



## LGBTQI+ Migrants and Inclusion: Lessons learned from the Expert Meeting in Mechelen 21 November 2022<sup>1</sup>

LGBTQI+ migrants experience specific forms of discrimination and obstacles to participate in society. This is why the [Urban Agenda for the European Union on the Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees](#) included an action specifically targeting this theme. It aims to gain more insight into the obstacles LGBTQI+ migrants encounter in Europe, as well as into how cities, national governments, and the EU level deal with these obstacles and contribute to their inclusion in society. Following a webinar and field visits to the cities of Berlin, Amsterdam and Antwerp, the city of Mechelen and the Government of Flanders, with support of the European Commission and the Migration Policy Institute Europe, organised an expert meeting aimed at presenting promising practices and developing very practical policy recommendations. **This report identifies the main takeaways from the session and presents 15 recommendations for policy makers and relevant organisations.**

The meeting featured an academic and a policy keynote speech.

Based on his research on the relationship between sexuality, migration and Islam, **Dr Wim Peumans discussed the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ people in the asylum process.** In particular, he highlighted how LGBTQI+ asylum seekers can experience this bureaucratic process as a torture, as it is notably centred on: 1) a fixed understanding of sexuality and gender identity; 2) coming out and Western conceptions; 3) the need to prove one's sexual or gender identity; 4) the need to participate in the LGBTQI+ scene in countries of origin and destination. There is a need for greater understanding and awareness of the persistent fear of persecution, the insecurity of asylum status which impacts asylum seekers' priorities, the difficulty to put into words something that was taboo in their country, as well as the need to consider the multiple identities and experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals in policy making. It is central to provide safer spaces for LGBTQI+ migrants.

The policy keynote speech was delivered by **Saraya Gomis, the Berlin State Secretary for Diversity and Antidiscrimination.** She **discussed the work done in Berlin to support and include LGBTQI+ migrants**, including the creation of a [dedicated administrative unit](#), anti-discrimination action plans that include LGBTQI+ migrants, and referral persons in police departments and state prosecutor departments. Although Berlin is often touted as a model, she stressed the importance of not being satisfied with what has been achieved **and the many remaining challenges.** Amongst these, she

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<sup>1</sup> Report: Raphael Kokkermans, MPI. For questions or more information: contact Tom De Bruyn, Agency for Home Affairs, Government of Flanders ([tom.debruyne@vlaanderen.be](mailto:tom.debruyne@vlaanderen.be)).



noted: 1) the psychosocial needs of LGBTQI+ migrants and the lack of therapists trained on anti-discrimination; 2) the absence or lack of funding of refugee and self-organised movements that are more accessible to some migrants; 3) the need to involve civil society, vulnerable groups and especially invisible groups; 4) the great need for intersectionality, especially in the organisational structure of municipal services and in funding; 5) the importance of developing and/or adapting the legal framework.

The first panel regarded the **views from international organisations regarding the challenges and solutions to develop inclusive LGBTQI+/migration policies at the local level**. The Flemish NGO, [Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen](#) stressed the need to 1) include translators, therapists, and lawyers in expert meetings and to train them to work in a culturally sensitive way; 2) help small and migrant-led organisations gain access to governments; 3) support legal authorities to prevent unsustainable actions as these can do more harm than good. The [European Commission](#) representative underlined the institution's limited competence in the field but its [integration and inclusion action plan](#) makes reference to its [LGBTIQ Equality Strategy](#). Besides, different EU funds have an LGBTQI+ angle, including for pre-integration strategies from the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund. Networks such as [Eurocities](#) can help in accessing funding and liaising with partners from different levels, countries and experiences to build consortia. The [Rainbow Cities Network](#) highlighted the need to involve LGBTQI+ migrants, to understand what intersectionality means, and to consider hiring staff with a LGBTQI+ background to reduce the need for staff training. Moreover, it will publish guidelines and promising examples for local authorities to develop policies targeting LGBTQI+ individuals next year, which could also be relevant for LGBTQI+ migrants. Besides, a representative of the **International Organisation for Migration** shared the [LGBTQI+ toolbox](#) it has developed for cities and especially frontline workers dealing with LGBTQI+ people with a migrant background.

The second panel focused on **developing inclusive LGBTQI+/migration policies in the context of the Ukrainian crisis**. The SOGIESC unit at the **Human Rights Directorate in Malta** has 1) developed several intersectional [strategies](#); 2) provided training to cultural mediators, the Agency of the Welfare of Asylum Seekers in charge of running the reception centres, and new police recruits; 3) and created materials for asylum seekers outlining LGBTQI+ rights. In contrast, the situation for LGBTQI+ migrants in Poland is dire due to discriminatory laws and a lack of protection from hate speech. However, the representative from the association [Culture for Equality](#) and member of the [Council of Equal Treatment](#) in the city of **Wrocław** highlighted the growing mobilisation at the local level for the LGBTQI+ community in Poland, particularly since the large number of arrivals from Ukraine. LGBTQI+ Ukrainians found easier access to LGBTQI+ associations, as many feared homophobia and transphobia in the country. Good practices in supporting LGBTQI+ migrants include developing intersectional policies, national policies to avoid dependence on political will at the local level, and safer spaces. The representative from the City of **Lisbon** discussed the intersectional approach and involvement of civil society organisations in the city's efforts to support LGBTQI+ migrants, including the creation of a municipal action plan. The city also developed [a portal for migrants](#) regarding their rights and duties, including information on gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, and a programme for LGBTQI+ displaced persons from



Ukraine. In **Barcelona**, the [Municipal Plan for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#) includes measures on interculturality and migration, but the representative from the [association ACATHI](#) highlighted the need for relevant policies at the regional and national level in a context of shared competences.

The third panel discussed **effective measures for the reception and integration of LGBTQI+ refugees at the local level**. The representative from **Hannover** discussed the [city's LGBTQI+ office](#), safe spaces, and accommodation for some LGBTQI+ individuals (including for trans people), but highlighted the need for more rooms and the challenge of supporting LGBTQI+ people from rural areas with no active rainbow community. The speaker from a migrant-led organisation [Skeiv Verden Vest](#) in **Bergen** discussed the city's policy of mapping out and trying to relocate LGBTQI+ asylum seekers from remote reception centres, even if it goes against immigration regulation. The city has also a dedicated chapter for LGBTQI+ migrants in its [2021-2027 action plan on sexual and gender diversity](#) and funds visible safe spaces, although he regretted the visibility aspect. His organisation offers courses on norms, sexual diversity, and gender to asylum seekers, helps identifying LGBTQI+ persons in remote centres, and provides training to city staff dealing with LGBTQI+ migrants. The representative from [Amsterdam](#) discussed the city's efforts to use international networks to develop inclusive policies for LGBTQI+ migrants. It tries to use broader policies to support LGBTQI+ migrants as much as possible, but also resorts to specialised policies where necessary (e.g. safer spaces, trans house). It also includes the rainbow community in their policymaking (e.g. Migrant Advisory Board). However, challenges remain in implementing intersectional policies, providing healthcare for transgender people, maintaining privacy (e.g. safe houses), dealing with diverging national laws and authorities, and diversifying the local administration. The representative from [Berlin](#) emphasised the need for the national level to speak with subnational levels to avoid thwarting their policies, and access to funding. Intersectionality is not complicated to implement but faces oppositions from individuals and ministries. Participants also highlighted the importance of data and research on the challenges faced by sub-categories of LGBTQI+ migrants, and of representation of LGBTQI+ migrants in institutions.

The last panel focused on **addressing offline and online differing opinions on LGBTQI+ at the local level**. The representative from the City of **Mechelen** presented the city's inclusive strategy and policy, some practices regarding LGBTQI+, and highlighted some local challenges. She mentioned the need for creating space for differing opinions within the boundaries of free speech. While laws are one part of the solution, creating a strong community/social environment is also relevant. Additionally, she stressed the need for (bystander) training for civil servants and the provision of more applicable tools. The representative of the Government of **Portugal** from the **High Commission on Migration** mentioned that local governments need financial support in order to develop policies and stressed the importance of training. Moreover, she mentioned that giving (safe) spaces means providing (safe) spaces. The [Federation Plataforma d'Entitats LGTBI de Catalunya](#) discussed the organization's work in supporting police forces and national police establishments across Europe, as well as their cooperation with the city of Barcelona. The city of **Barcelona** stressed the importance of involving the LGBTQI+ community in policies. Barcelona is not only a pioneer in the emergence of LGTBQI+



movements in Spain, but also in the promotion of public policies. It created, as early as 2004, a Citizen Participation Council, which is a space for participation, recognition and dialogue with citizens. The representative of the City of **Oslo** presented the city's vision and how it is being translated in concrete initiatives on the field to tackle polarisation. He stressed that it is the responsibility of the majority to adjust, not the other way around. Besides, given that words matter, he urged for taking responsibility on social media by developing a social code and monitoring social media.

In his **closing remarks**, the **Flemish Minister of Home Affairs, Public Governance, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities of Flanders, Bart Somers**, discussed the progress made in terms of LGBTQI+ rights and migrant support in Belgium, Flanders, and the city of Mechelen. He highlighted the diversity in Mechelen and the need to embrace it. Although Belgium was one of the first countries to legalise same-sex marriage and has a progressive legislation for LGBTQI+ persons, this remains a struggle in practice. He highlighted Flanders' efforts to promote diversity and core values in integration courses, develop rainbow buddies for LGBTQI+ migrants, create safer spaces, and train bystanders to stand up against discrimination, including against the rainbow community. The Hannah Arendt institute in Mechelen also works on hate speech.



## Policy recommendations

The expert meeting resulted in 15 recommendations for policymakers but also for LGBTQI+ organisations. They form the basis of the COLORADO PROCESS.<sup>2</sup>

**C**oordination: *coordination among and between different governmental levels is essential in the development and implementation of policies. Discussion and collaboration between levels of governance is key to ensure that the needs of all LGBTQI+ migrants are met, wherever they are in the country, and that national policies do not counter local policies.*

**O**bviating pinkwashing: *pinkwashing, whether on purpose or by accident, should be avoided. There is a need to move from project-based support to structural support, as one-off projects can, sometimes, do more harm.*

**L**anguage: *the use of inclusive language is crucial to creating a more welcoming and inclusive society for all. This includes acknowledging the importance of inclusive language and recognising that this is a learning process.*

**O**bviating western- and coming-out-based strategies: *policymakers should acknowledge the cultural and societal influences that can shape people's experiences and approaches to identity and self-expression. Assessing the claims of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers on the basis of Western and coming-out strategies does not reflect the diversity of ways in which people experience their sexual and gender identity.*

**R**esearch and heterogeneity of the Rainbow Community: *the LGBTQI+ community is not a heterogenous group. It is therefore of utmost importance to conduct research into the specific challenges and needs the different target groups face in the migratory context. One size-fits-all solutions should be avoided.*

**A**sylum procedures: *asylum procedures should be adapted to the needs and realities of queer refugees, who face unique and additional challenges compared to other asylum seekers. Bureaucratic procedures can be experienced as additional torture by LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and have an impact on their integration prospects.*

**D**evelopment of specific support measures: *guidelines, toolboxes, promising practices and other support measures should be developed for small municipalities and regions to develop policies targeting LGBTQI+ migrants, as these often face limited financial and human resources, as well as limited expertise.*

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<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to the shooting at an LGBTQI+ nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colorado (USA) on 19 November 2022, which left 5 dead and 25 injured.



**O**rganisations in civic integration trajectory: *greater visibility for LGBTQI+ organisations should be given in the civic integration trajectory of migrants and asylum seekers to better inform migrants about practices in the country and facilitate contacts with LGBTQI+ migrants and LGBTQI+ organisations.*

**P**ercolating promising practices: *local policymakers need to be inspired by avant-garde cities such as Berlin, Amsterdam, Hannover or Bergen. It is nevertheless key to remember that there is still a long way to go – even in these cities – and that promising practices need to be filtered, as they are not all replicable and/or adaptable in all contexts and cities.*

**R**obust legal framework: *a robust legal framework is necessary to protect the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals and migrants. This is necessary at the national but also at the regional and local level.*

**O**rganisations: *LGBTQI+ organisations should include LGBTQI+ migrants given the many common challenges. Too often LGBTQI+ organisations and migrant organisations reject LGBTQI+ migrants as they consider their struggle outside of their scope.*

**C**ombining offline and online strategies: *there is a need for support in the shape of tools, methodologies, training, and guidelines to create room for differing opinions within the boundaries of free speech. Authorities should develop a social media code, monitor their social media, and focus on initiatives targeting the mindset of the majority. Words matter.*

**E**xisting funding for LGBTQI+ migrants: *there is a great need for access to funding. A number of existing funding sources in the EU can be used for projects with an LGBTQI+ perspective. LGBTQI+ organisations and policymakers can reach out to networks, such as Eurocities, to be supported.*

**S**upport and involvement of organisations and practitioners: *civil society organisations and especially migrant-led organisations and organisations representing invisible groups in society should be involved at all levels of policy making. Adequate support, including financial and capacity-building, should be delivered to ensure access and participation. Service providers and police agents should also be trained in a culturally and gender sensitive manner and should be included in discussions around LGBTQI+ migrants.*

**S**haring of worst practices as a learning method: *focusing on promising practices is insufficient as bad practices must also be shared and called out. Hence, policymakers can learn and avoid making the same mistakes.*