegazy was an Egyptian lesbian and queer activist. She came to prominence following her arrest in 2017 during the infamous rainbow flag incident at the concert of a band called Mashrou' Leila in Cairo, whose vocalist is openly gay. As a result of waving a rainbow flag at the concert, Sarah was arrested along with 57 others and charged with “promoting sexual deviance and debauchery”. She commented on her act using the following words:*

*It was an act of support and solidarity — not only with the [Mashrou' Leila] vocalist but for everyone who is oppressed. We were proud to hold the flag. We wouldn't have imagined the reaction of society and the Egyptian state. For them, I was a criminal — someone who was seeking to destroy the moral structure of society.*

*As a result of torture, physical and psychological abuse, bullying and social ostracism that Sarah experienced during 3 months detention in prison, Sarah suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Her PTSD worsened after she sought asylum in Canada, where she faced the pain of exile, loneliness, and loss. On the morning of June 13, 2020, Sarah chose to leave our world, putting an end to her pain after all the oppression, injustice, and hate. She was more than just an activist, she was a symbol of resilience, hope, and love.*







Sara Hegazy waving a rainbow flag at Masrou' Leila concert  
Source: Channel 4.



Sara's last handwritten letter said:

*To my siblings – I tried to find redemption and failed, forgive me,*

*To my friends – the experience was harsh and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me.*

*To the world – you were cruel, to a great extent, but I forgive.*

### **What PIN does to promote LGBTIQ+ rights in MENA region?**

People in Need provides protection in cases of LGBTIQ+ people who are persecuted, harassed or threatened by the authorities, their community or their family. We also provide mental health and psychosocial support to individuals experiencing trauma and emotionally challenging situations, including recent mental health support to LGBTIQ+ refugees fleeing Sudan. In addition, we provide capacity building for staff for LGBTIQ+ organizations. Last but not least, People in Need works to improve levels of tolerance for LGBTIQ+ people by including reference to them in its capacity building work with other civil society actors. This includes implementing a code of conduct for all programme participants that sets out expected behaviour and prohibits harassment or insults on the grounds of sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

# Being LGBTIQ+ in Southeast Asia

Being LGBTIQ+ in Southeast Asia is an ongoing struggle, but the protection of the LGBTIQ+ people differs greatly depending on the country in which they live. In Brunei, being LGBTIQ+ is punishable by death; in Malaysia, non-traditional sexual and romantic orientation can lead to imprisonment. However, authorities and societies in Thailand, Singapore and Viet Nam seem to have a less negative attitude towards LGBTIQ+ people. Although enormous progress has been made over the last 10 to 15 years in these countries, there is still a long way to go. Along with broader civil society, LGBTIQ+ activists share the experiences of censorship, misinformation, and state-led propaganda that form the core of governments' assaults on all human rights advocacy. Consequently, LGBTIQ+ people have encountered discrimination, harassment or bullying and are often not protected by the police authorities when they try to report their experiences.

## Viet Nam

Up till now, sexual orientation and gender identity have received little official attention in Vietnamese laws and policies. While LGBTIQ+ people have not faced discrimination in the name of religion, Confucian cultural and family values such as filial piety and traditional gender roles have hampered the enjoyment of LGBTIQ+ rights and freedoms.

Despite significant progress in the situation for LGBTIQ+ rights in Viet Nam, social marginalization remains in the public and private sphere for a lot of LGBTIQ+ people. In the absence of official and quality public services for legal aid and counselling for LGBTIQ+ people, local NGOs have filled in that gap. Most of the pupils and students whose expression violates gender norms—in particular, boys whose behaviour is perceived as “too effeminate”—have been singled out and even banned from participating in school clubs. Moreover, the belief that same-sex attraction is a diagnosable and treatable mental disorder is pervasive in Viet Nam. In August 2022, thanks to years of hard work led by local LGBTIQ+ activists, the Vietnamese Ministry of Health recognized that same-sex attraction and being transgender are not mental disorders and thus officially outlawed conversion therapies as well. Yet, it is unclear how this decision will be enforced, as many LGBTIQ+ people are still threatened by these practices and often face harsh treatment from their families.

But the movement remains strong and is stronger than ever. Despite institutional, conservative and discriminatory social values that are difficult to change, social and cultural tolerance of LGBTIQ+ people is growing, especially in big cities. LGBTIQ+-friendly venues are opening up across the country, and Pride parades are underway every year in many provinces.

### *What is it like to be an LGBTIQ+ activist in Viet Nam?*

Growing up as a “too queer” kid, I spent a lot of time worrying about how the social norms in Viet Nam were a bit too limited for me to move around, navigate, or even be myself. Of course, I was not aware of the term “activism” at the time, but the desire to work for a more free and open society emerged naturally within me. I began my journey with an initiative showcasing queer aspects of the Vietnamese history, which were largely dismissed in formal textbooks. After four years of covering diverse topics (a non-binary history of Viet Nam, the post-internet movement, and queer lexicology), I understood that a community will always have to look back at the long, braided thread of history that connects them together. By reimagining a shared past, we move forward as a collective.

That mindset has influenced my work with Pride, a movement promoting equal rights, acceptance, and dignity for LGBTIQ+ people. The Pride movement has spread around the world, inspired by the Stonewall Riots. Many people regard Pride as a transient joyous event because of its festive tone, yet at its core, Pride is a protest, a manifestation of liberation from heteronormative oppression. As a result, Pride can be a reliable predictor of a country's civil society situation, as well as the LGBTIQ+ rights movement in particular. Viet Nam is no different.



The last time we hosted the walking march, in 2022, we had several thousand individuals join us in solidarity with the LGBTIQ+ movement in Viet Nam. However, this has not always been the case. We had fewer than 100 individuals walking with us in early 2010s (no banners, no chanting) since the peaceful demonstration was (and still is) considered “sensitive” in Viet Nam. But, as LGBTIQ+ people often do in the face of adversity, we got creative.

What we did was reach out for support. And it was people from the diplomatic and international forces who helped us hold the signs, in a way, becoming the lightning rod. That gesture spoke volumes, proving that LGBTIQ+ are not and have never been alone. Every year after that, we still carried Pride to the main streets. Though we were many times stopped by authorities, we were the ones to hold the signs. While nationalism is now on the rise and has hindered foreign aid, we would like to say ‘thank you’ to all of them, especially the ones who decided to stay silent so that we could speak. In order for that 100 people to transform into thousands of people over the period of more than a decade, we couldn’t have done it alone.

“What will happen next?”, that is the question we ask ourselves after every year. Civil society climate is shrinking, but Viet Nam still prides itself in the progressive LGBTIQ+ movement. That’s why we want to treat Pride as an invitation, to make room for constructive dialogues, to collaborate and build a friendlier city for the local queer community.

So, in a word, Pride is connection. Pride was built by and should always centre LGBTIQ+ people, but its message transcends so much more. If you want to dress the way you want without judgment. If you want to hold hands with the person you love without fearing what may come. And if you want to happily live your life the way you want, then Pride is for you, and for all of us.

### What PIN does to promote LGBTIQ+ rights in Viet Nam?

In Viet Nam, People in Need has been supporting activists working on LGBTIQ+ rights for several years. Thanks to our support, several provinces were able to organize LGBTIQ+ events and a few activists were provided with mental health support and capacity building to ensure effective, resilient and sustainable promotion of LGBTIQ+ rights in Viet Nam.

Hanoi Pride 2022.  
Source: EU Delegation to Viet Nam.







*As demonstrations have been considered sensitive, the first Pride “parade” in Vietnam took place on bikes. The bike rally has become a tradition of Hanoi Pride, taking place each year even though Pride walks have already been being held for several years in several provinces. Source: USAID.*







