



LGBT+ YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN THE EECA REGION

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ANNOTATION

This pilot study focuses on a special group among LGBT+ people: youth. A quantitative analysis of the answers to the survey, as well as additional data gleaned from interviews and focus groups, allows us to conclude that LGBT+ youth in the EECA region face a wide range of problems. These problems can be divided into four segments: political problems, access to the healthcare system, discrimination in the workplace, and problems with access to education. At the same time, according to the analysis, these four segments are arranged hierarchically: that is, our respondents are more likely to encounter problems in the political sphere (90%) than in the educational sphere (30%). Consequently, the basic needs reported by LGBT+ youth in EECA are related to political rights and freedoms. They need guarantees for the realization of their rights to participate in political and civic life in their countries, to hold peaceful assemblies, to be elected to representative bodies of power, etc. In the field of access to healthcare services and the labor market, respondents need effective tools to protect themselves from discrimination related to gender identity and sexual orientation. In addition, respondents noted the overall low level of development of the healthcare systems in the region, as well as the low level of salaries, problems that are not directly related to gender identity and sexual orientation, but that are part of the everyday life of LGBT+ youth in the region.

The study showed that LGBT+ youth of the region are well aware of the activities of LGBT+ non-governmental organizations in their countries. Most respondents consider the work of such organizations to be useful and necessary, and support various activities ranging from advocacy and public events to informational campaigns and targeted assistance. Moreover, in the responses to the survey, many noted that they themselves are ready to engage in activism to improve the situation of LGBT+ youth in the EECA region. Thus, LGBT+ youth are a resource for active social and political work on human rights problems in the countries of the region.

The study made it possible to develop a number of recommendations for the region as a whole, both for national contexts, and for the local work of civil society initiatives and organizations. The most important of these recommendations are the following. First, it is necessary to continue to monitor the situation of LGBT+ youth in the region, and to conduct relevant studies and surveys. Second, it is necessary to establish dialogue between authorities and citizens to improve the situation of LGBT+ youth in EECA countries. Finally, it is necessary to support and conduct informational campaigns to eradicate prejudices against LGBT+ people that circulate in societies of the EECA region.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are a special social group, not just because of their age. It is clear that different age categories differ from each other precisely by the extent to which their dates of birth coincide or do not coincide. However, the point of distinguishing age groups in a particular society lies in the special set of vulnerabilities determined by age as a social status. An unstable financial and career position, the first experience of an independent and autonomous life, experimentation and searching in various fields, careless behavior and risk, and high public expectation are some of the many things that generally characterize the social status of young people as a separate social group¹. In other words, although people at different ages may take risks, and few are protected from job and income loss throughout their entire lives, statistically, such problems are most common among young people and have the most devastating consequences for them than at any other time in life. This is why young people stand out as a separate social group, and not just because of their age.

The situation is complicated when certain social differences are viewed in the context of other social differences². For example, among others, sexuality and age intersect in a unique way, providing the basis for peculiar experiences in which risk and vulnerability are manifested in new and often more intensified ways³. For example, inexperience in building trusting, romantic relationships, characteristic of young partners, is often associated with risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV, psychological problems, and violence⁴. The relationship between sexual experimentation, the discovery of different sides of sexuality, the development of a particular sexual identity, and youth is being actively explored, especially in relation to young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people (LGBT+), since it is in these cohorts that problems associated with social rejection are noted and lead to serious consequences. Even in countries where there are environments that are generally friendly towards sexual diversity, LGBT+ young people face misunderstanding, rejection, pressure and outright violence, which may lead to serious injury and suicidal behavior⁵. Psychological protection from such problems increases as one grows up, and therefore, LGBT+ youth remain a uniquely vulnerable group in this regard.

¹ Омельченко Е. Л. Молодежь в городе: культуры, сцены и солидарности. Москва: Издательский дом НИУ ВШЭ, 2020; Krupets Y., Morris J., Nartova Nadya, Omelchenko Elena, Sabirova G. Imagining young adults' citizenship in Russia: from fatalism to affective ideas of belonging. *Journal of Youth Studies*. 2017. 20(2): 252-267.

² Темкина А.А., Здравомыслова Е.А. Интерсекциональный поворот в гендерных исследованиях. *Журнал социологии и социальной антропологии*. 2017. 20(5): 15–38.

³ Омельченко Е. Л., Н. А. Нартова. PRO тело. Молодежный контекст. Санкт-Петербург: Алетейя, 2013; Низамова А. Н. Активное долголетие и внешний вид: как теоретическая концепция регулирует самовосприятие в старшем возрасте? *Журнал исследований социальной политики*. 2016. 14(4): 569-582.

⁴ Greene G.J., Fisher K., Kuper L., Andrews R. and Mustanski B. 'Is This Normal? Is This Not Normal? There Is No Set Example': Sexual Health Intervention Preferences of LGBT Youth in Romantic Relationships. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*. 2015. 12(1): 1-14; Robertson M.A. 'How Do I Know I Am Gay?': Understanding Sexual Orientation, Identity and Behavior Among Adolescents in an LGBT Youth Center. *Sexuality & Culture*. 2014. 18: 385-404 (2014).

⁵ Eliason M. Introduction to special issue on suicide, mental health, and youth development. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2011. 58(1): 4-9.

In the countries of the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), many of these problems faced by young people are only exacerbated by active policies of intolerance towards sexual diversity⁶. Although there is no uniform approach to policies related to sexuality in the region, many governments in EECA countries openly express homophobia or indifference towards LGBT+ people, which in turn encourages homophobia and leads to tolerance for such sentiments⁷. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, criminal prohibition of voluntary sexual practices between persons of the same sex still exists⁸. In Russia, there is a law prohibiting the public expression of opinions on equality between LGBT+ and heterosexual citizens (the law on so-called propaganda)⁹. In Georgia, public actions of LGBT activists are met with violent opposition from religious groups, which is condoned by authorities¹⁰. The list of such problems goes on and on. Although not specific to young people, this context is particularly harmful for the least protected and most vulnerable groups.

It is in this context that this pilot study examines the situation of young people from the LGBT+ community in EECA. This work is devoted to studying the specific needs of this category of citizens of EECA countries in the field of health and in connection with human rights. Young people are defined relatively broadly in the study and include people between the ages of 18 and 30. This age is characterized as the accumulation of experience (sexual, educational, professional, etc.) and various forms of «capital»: social capital (acquaintances, «relationships», friendship, family relations); financial capital (earnings, property, savings); cultural capital (knowledge, experience, skills), etc. Studies show that by the age of 30, many people have mostly completed their educational projects, acquired a regular circle of acquaintances, and have relatively permanent jobs, regular sexual relations or a family, experience going to medical institutions, etc. In other words, they have already experimented in various spheres and have a fairly clear idea of their identity and trajectory in life. Our research addresses people who are in the process of accumulating all of this experience.

⁶ Healey, D. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018; Kondakov A. The influence of the 'gay-propaganda' law on violence against LGBTIQ people in Russia: Evidence from criminal court rulings. *European Journal of Criminology*. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819887511>.

⁷ Channell-Justice E. *Decolonizing Queer Experience: LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

⁸ Latypov A., Rhodesc T. and Reynolds L. Prohibition, stigma and violence against men who have sex with men: effects on HIV in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*. 2013. 32(1): 52–65.

⁹ Kondakov A. 'The Censorship «Propaganda» Legislation in Russia'. In: *State-Sponsored Homophobia*, ed. L. Ramon Mendos. Geneva: ILGA-Europe, 2019: 213–15.

¹⁰ Tolkachev D. and Tolordava T. Shared Past, Different Future? Russian and Georgian Authorities' Discourse Concerning Homosexuality. *Sexuality & Culture*. 2020. 24: 447–464.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

This study was conducted using a wide variety of methods, which allows you to determine the most appropriate tools for future work. At the first stage, a pilot quantitative study was carried out, during which an on-line questionnaire was disseminated among young LGBT+ people with the help of local LGBT+ organizations. During December 2020, 79 people responded to the questionnaire. Then, five interviews were conducted with LGBT+ people from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which allowed us to obtain information about the contexts of interest to us in these countries. Finally, a focus group discussion with pre-prepared topics took place, in which young LGBT+ people from Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine participated. Questionnaires, interviews, and discussion allowed us to obtain a greater volume of data, and complemented each other. In future studies, this data can be used to develop accurate tools for working with the designated group. This report uses quantitative data obtained from questionnaire responses.

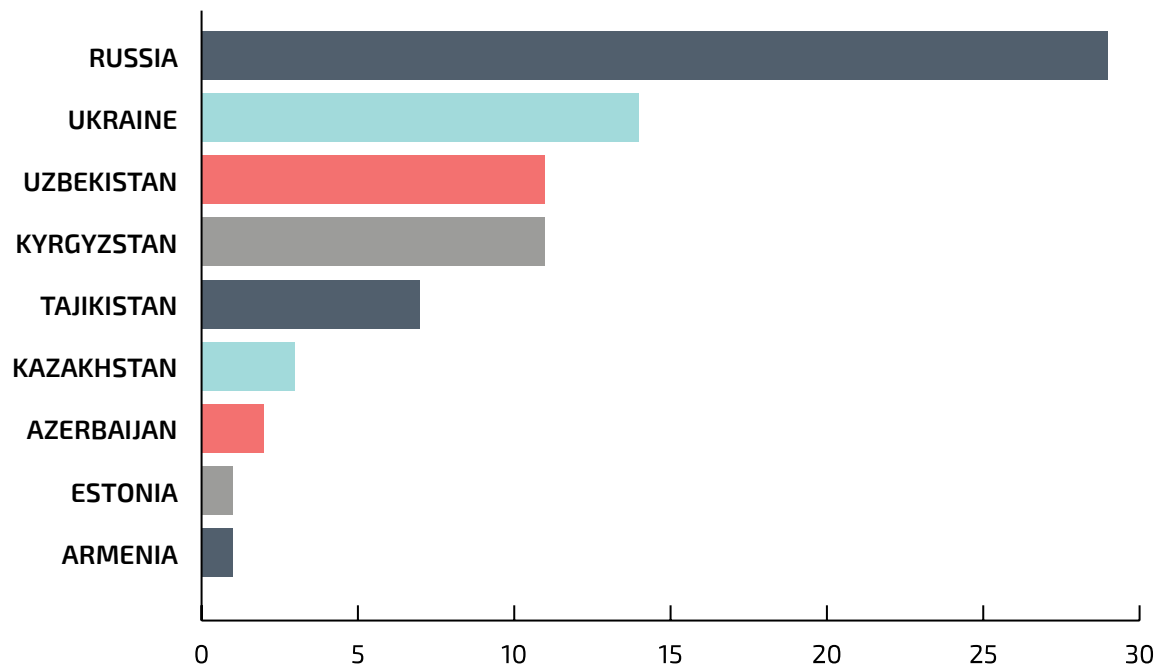


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of questionnaire respondents

As seen in Figure 1, young LGBT+ people from nine countries responded to the questionnaire. The largest number of respondents are from Russia, followed by Ukrainians, and citizens of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The average age of the respondents was 28. Nearly all respondents live in capitals or large cities, including those with more than a million inhabitants. This reflects well the overwhelming pattern of cisgender males among LGBT+ people: typically, urban dwellers with a high level of education and on their way to a protected adult life.

Thus, among our respondents, the majority (40 people) have higher education and a corresponding income that allows them to experience relative economic security (enough for food and clothing, but not for savings). The remaining respondents experience financial insecurity to varying degrees, including a lack of funds for their daily needs.

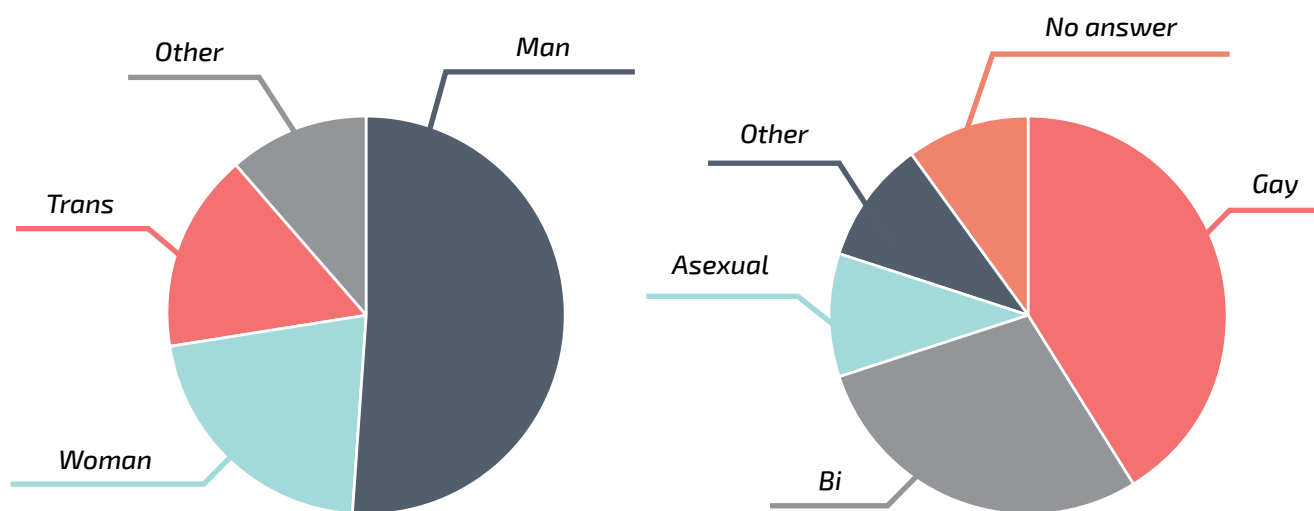


Figure 2. Sexual and gender identity of respondents

Figure 2 demonstrates that respondents are expectedly diverse in terms of sexual behavior, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. Most (33 people or 45%) identify themselves as gay or homosexual men. They are followed by bisexual people (23 people), and then asexual people (8) and other categories of identity (for example, gender fluid, panromantic, demi-bisexual). In terms of gender characteristics, the respondents were divided into men (41), women (17), representatives of trans communities (13), and other categories of gender identity. At the end of the list are five people who identify themselves as non-binary persons, two as bigender, one agender person, and one genderqueer person.

This diversity is now common in both the European Union as a whole and in Council of Europe countries: although more conventional forms of self-identification (such as «gay» or «trans») prevail, the sexual and gender experiences of young people are increasingly beginning to be described using less stable categories («non-binary» persons, «queer», and others). This reflects the fluidity and volatility of both modern life and the gender or sexual experience of individuals.

OVERVIEW OF PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

The following analysis identifies the most problematic areas that respondents identified when responding to the questions of the online survey. All respondents were provided the opportunity to choose any number of answers when identifying the main barriers LGBT+ youth face in their country. The responses related to discrimination in the field of employment and relations at work, access to medical services and education, and the level of guarantees of civil and political freedoms. In addition, respondents could choose their own answer to the question and write down what they think is the most pressing problem of LGBT+ youth at the moment. This made it possible to identify those problem areas that were not listed in the question itself.

As a result, all of the respondents' answers are divided into five large groups arranged in hierarchical order in Figure 3. According to the respondents' answers, politics was the most problematic area in all countries where the survey was conducted. This means that the respondents have not found any positives in their experiences related to the civil and political rights and freedoms indicated in the survey: freedoms of speech, self-expression, peaceful assembly, etc. This area was selected as the most problematic (90% of respondents) almost unanimously (71 out of 79).

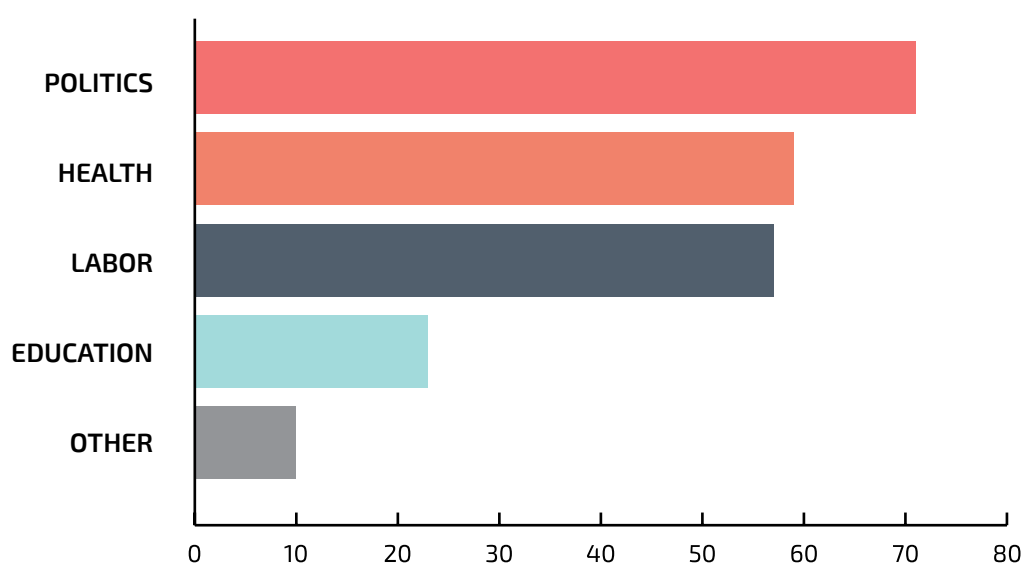


Figure 3. Hierarchy of problem areas for LGBT+ youth in EECA countries

Health and labor shared second place in terms of the most problematic areas. According to respondents, LGBT+ youth face discrimination and have negative experiences in these two areas. The problems in these areas can be divided into two groups. The first group is general and not specific to LGBT+ people, and is rather associated with the low level of economic development of the countries of the EECA region.

Thus, nearly 30% of respondents consider their level of wages to be low. This is typical for other citizens of EECA countries, where the cost of labor does not even reach the average indicators of the European Union. At the same time, more than 60% of respondents consider the situation in the field of labor to be specifically discriminatory towards LGBT+ people, the overwhelming majority of whom are also dissatisfied with their level of wages. In terms of medicine, 62% of respondents consider the level of medical services to be low, while 57% have faced discrimination specific to LGBT+ people in the field of healthcare.

At the bottom of the list is an area that does not necessarily come to mind immediately when LGBT+ youth respondents in EECA countries reflect on the challenges they face: the field of education, which was selected by 30% of respondents. LGBT+ youth often face a large number of problems related to education when studying in high school. This is the time and place when people generally open up about their sexuality, and, at the same time, may experience psychological and physical pressure and violence from classmates and teachers who seek to validate their version of sexuality everywhere and in any way. In our study, there were no high school students. All respondents had already reached the age of 18. Nevertheless, those who noted discrimination in education reported on their experiences at different stages of education.

The final category of this analysis is «other». This is a space for indicating problems that were not included in the design of the study. Among such problems, relations with law enforcement agencies were the most common: several participants of the survey note that homosexuality is still criminalized in their countries, which emboldens the police. Others point to discriminatory practices even in the absence of any criminal offense for voluntary homosexual relations. This is followed by problems of the trans community related to access to specific health services (consultations, hormone therapy, medical bureaucracy). Finally, respondents note the lack of equality of rights between same-sex and opposite-sex partners, as well as the problem of everyday violence on the street.

In an attempt to obtain more detailed and diverse information, the respondents were also asked an open-ended question about their experience with problem situations: ***what problems related to your sexual orientation or gender identity have you faced?*** 63 out of a possible 79 respondents answered this question (the remaining respondents preferred not to answer). 11 respondents stated that they did not encounter any problems, while 4 indicated that they did not encounter problems because they hide their sexual orientation. The largest number of responses (21) related to public condemnation as a problem directly experienced by respondents. Another 11 people faced discrimination in healthcare institutions and a denial of access to healthcare services. 5 people recalled discrimination in the workplace, including refusal of employment due to sexual orientation or gender identity. Threats, including from law enforcement agencies, and physical violence were reported by 3 respondents. All this points to the wide variety of problems faced by LGBT+ youth in EECA countries.

STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS

In the final part of the survey, we asked respondents about how non-governmental LGBT+ organizations in the region can help to resolve the problems identified. When asked whether LGBT+ advocacy organizations can provide any assistance, 46 respondents (58%) answered in the affirmative, 24 (31%) found it difficult to answer, and only 9 (11%) said no. When assessing the help LGBT+ organizations provide using a 10-point scale, 73% of respondents gave a rating in the upper half (from 5 to 10 points), and almost 25% rated the work of such NGOs with 10 points. Accordingly, 27% of respondents are dissatisfied with the work of LGBT+ organizations. This all testifies to the value of the work of LGBT+ organizations for youth in the region, as well as to the awareness of the respondents about such work. When asked whether LGBT+ respondents know organizations in their country or region, only 5 respondents indicated that they do not know about such organizations. Thus, the work of activists does not go unnoticed.

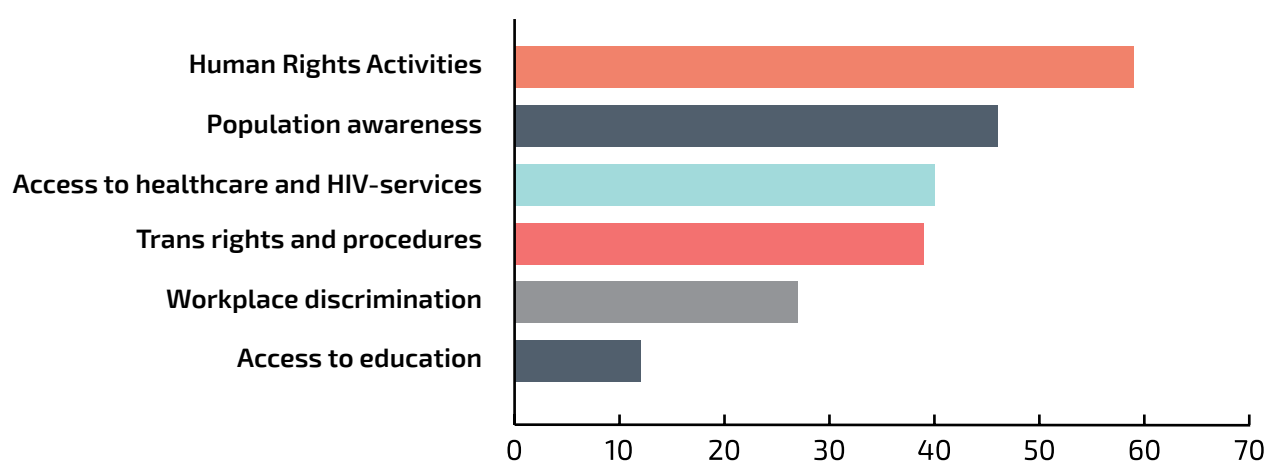


Figure 4. List of problem areas LGBT+ organizations are expected to address

Figure 4 shows the problem areas that respondents expect local and regional LGBT+ organizations to address. The list is presented in descending hierarchical order, which reflects the priorities established by the respondents. In other words, moving towards the top of the list does not mean that the rest of the problem areas are less important. Rather, it means that, at the time of the survey, more respondents considered this problem urgent. Respondents could choose any number of answers and add their own responses as well. As a result, human rights activities turned out to be the most popular: 74% of respondents considered this to be the most important problem addressed by LGBT+ organizations. This includes the organization of pickets and demonstrations, and the protection of freedoms and civil rights. The problem of the population awareness occupies the next spot with 58%. Many respondents note that discrimination against LGBT+ people is the result of ignorance, prejudice, and fear inherent in the societies of the region. LGBT+ organizations solve these problems through informational campaigns. Medical problems, including HIV issues and access to hormone therapy, should be addressed by LGBT+ organizations according to 50% of respondents. In addition, 50% believe that LGBT+ organizations should promote reforms in relation to official recognition of gender identity without requirements of traumatic interventions by medical specialists.

Discrimination in the workplace and in employment received 34% of the vote, and access to education 15%. In general, this structure of responses reflects rather accurately the problem areas identified above (politics, medicine, labor, and education).

In additional questions, we also asked about the work of the author of the study, ECOM — Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity. 40% of those who answered the question said they were familiar with the work of ECOM, while 59% said no. The planning of ECOM activities in the region can be based on the requests reported by the survey's LGBT+ youth respondents. For instance, 47% of respondents believe it is necessary to establish dialogue with local and regional authorities; 38% consider it important to monitor the needs of LGBT+ youth in the region; 30% support regional informational campaigns; 27% give preference to building coalitions between various international LGBT+ and HIV-service organizations and distributing stipends and grants to youth projects; finally, 22% were in favor of organizing direct action. When respondents were offered options for two types of activities (establishing dialogue with authorities and direct funding of work) in two different areas (LGBT+ rights in general, and access to healthcare), almost 50% were in favor of dialogue on LGBT+ rights in general, and more than 43% for dialogue on health issues. Meanwhile, 34% were in favor of funding for relevant advocacy programs, and 28% for funding in the healthcare sector.

The survey also assessed the activist capacity of the respondents. One of the questions dealt with what the participants of the study are willing to do on their own in order to resolve the problems identified. Figure 5 presents their responses: the majority of those who answered this question are willing to conduct monitoring studies and consultations on health issues. In the middle are those willing to participate in online and offline campaigns, establish dialogue with authorities, and provide legal advice. Slightly fewer respondents are willing to help others receive hormone therapy and provide care for people with HIV. In general, the respondents are willing to take various necessary actions; they are active LGBT+ youth. In other words, if this potential of young people has not yet been tapped by local and international organizations, then it is an important resource for their advocacy activities, and should serve as a reliable source for change in the region



Figure 5. Number of respondents willing to participate in various advocacy activities

CONCLUSIONS

The study showed that the main problems faced by LGBT+ youth in the EECA region are socio-political problems. This includes the issues of discrimination and the violation of rights and freedoms, the impact of an unfriendly and homophobic environment expressed through both psychological and physical violence, and non-acceptance by society and the state, including at the legislative level. None of these problems, united by the common socio-political context of the countries of the region, are new. However, it is important to note that, in some countries, there are negative trends, where societies are moving from silence or partial recognition of LGBT+ people towards an increase in openly homophobic sentiments and discrimination, which is fueled by active policies of hatred (for example, laws and bills on so-called "gay propaganda"). The issue of criminal prosecution of men who have sex with men in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain unresolved, and attacks on LGBT+ activists in Ukraine and Georgia continue.

Health remains another problem area for LGBT+ youth in the EECA region. Due to general and LGBT+-specific circumstances, formal healthcare systems are relatively complicated to use. A lack of sufficient funding for national healthcare systems is a common circumstance that results in a poor-quality end product. Specific problems include a wide range of difficulties faced by young people precisely due to the fact that they identify themselves on the LGBT+ spectrum. These include discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in access to medical services, the existence or absence of mechanisms for receiving relevant medical services (antiretroviral therapy, hormone therapy), and medical intervention procedures that are unnecessary but required to change one's personal identity documents to conform with one's gender identity.

In the spheres of education and labor, the respondents of this study face fewer problems than in comparison with the spheres of politics and medicine. Despite this, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity remains widespread in the workplace and during recruitment. The trans respondents in this study reported many such incidents. Individual incidents of discrimination were also reported by respondents in connection with access to education. In general, these areas are of great importance for young people and should therefore receive greater attention from society and civil society organizations.

Respondents noted that the problems they identified can be resolved with the help of the work of non-governmental organizations and initiative groups. The hierarchy of problems resolved in this way reflected the hierarchy of the areas in which respondents find that problems are concentrated. Moreover, the survey participants noted that they know of organizations already working to solve these problems and operating in the region, including ECOM, and that they highly appreciate their work. Our respondents are willing to take part in activism and advocacy activities in various ways: from collecting information and participating in public actions to directly working with people in need. This attests to the potential resource that interested LGBT+ youth, capable of performing noble deeds, represent for the EECA region.

RECOMMENDATIONS



AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

- ★ Collect comparative data, and conduct research on the problems and human rights violations faced by LGBT+ youth at the regional and international levels;
- ★ Promote the development of dialogue with local and national authorities in order to abolish existing discriminatory legislation (criminal prosecution of MSM, laws on so-called «gay propaganda»);
- ★ Promote the development of dialogue with local and national authorities in order to enact antidiscrimination legislation that guarantees human rights and political freedoms;
- ★ Promote the development of regional programs to ensure the involvement of LGBT+ youth in decision-making processes in their countries in the public and civil sectors;
- ★ Promote the development of dialogue between national and local authorities and LGBT+ people, including LGBT+ youth;
- ★ Defend the ideas of human rights at the global level and in the EECA region, including non-discrimination when making socially significant decisions by including LGBT+ youth in social processes.







AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

- ♥ Promote the repeal of existing discriminatory legislation (criminal prosecution of MSM, laws on so-called «gay propaganda»);
- ♥ Promote the adoption of antidiscrimination legislation that guarantees human rights and political freedoms (freedoms of speech, expression, peaceful assembly, and the freedom to elect and be elected);
- ♥ Promote the participation of LGBT+ youth in public processes and discussions in order to actualize the youth agenda in public and political discussions in EECA countries;
- ♥ Support national non-governmental organizations and initiatives working with LGBT+ youth in EECA countries;
- ♥ Promote healthcare reforms to improve the quality of health services and to combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the provision of healthcare services.



AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, TO LGBT+ YOUTH COMMUNITIES

-  Attract various resources (both established grants from international foundations and alternative sources), including relying on the activist potential of LGBT+ youth in local communities;
-  Initiate and conduct informational and educational work aimed at raising public awareness about political freedoms, human rights, and the values of diversity and non-discrimination;
-  Initiate and carry out projects aimed at addressing the urgent problems of LGBT+ youth related to discrimination and access to medical services;
-  Support local initiatives and active individuals to ensure a pluralism of opinions and the involvement of LGBT+ youth in social and political processes.

