

Strategies of LGBTQI+ organizations in hostile environments

Policy Brief

Dr. Bastiaan Redert (bastiaan.redert@uantwerpen.be)
Faculty Social Sciences – Department Political Science
City Campus, M.282
Sint-Jacobsstraat 2-24
2000, Antwerpen
Belgium

Summary

The past few years can be characterized by an increasing contestation of LGBTQI+ rights in various, if not all, European countries. Although some European countries already actively resisted the advancement of LGBTQI+ rights, we also see new types of resistance, for example in the rise of populism or the rise of the anti-gender movement. These developments may pose serious risks for those organizations actively promoting and advancing the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. More specifically, more hostile political environments as well as more hostile public opinion might limit the effectiveness of the political activities of LGBTQI+ organizations.

To better understand how hostility affects the advocacy or lobbying strategies of these organizations, a group of 12 Social Science (Political Science, Communication Science, and Sociology) students at the University of Antwerp conducted a large-scale research project. Using quantitative data, they sought an answer to the central research question: “How do national contexts (and hostility therein) affect the strategies of LGBTQI+ organizations?”

In sum we draft five main conclusions that we deem crucial for policymakers and LGBTQI+ organizations:

1. Overall, LGBTQI+ organizations describe the legal situation of LGBTQI+ individuals in their respective countries as relatively positive. Also, they indicate that public opinion is quite positive and slightly improving over time. Yet, public opinion is likely to diverge across policies, for example improved support for same-sex marriage while a decline in favor of trans rights.
2. On average, LGBTQI+ organizations biggest online following is on Twitter. Although this is a crucial tool to communicate with their supporters, current developments at Twitter might jeopardize this.
3. Organizations’ choice for particular advocacy strategies partially depends on public opinion and the secularization of countries: the more positive public opinion and the more secularization, the more organizations seek direct exchanges with politicians and policymakers.
4. LGBTQI+ organizations regularly build coalitions with likeminded organizations, predominantly on the national and local level. International coalitions are less common.
5. LGBTQI+ organizations, on average, tend to target national opposition parties more frequently, than governing parties or transnational organizations. Yet, when public opinion within countries is negative towards LGBTQI+ topics, organizations tend to target European institutions more.

These conclusions underscore the interplay between national political contexts and advocacy efforts for LGBTQI+ organizations. The following paragraphs will discuss these and other findings more in detail. First, however, a short outline of the research’s scope and methodology will be provided.

For further questions about the research project, please contact Dr. Bastiaan Redert (bastiaan.redert@uantwerpen.be).

Research outline

The research project was conducted over the academic year of 2022-2023. It involved both understanding current theories on strategies of interest organizations and theories on LGBTQI+ politics, as well as setting up a novel empirical study in the form of a mapping and a survey. In a first step, the project mapped 411 LGBTQI+ organizations in 18 European countries (Figure 1). All organizations included in the mapping are a member of ILGA Europe. Table 1 shows the total number of mapped organizations per country.

Having identified these organizations, we coded the size of their membership, staff size, the type of organization, online following, sources of funding and the type of (political) activities these organizations undertake. Based on this mapping exercise we gained a more thorough understanding of how LGBTQI+ organizations organize themselves. We found, for example, that donations and gifts from individuals make up almost half (49.9%) of the funding of LGBTQI+ organizations. Organizations also receive funding through membership contributions (35.1%), funding from private companies (29.2%), and funding from foundations/philanthropists (28.9%) closely follow. Only a small minority of LGBTQI+ organizations receive funding from the European Union (3.53%).

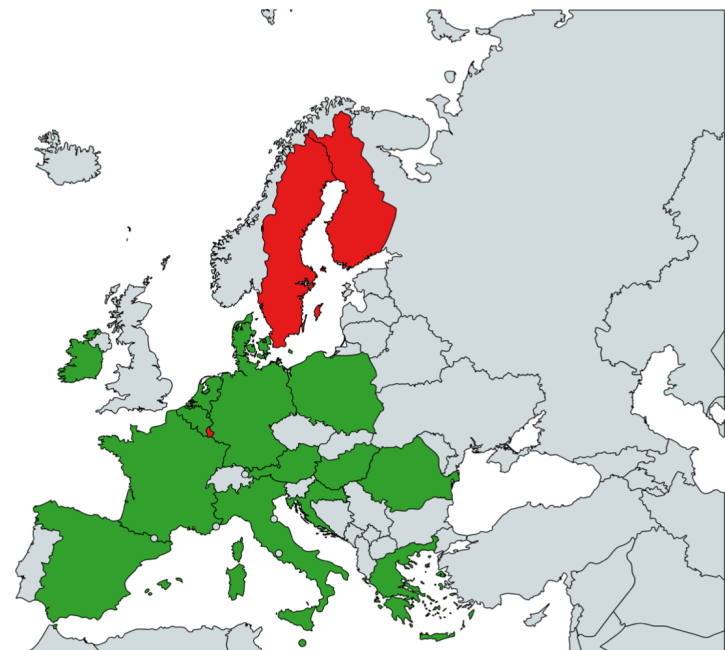
Likewise, we also compared online following of the 411 organizations. Here, we found that organizations have on average the biggest online following on Twitter (average following of 11.572 users), followed by Facebook (11.181 users) and then Instagram (8.148 users). Twitter is thus an important communication channel for these organizations as it helps organizations to reach out to many followers at once. Yet, current developments at Twitter (or X) may jeopardize this reach.

Besides the mapping, the research project conducted a survey among LGBTQI+ organizations which we approached using contact information collected in the mapping exercise above. In total, we received 70 completed surveys from organizations operating in 15 countries (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, we were unable to get responses from organizations in Sweden, Finland and Luxembourg. The other countries were represented in the sample.

Table 1: Number of surveyed organizations

Country	Number	% of Total
Austria	5	7.1 %
Belgium	8	11.4 %
Croatia	4	5.7 %
Denmark	1	1.4 %
France	1	1.4 %
Germany	9	12.9 %
Greece	2	2.9 %
Hungary	3	4.3 %
Ireland	1	1.4 %
Italy	4	5.7 %
Malta	1	1.4 %
Poland	5	7.1 %
Romania	3	4.3 %
Spain	7	10.0 %
The Netherlands	14	20.0 %
Pan-European	2	2.9 %

Figure 1: Geographical coverage of countries in sample



In the survey, we asked representatives of LGBTQI+ organizations to reflect on the perceived hostility in their specific countries. First, a big majority of participants (58,6%) indicated that public opinion in their countries is friendly towards LGBTQI+ rights. Likewise, when asking respondents to indicate whether public opinion has changed over the past 5 years, we find that 62,1% of respondents indicate that public opinion has become more friendly. Although this might seem as positive, we also find evidence of countries in which LGBTQI+ rights are still under pressure. For example, 19% of respondents indicated that public opinion is hostile towards LGBTQI+ rights, and 29,3% indicates public opinion has become less friendly over the past 5 years. This highlights the varying degrees of acceptance across the European Union. Based on our data, we cannot definitively say what countries are becoming more or less hostile in terms of public opinion. Yet, the data point in the direction that assumed progressive countries (such as Germany and The Netherlands) have become slightly more hostile, whereas public opinion in less progressive countries (such as Hungary) is becoming slightly more friendly. Also, we have no data that assessed public opinion in a more detailed manner. For example, it may well be that in some countries public opinion towards same sex marriage has improved, whereas opinion towards trans rights has drastically worsened.

We also asked respondents to reflect on the legal situation in their countries. Here, we find that 48,3% of respondents think the legal equality of LGBTQI+ people in their country is good or excellent. 27,6% of respondents argue that legal equality in their country is terrible or poor. This particularly applies to organizations in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Greece, and Italy. Indeed, these numbers seem to correspond with the Rainbow Map of ILGA Europe.

Lastly, we also wanted to know whether the hostility in the national context might threaten the existence of LGBTQI+ organizations. Although a majority of organizations deemed it unlikely that their existence could be under threat, we still find that 38,6% of organizations deem it likely that external pressures might cause serious challenges for their existence.

These findings pose serious implications for the way LGBTQI+ organizations organize themselves, but also how they organize their political activities. Hence, we also specifically asked the participants various questions regarding the strategic choices that their organizations make daily. In the research project itself, we focused on channel choice, coalition behavior and target choice. Following paragraphs will highlight some of the key findings regarding these three strategic elements.

Channel choice: How to lobby for change?

Generally, interest organizations have three main channels they can use to promote and/or defend their interests: inside strategies, outside strategies, and litigation or legal strategies. Inside strategies refer to activities of interest organizations that *directly* reach politicians and policymakers, such as emails, phone calls, (informal) meetings, writing policy papers, etc. Outside strategies, on the contrary, are those strategies that try to *indirectly* influence politicians and policymakers through public opinion, for example by writing newspaper articles, organizing protests and demonstrations, social media campaigns, etc. Lastly, litigation strategies refer to organizations using the legal system to create policy change, for example by litigating at (inter)national courts or providing legal services to individuals.

First, we find that outside strategies are mostly used by LGBTQI+ interest organizations: on average organizations spend 49,5% of their time on outside strategies, followed by inside strategies (42.8%). This thus means that organizations tend to focus on influencing public opinion through social media, news channels and protests. Regarding litigation activities, we find that half of the organizations are active in litigation, but the organizations that do so, only spend 7.7% of their time on average on these activities.

Second, we find that national contexts indeed affect organizations' choice to use a particular channel. First, we find that the higher the secularization of countries is, the more organizations use inside strategies. Public opinion plays an important role in this regard. In countries with a high degree of secularization, public opinion also tends to be more positive towards LGBTQI+ rights. As LGBTQI+ organizations do not have to 'convince' the public of the importance of LGBTQI+ rights, they instead tend to use more inside strategies. This allows them to directly reach out to politicians and policymakers. Indeed, in these direct contacts, LGBTQI+ organizations can also use information about public opinion as a negotiating tool, as politicians often will follow public opinion with regards to equality politics. In a separate analysis we further confirm this result as we find that organizations use outside strategies less frequently when secularization is high. Interestingly, we find that particularly organizations in countries with higher religiosity use litigation strategies more. An explanation could be that when organizations face negative opinions from the public and political elites, they rather avoid interactions with citizens or politicians, but instead use the neutral legal system to create policy change.

These implications of these findings are important considering the role that religion has in various countries. In our survey, we asked respondents how influential religious actors (such as churches and religious interest groups) play in national politics. Here, a majority of respondents (54,4%) indicated that religious actors are very to extremely influential in national politics. Only 4 respondents (7%) indicate that religious actors do not have influence. This thus indicates that religiosity still plays an important role in many countries' political systems. Our findings highlight that religiosity indeed also trickles down in the strategic choices of LGBTQI+ organizations.

Coalition behavior: Going alone or going together?

Forming coalitions is one of the most prevalent strategies used by interest organizations. We find that this also applies to LGBTQI+ organizations as all the surveyed organizations make coalitions with other organizations. We find that most organizations (96,7%) make coalitions with other national LGBTQI+ organizations, followed by other citizen or interest groups and local governments (also see Table 2). Only 37,7% of surveyed organizations build coalitions with global organizations, and only 27,9% with EU institutions.

Table 2: Coalition partners of LGBTQI+ organizations

Coalition partner	% of Total
Other national LGBTQI+ organizations	96,7 %
Other citizen groups, interest groups or companies	85,2 %
Local governments	77,0 %
Other EU-level LGBTQI+ organizations	75,4 %
National governments	54,1 %
Research institutes or think tanks	52,5 %
Other global LGBTQ+ organizations	37,7 %
EU institutions	27,9 %

These results highlight that coalitions between LGBTQI+ organizations are rather nationally and even locally oriented, rather than international. This might indicate the relative importance of grassroots politics, where European LGBTQI+ organizations focus their political activities that is close to the individuals they represent.

In a next step, we studied to what extent the political orientation of a national (or federal) government affects the type of coalitions LGBTQI+ organizations build. Theoretically, we might expect for example that LGBTQI+ organizations operating in countries with a more conservative and less LGBTQI+-friendly

government might build coalitions with organizations from more LGBTQI+-friendly countries. Yet, we find no significant results between the orientation of national governments and coalition behavior of LGBTQI+ organizations. Coalition behavior is thus driven by other factors and considerations.

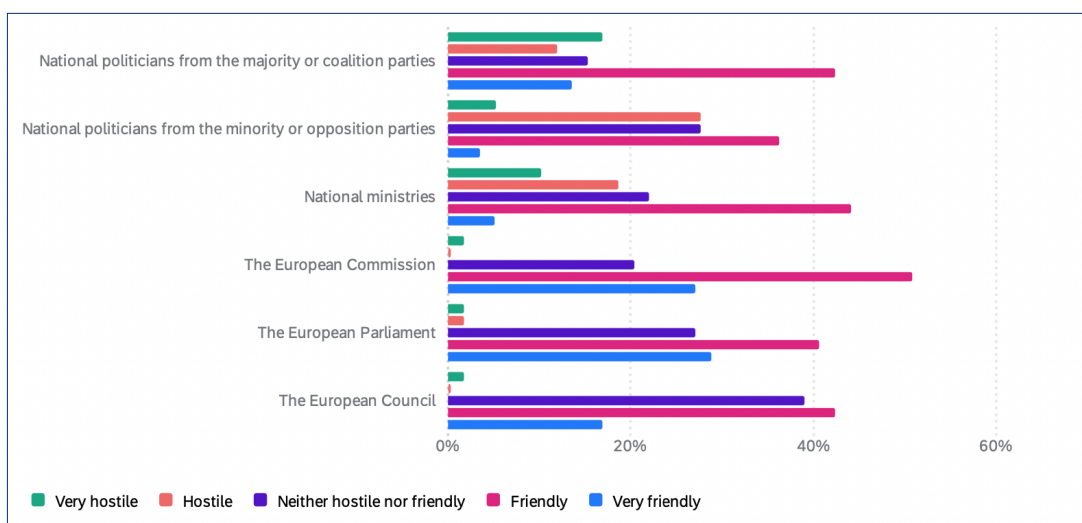
Target choice: Who to lobby?

The focus of this last section was to study to what extent national contexts influence which political actors are lobbied by LGBTQI+ organizations. Next to what channel organizations use, and with who they lobby for policy change, organizations also must consider what political target they want to influence. Here, we make a distinction between national political actors and transnational actors (such as the European Parliament). Also, we studied to what extent governing parties and opposition parties are targeted.

First, we find that the organizations in our sample mainly target on national political actors. This is not surprising as we purposively surveyed national LGBTQI+ interest organizations. Of these groups 15,7% also targets transnational political actors. This also corresponds when looking at the division of time based on different political levels. We find that on average most time of the surveyed organizations is spend on the local level (38,4%), national level (26%), subnational level (19,9%). Only 11,2% and 4.4% of organizations' time is, on average, spend on activities at the respective European and global level.

Interestingly, organizations target opposition parties somewhat more frequently than governing parties. This might seem surprising as governing parties have a direct say in upcoming policies, whereas opposition parties can only respond to policies. Also, when we consider the perceived stances towards LGBTQI+ rights of governing and opposition parties, we do not really see apparent differences (Figure 2). Although respondents indicate that politicians from governing parties are mostly very hostile, more than 40% of the respondents in other countries indicate that these politicians are friendly towards LGBTQI+ topics. Simultaneously, opposition parties are less often perceived to be hostile, but also less perceived to be friendly towards LGBTQI+ related topics. In other words, there is no clear pattern in the perceived friendliness and hostility of governing and opposition parties. As a result, we cannot for certain argue why opposition parties are the somewhat more preferred target choice of LGBTQI+ organizations.

Figure 2: Perceived hostility of national and EU-level institutions



In a next step, we analyzed to what extent public opinion and the legal equality of LGBTQI+ people affect the target choice of LGBTQI+ organizations. One interesting finding is that LGBTQI+ organizations tend to target transnational actors more when public opinion is negative towards LGBTQI+ rights. Indeed, organizations understand that politicians and policymakers often will follow public opinion with regards to equality politics. Hence, organizations instead decide to focus on transnational actors that are perceived to be more friendly towards LGBTQI+ topics (see Figure 2) if public opinion is not favorable. In a similar vein, we also find that that in countries where there is a higher degree of legal equality, LGBTQI+ organizations tend to target governing parties more. In countries where there is higher legal equality might indicate that political elites (such as policymakers) are relatively positive vouched towards LGBTQI+ rights. This thus makes them a more attractive target for organizations seeking policy change.

Conclusion

The research presented in this policy brief sheds light on the intricate dynamics between LGBTQI+ organizations and the hostile environments they operate in across various European countries. The past few years have witnessed a concerning contestation of LGBTQI+ rights, marked by the rise of anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment fueled by populist movements and the anti-gender movement. These developments pose significant challenges to LGBTQI+ organizations dedicated to advancing the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals.

1. Online platforms, particularly Twitter, play a vital role in LGBTQI+ organizations' public outreach. However, evolving developments on platforms like Twitter could potentially threaten their reach.
2. While there is an overall positive trend in public opinion and legal equality of LGBTQI+ people, notable variations exist among European countries. Some countries experience positive changes, while others still face substantial opposition.
3. The strategic choices of LGBTQI+ organizations, including lobbying strategies, are influenced by factors such as public opinion and the degree of secularization in their respective countries.
4. Collaborative efforts in the form of coalition building, predominantly on the national and local levels, are the norm for LGBTQI+ organizations, reflecting their grassroots engagement.
5. The target choices of LGBTQI+ organizations vary based on the political climate, with a tendency to focus on national opposition parties in countries where public opinion is negative, and transnational institutions when facing unfavorable domestic conditions.

These findings underscore the significance of context-sensitive advocacy efforts by LGBTQI+ organizations, indicating that flexibility and adaptability are key to navigating the challenging political environments. Key to this flexibility is having a wide toolkit of various strategies (both inside, outside and litigation strategies), building coalitions with different types of actors, and carefully targeting national and European institutions. Policymakers should take note of these insights and work towards creating an inclusive and enabling environment that supports diverse advocacy strategies. Ultimately, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by LGBTQI+ organizations in hostile environments and offers valuable guidance for both policymakers and advocacy groups striving for positive change.