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Ukraine and Albania urged to protect LGBT+ people from hate and discrimination

Ukraine should outlaw anti-LGBT+ discrimination and Albania legalise same-sex civil partnerships, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) said.

By Rachel Savage

Thomson Reuters Foundation (03.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Y7HaLu> - Ukraine should reform its laws to combat homophobic hate crimes and Albania should give more rights to same-sex couples and trans people, a top European rights body said on Wednesday, amid a backlash against LGBT+ rights in Eastern Europe.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), part of the Council of Europe, renewed a call it made in 2017 for Ukraine to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.

"Unless you insert it in criminal code, police will not look for that as a motive for hatred or discrimination," Maria Daniella Marouda, chairwoman of the ECRI told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

Ukraine's Permanent Mission to the Council of Europe did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the latest human rights report by the ECRI, which it issues regularly to monitor progress among its 47 member states.

Discrimination against LGBT+ people in the workplace was outlawed in 2015 and Ukraine has increased support for the community in recent years in a bid to move closer to the European Union, but advocates say homophobia remains widespread.

In April, an LGBT+ group sued one of Ukraine's most prominent religious figures after he blamed the coronavirus on same-sex marriage, which is not legal in the ex-Soviet nation.

Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric and other anti-LGBT+ hate crimes are rising across Europe, fuelled by divisive politics and socially conservative groups, according to the LGBT+ advocacy group ILGA-Europe.

Growing recognition of same-sex partnerships and parental rights has sparked a backlash by nationalist and religious leaders who reject homosexuality, LGBT+ activists say.

"It can be a backlash in rhetoric, in hate speech, in hate crimes, in violence against LGBTI issues," said Marouda, a Greek academic. "This is happening all over Europe."

The ECRI also urged Albania to recognise same-sex partnerships and let trans people legally change their gender on official documents so that it matches their appearance, to protect them from harassment.

Several senior Albanian officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Same-sex marriage is not legal in the socially-conservative Balkan country.

Albania is unlikely to listen to the ECRI, having rejected similar recommendations made by the United Nations in 2019, said Xheni Kharaj, one of Albania's most prominent LGBT+ activists.

"LGBTI couples are not recognised as couples, transgender people due to the lack of law cannot start transition," said Kharaj, head of the Alliance Against Discrimination of LGBT.

"We don't have even doctors here who are prepared to help them transition."

Albania psychologists barred from conducting gay 'conversion therapy'

By Rachel Savage

Thomson Reuters Foundation (18.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3c1Z4nU> - Albania's leading psychologists' organisation has barred members from carrying out so-called "conversion therapy" which aims to make gay people straight, as countries around the world consider laws to ban the controversial practice.

The Order of Psychologists said members would face disciplinary proceedings if they carried out the treatment, which is based on the belief that being gay or transgender is a mental illness that can be "cured".

All registered psychologists in Albania must be members of the Order of Psychologists which has given licences to about 600 psychologists since it was set up by parliament in 2017.

Only three countries - Brazil, Ecuador and Malta - have nationwide bans on "conversion therapy", but earlier this month Germany outlawed the treatment for minors. The United States, Canada, Chile and Mexico are among nations seeking bans.

Xheni Karaj, executive director of the Alliance Against Discrimination of LGBT (Aleanca LGBT), an Albanian advocacy group, said the move was "very, very positive".

"We know psychologists work a lot ... in schools and we have had many cases of school psychologists (telling LGBT) kids that this is a disease and you should be turned back to 'normal'," Karaj told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The Order of Psychologists issued its ban after a request from Albanian LGBT+ advocacy group Pink Embassy on May 11.

"Our professionals appreciate that conversion therapy is an archaic, unethical practice that categorically contradicts fundamental human rights and freedoms," president of the Order of Psychologists, Valbona Treska, said in a statement.

Albania's government did not respond to requests for comment.

Discrimination against LGBT+ people is illegal in Albania, but Aleanca LGBT documented almost 450 anti-LGBT+ hate crimes in 2019. The report found only 34 cases were reported to the police, due to mistrust and fears of being outed.

There were "a growing number of hate speech incidents in the media ... most targeting trans people," in the Balkan country in 2019, according to ILGA-Europe, a regional advocacy group.

Practices that aim to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity have been condemned by numerous medical associations globally. The European parliament denounced conversion therapy in 2018 and urged member states to ban it.

Brutal and extreme conversion methods including torture, forced internment, electroshock therapy and sexual violence have been documented in Ecuador, South Africa, the Dominican Republic and China.

A 2019 survey by advocacy group The Trevor Project in the United States, where 19 states ban conversion therapy for minors, found 42% of LGBT+ youth who underwent the treatment said they had later attempted suicide.
