

The Equal Rights Coalition – A Multilateral Platform for LGBTQI+ Rights

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Alongside the U.N., the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) is a multilateral platform advocating for the global LGBTQI+ community. The organization “works for a world where every nation recognises, promotes and protects the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons.” The ERC currently consists of 42 member nations and many more civil-society organizations.

The September 2022 edition of EuroPride in Belgrade, Serbia, was meant to be both a celebration of the great strides made toward equality by LGBTQI+ people in the country, and a reminder of how much is still left to be done. Furthermore, it was meant to support Serbia’s ongoing campaign for entry into the European Union. But the Serbian government, under President Aleksandar Vučić, canceled the parade at the last minute. According to Vučić, the potential for violent clashes between pro- and anti-LGBTQI+ demonstrators, alongside broader economic pressures, meant that Belgrade police were incapable of guaranteeing the security of the parade. He postponed EuroPride to “happier times.”

What recourse do LGBTQI+ activists and the governments that back them have in such situations? One of their best options is the Equal Rights Coalition. Alongside the U.N., the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) is a multilateral platform advocating for the global LGBTQI+ community. The organization “works for a world where every nation recognises, promotes and protects the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons.” The ERC currently consists of 42 member nations and many more civil-society organizations: some from member nations, others from countries where homosexuality is still criminalized and LGBTQI+ people continue to be persecuted.

The leadership of the ERC rotates every two years. Two member nations become co-chairs—one from the Global North, the other from the Global South—as do two civil-society groups from the same countries. The co-chairs for the 2022-2024 period are Germany and Mexico, their corresponding civil society co-chairs Lesbian and Gay Federation LSVD in Germany and Fundación Arcoiris por el respeto a la diversidad sexual (Rainbow Foundation for respect of sexual diversity) in Mexico—the latter a group “focusing on the analysis of gender and sexuality in the Latin American and Caribbean regions” whose work “emphasizes that stereotypes and discrimination based on sexuality are a major obstacle to both thriving individuals and flourishing societies.”

The ERC divides its work into four broad categories:

- Coordination between international donors who support LGBTQI+ human rights
- International diplomacy to protect and strengthen LGBTQI+ communities

- National laws and policies, with a focus on how members states' governments can protect their LGBTQI+ constituents
- The implementation of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals in a way that benefits LGBTQI+ people.

Like the U.N., the ERC is a complex web of varying national interests. Its members have different priorities and sometimes even contradictory goals. Nor is ERC rhetoric always matched by the actions of individual members. But because the ERC is explicitly an LGBTQI+ rights coalition, nations are subject to greater scrutiny on their LGBTQI+ rights records than they are in most other international forums.

ERC members must be willing to act

After the Serbian government postponed EuroPride in September 2022, Klaus Jetz, the director of the LSVD, noted, it was forced to explain its decision to the other ERC members. "You could clearly feel how the Serbian government representative was equivocating on the issue in her video message," Jetz says. "She was looking for arguments to back up a decision that was at odds with Serbia's membership in the ERC." He adds, "They already had a guilty conscience about it."

ERC membership is more than a feather in the cap of a government trying to burnish its progressive credentials; it requires concrete action, Jetz says. States are forced to explain and defend their specific policies on LGBTQI+ people to other ERC members, which they rarely have to do in other contexts, making the organization a rare construct in international relations—and all the more valuable for it. In the ERC, delicate diplomacy and critical responses to harmful policies and decisions can exist side by side. In addition, civil society groups can pressure states to keep their word on LGBTQI+ human rights.

Networking international LGBTQI+ activists

LSVD and Fundación Arcoiris are two such civil society groups. They have ambitious plans for their two-year co-chairmanship of the ERC. Their main goals include strengthening connections, defending against hatred, and encouraging governments at home and abroad to do more for LGBTQI+ communities. Jetz and Gloria Careaga, the general coordinator of Fundación Arcoiris, aim to bring LGBTQI+-friendly governments and civil society organizations closer, allowing diplomacy and activism to work together hand in hand. The denser the network, the more effective the political work becomes. "These are long processes, but they can make a lot happen," Jetz says. Careaga adds, "The main goal of the ERC is to encourage governments to have better positions on LGBTQI+ rights."

LSVD and Fundación Arcoiris hope to gain new members for the ERC: both states and civil society organizations. But they will also have to defend hard-won victories on LGBTQI+ rights during their co-chairship. Both organizations must deal with the global "anti-gender movement" in their day-to-day work. This movement is especially hostile to trans* people,

denying the possibility of gender expression beyond the male-female binary. These are ideas that threaten the whole LGBTQI+ community. “We need to fulfill our mandate as a civil society group, to empower ourselves and others to understand what’s going on,” Jetz says. This challenge is not just present in Germany: anti-gender activists “built up their movement and have grown very, very rapidly” in Mexico, Careaga says. “Then they got louder, too. You started hearing similar things from elected officials.” As the ERC notes in a briefing paper, anti-gender movements are “aligned with coalitions broadly opposed to progressive recognition of human rights standards, and social and economic justice” and “have often mobilized with scale and speed unanticipated by progressive movements.” According to Jetz, the best way of countering such groups is education and patience. “Hopefully we’ll be done talking about in ten years,” he says.

Meeting global challenges—together

The ERC is divided into discrete member states. But in the age of social media, most movements spread easily beyond national borders. It happens that different civil society organizations within the same country advocate both for and against the human rights of LGBTQI+ people (for example, the U.S. has both prominent pro-LGBTQI+ groups like the Human Rights Campaign and anti-LGBTQI+ groups like the Family Research Council). Because of this complexity, Jetz and Careaga both emphasize, it is essential that every ERC member offer the best possible set of legal and public policies protections for its LGBTQI+ community.

At the [2022 ERC conference](#), which took place in Buenos Aires, Annalena Baerbock, the German Foreign Minister, said, “As co-chair, our fight for equal rights will begin where it should: at home.” But Jetz and Careaga believe that LGBTQI+ activism must operate on the national and the international level simultaneously. They say that activists can’t wait until everything is perfect at home before supporting their colleagues in other countries. Still, as Jetz says, “the better you’ve done your homework in your own country, the more they’ll listen to you abroad.”