

## How did the Pandemic Affect LGBTI+ Associations in Ankara?

### Outcome Report of Ankara LGBTI+ Associations Meeting

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The rapid transformation of the new type coronavirus that emerged in late 2019 into a pandemic caused a multidimensional crisis that profoundly affected the whole world. This crisis, which affects all layers of society in varying intensity "... has serious implications for LGBTI+ people who are among the most vulnerable groups in the country and who had already been struggling with challenges in accessing rights and facing systematic rights violations, including those related to the right to life. In addition to inequalities in enjoying the right to health and the right to employment, as well as soaring reports of domestic violence under isolation, the LGBTI+ community has been targeted by a recent wave of hate-motivated campaigns."

During the rapid intensification of the pandemic crisis, LGBTI+'s became the target of the rising public opposition and phobic hatred. This wave, started right after the April 23 Children's Day, surged with the statements of various bureaucrats and state institutions that openly points to the LGBTI+'s and LGBTI+ organizations as targets. This rise has brought LGBTI+ censorship to various streaming platforms, statements of religious authorities scapegoating LGBTI+'s as the cause of the pandemic, and bureaucratic investigations on LGBTI+ organizations.

Besides all that "... banning halls and collective events, especially the physical halt of the activities of LGBTI + associations/communities/collectives, is one of the negative effects of the pandemic on the sociality of LGBTI+'s. ... The fact that all these activities could not be held during the pandemic negatively affected the LGBTI+'s both socially and psychologically. Especially the suspension support groups have further obstructed LGBTI+'s

access to support. As a result, limiting the socialization activities of LGBTI+'s, which play a role both in identity construction and personal empowerment, negatively affected the community, increased the feeling of loneliness and created hopelessness among individuals.”

Specifically in Ankara, the pandemic began to be felt just after the annulment of the LGBTI+ activity bans that were issued during and after the state of emergency. While the activity ban has just been canceled, the pandemic restrictions have practically prolonged the ban. Increasing hostility towards LGBTI+'s has caused organizations in Ankara to encounter various bureaucratic difficulties.

Organizations from Ankara; May 17 Association, Rainbow Families Association (GALADER), Kaos GL, Red Umbrella, Pink Life and ÜniKuir, came together on October 29, 2020 with the call of Kaos GL Association and discussed the effects of the pandemic on their organizational activities. The meeting, where the impact of the rising hostility towards LGBTI+'s in the public space have been discussed, also revealed the concrete situation of the LGBTI+ struggle in Ankara.

### **Pandemic and Associations**

The crisis manifested itself in very different ways in Ankara, which entered into the pandemic crisis in a process where the ban issued on November 2017 on LGBTI+ activities was canceled and new LGBTI + associations started their activities by completing their establishment processes. This process, which coincided with the period that the newly established associations began their activities, brought the isolation of the associations in their early stages. This challenge to both administrative and organizational capabilities in their initial phase has brought various adaptation problems. Organizations, which had to close their offices and experienced multiple difficulties in the transition to pandemic working conditions, also faced multidimensional issues in carrying out their volunteer activities and organizational endeavors. The effect of LGBTI+ antagonism that increased during the pandemic plays a separate role in the deepening of these problems. At the meeting, where it was determined that having the offices closed as the authorities loosened pandemic measures and the social impact of the pandemic started to decrease is becoming a problem, the effect of increasing administrative uncertainties on the activities was also discussed.

Kaos GL Legal Coordinator Att. Kerem Dikmen assesses the possible effects of the omnibus bill to be submitted to the general assembly of the parliament in the information note regarding the general assemblies of the associations:

*"According to the proposal, the authority given to the Minister of Interior starting from 31.07.2020 to postpone the general assemblies of the associations for three months will be changed to 'three times in three-month periods'.*

*If the proposal becomes a law in the General Assembly of the Parliament, the Ministry of Internal Affairs will be given the authority to postpone the general assemblies three times between the dates 31.07.2020- 31.10.2020, the second between 31.10.2020- 31.01.2020, and the third between 31.01.2020-30.04.2020. If the authority is fully exercised, it will mean that NGO general assemblies can be held on 01.05.2021 at the earliest. With the same proposal, the Minister of Interior will be given the authority to extend the declaration and notification periods of the association in the same way, but since it remains uncertain whether this authority will be used, associations must submit declarations and notifications until 31.10.2020.*

*In case of a decision to postpone is issued, the term of office of the current executive and supervisory boards of the associations will be extended at the same rate.*

*In order for the proposal to be valid, it must be accepted at the General Assembly of the Turkish Grand National Assembly and published in the Official Gazette."*

While the postponements only covered general assemblies and events until now, the omnibus bill submitted to the parliament will transform this scope into a form that prohibits all activities; and this creates new uncertainties and barriers in front of civil society in general and LGBTI+ organizations in particular. Whether the statement in the omnibus law covers executive activities or not; whether the executive boards, employees will be prevented from coming together remains uncertain.

Despite these difficulties and uncertainties, LGBTI + organizations that are trying to keep up with the new forms of activities created by the pandemic, discussed the advantages and the disadvantages of this process. While the need for sharing and solidarity has increased and activities aimed to answer these needs has increased, activities that can increase the well-being of LGBTI+'s that are staying at home has been started, and the digital field expands

the scope of these activities; the ongoing obstacles to internet access and the negative impact of the lack of digital literacy on participation remain a problem.

These problems, which escalated with the pandemic, continue to cause serious problems in access to social, economic and political rights and freedoms, especially to freedom of association.

### **Pandemic and Access to Services**

Although the services provided by LGBTI+ organizations in various fields suffer serious disruptions in the pandemic crisis, their sustainability is tried to be ensured by transforming according to the new conditions imposed by the period. Still, providing some services becomes almost impossible.

The problems in access to services that refugees, immigrants, sex workers, people living with HIV and imprisoned LGBTI+'s face intensely have become more complicated with all the socio-economic losses of LGBTI+'s. The fact that the activities where refugees and immigrants can receive support and socialize face-to-face cannot be organized due to the pandemic, the services are being offered only to people with internet access and the problems experienced in accessing the internet have led this service area to shrink.

The impact of the pandemic on the working conditions of sex workers and economic losses, problems in the online sex work services and the difficulties in obtaining condoms caused the services provided by organizations to be interrupted during the pandemic. While the closure of the brothels makes it impossible to work legally and the potential danger of violence that may result from the shift to the unregistered area exists, there are still uncertainties regarding the future of the brothels, and no mandate has been declared on this issue.

The disruption of counsel services and support mechanisms against domestic violence, which increased during the compulsory stay-at-home period due to the pandemic, continues to be one of the problems created by this period.

The disruption of access to healthcare services by people living with HIV due to the pandemic, the long-term closure of the municipal test and counseling service centers, and the negative impact of the increasing HIVphobic discourse on social media also caused the problems faced during the pandemic process to increase.

The surge of rights violations against the prisoner LGBTI+'s during the pandemic period, visitation bans, obstacles in access to healthcare services due to the pandemic, and difficulties in meeting the needs of prisoner LGBTI+'s led to the reduction or even interruption of the services provided by the organizations in this field.

Having the offices of LGBTI+ organizations and safe areas such as the newly opened Mahmut Şefik Nil Hall closed continues to be an obstacle against LGBTI+'s access to safe areas during the pandemic.

The increase in employment problems of LGBTI+'s during the pandemic period, layoffs, having no security mechanisms and increasing economic difficulties reveal the need for new solidarity areas. The fact that support towards the job search of the LGBTI+'s who lost their jobs in this process are decreased and this problem has reached to a dramatic point within the LGBTI+ community, pushes organizations to seek new ways to create solidarity areas and develop the existing ones.

LGBTI+ organizations, which are trying to create areas such as support for elderly trans activists, copyrighted writing projects, and joint support mechanisms with municipalities, are trying to reconstruct their projects considering this need for solidarity.

### **The Effect of Pandemic on Counseling Activities**

LGBTI+ organizations, which provided face-to-face consultancy in a wide variety of areas during the pre-pandemic period, continued their consultancy activities by moving their consultancy activities online. Consultancy services, which increased during the pandemic period, turned into an area where LGBTI+'s staying at home can receive psycho-social support.

The pandemic period, in which legal consultancy services also increased, increased the need for solidarity networks regarding social aid and support mechanisms.

While organizations have taken steps to increase the variety of their consultancy fields during the ongoing pandemic, these steps have started to focus on legal counseling, peer counseling and psychological counseling. These activities are of vital importance, especially for LGBTI+'s who have to stay with their families.

The shift of consulting activities from face to face to online space brought other problems. Increased online consultancy services are taking much more time than face to face consultancy, and this directly affected the consultancy activities.

In activities that have to be done face-to-face, such as legal consultancy, the risk of Covid-19 contamination faced by the consultants and consultees continues to be an ongoing problem.

### **The Effect of Pandemic on LGBTI+ Activities**

Suspending of face-to-face activities due to the pandemic forced LGBTI+ organizations to digitalize their services. The transfer of the events to the online space brought an intensification of media studies. These activities, which were reorganized with an approach that prioritizes the empowerment of LGBTI+'s during the pandemic period, made it difficult for LGBTI+'s who do not have internet access, who have a lack of digital literacy or who are trying to overcome this period in their family home. On the other hand, moving the events to the online space made it easier for people who could not participate in the events before the pandemic, who had privacy concerns or were in different locations. It has been observed that the spheres of influence of LGBTI+ organizations have expanded in this respect.

Although the longer decision-making processes regarding the events in the online arena challenges these processes with various difficulties, the limits of the online space also bring some obstacles in the implementation of the activities.

The loss of motivation and safety concerns observed in LGBTI+'s who had to stay at their family home during the pandemic period remains a serious obstacle to participation in online activities. Losses in socialization areas continue to deprive LGBTI+'s living in the family home from support mechanisms.

The difficulties experienced in the first period of the pandemic, the social environment brought by the lifted restrictions in the summer and the intensification of the pandemic during the autumn reveal that this process will continue. Although the lessons learned from this process facilitate the organization of this new period, it reveals the need for new ideas to minimize the effect of Covid-19 exhaustion on the activities.

Organizations in Ankara, which continued their existence under long-term LGBTI+ activity bans in the pre-pandemic period, continue to feel the effects of the pandemic that started right after the end of the bans. Increasing LGBTI+ hostility and hateful discourse among the

public imposes the necessity of being ready for the possible effects of this situation on the post-pandemic period on all organizations.

### **Reporting Activities in the Pandemic Period**

Human rights monitoring and reporting activities, one of the most fundamental activities of LGBTI+ organizations, were tried to be carried out during the pandemic period. LGBTI+ organizations, which prepared reports regarding the violations faced by people living with HIV using online tools, also carried out translation activities for sex workers during this period.

The pandemic period, during which publications on safe sexuality were also made, also contributed to the transformation of LGBTI+ publication into a form that would offer support mechanisms to the subjects.

Reports on the impact of the ongoing pandemic on inmate LGBTI+'s, the difficulties experienced by sex workers during this period, and incidents in the family homes are expected to be published in the upcoming days.

### **Organization During the Pandemic**

The pandemic, which started right after the annulment of the prohibitions against LGBTI+ activities, which was a serious obstacle to the freedom of association and also known as the Ankara Bans, continues to be a severe obstacle to the organizational capabilities of LGBTI+ organizations. The atmosphere of uncertainty created by the postponement decisions regarding civil society during the pandemic contributes to the further increase of these obstacles. Specifically the organizational activities of the associations that were established just before the pandemic have got even more challenging during the pandemic period.

During this period, activities that moved to the online scene have expanded the influence of organizations and diversified participation, but the decreases in the quality of life, the difficulties of staying in the family homes, the increase in violence and hate speech parallel to the hostility towards LGBTI+'s caused LGBTI+'s to lose motivation and new organizational problems to arise. The exhaustion from continually using digital devices also took its place among these problems.

The pandemic that caused the loss of the organizational biosphere (campus, street, workplace, etc.) brought digital security problems with it. The fact that Increased contact

and accelerated communication between LGBTI+ organizations, which have to deal with these problems altogether, is an essential step for the LGBTI+ community especially in this period of increasing LGBTI+ hostility among the public.

The social crisis environment, which has deepened with the pandemic crisis, causes the LGBTI+ organization to become even more critical.

### **Increasing LGBTI+ Hostility During the Pandemic Period**

The LGBTI + hostility that started with the statement of the Chairperson of Religious Affairs during the pandemic period and increasingly drew attention from the public challenged the organizations in Ankara that had just gotten out of the activity bans, with administrative oppression.

This anti-LGBTI+ surge among the public and smear campaigns, which put a target on the entire LGBTI+ community and associations, increased the security concerns of LGBTI+'s and caused the pandemic period to turn into a more profound crisis.

The increasing LGBTI+ hostility in the political sphere also manifested itself in social media and caused LGBTI+'s to be exposed to hate speech, smear campaigns and digital violence on the social media. The tendency of this hostility to turn into physical violence has led to a further increase in public repression.

Institutions that show solidarity against the wave of hatred towards LGBTI+'s, sex workers, refugees and immigrants, people living with HIV also became targets. While this spiral caused organizational problems for LGBTI + organizations, it also brought along a language and style that is shaped by security concerns.

As the increasing LGBTI+ hostility brought visibility, it was observed that the media's attention turned towards organizations and organizations were given a role in the duality of hostility.

### **Public Visibility of LGBTI+ Organizations**

Similar, exported anti-LGBT+ policies of right populism, which shows an organized upward trend in the world and Turkey, had a severe effect on the public visibility of the LGBT+ community and organizations. Faced with the threat of degradation and loss of existing rights, it has become necessary for LGBTI+ organizations to find new ways and methods.

Having various legislative work disrupted by the pandemic, not including public representation in online activities and increasing anti-LGBTI+ policies made it difficult for organizations to get on the same side with public authorities. Anticipating this new situation will continue to grow in the post-pandemic period, organizations revealed the necessity of adapting their activities to this current situation.

While most of the works carried out with various municipalities and public institutions came to a halt due to the pandemic forces LGBTI+ organizations into isolation, while the needs for these activities tend to increase in the current political conjuncture.

The increasing anti-LGBTI+ trend among the public continues to raise the security concerns of LGBTI+ subjects and activists. In addition, the fact that increasing conservatism around the world and in Turkey is spreading to the LGBTI+ community continues to push organizations to find new policies and new practices.

### **Pandemic and Uncertainties**

The uncertainty created by the Ministry of Interior's postponement of the general assemblies of the associations and the possibility of postponing all activities of the associations if the omnibus bill passes as a law, continues. This legislation, which has the potential to suspend the executive activities of the associations, in addition to administrative activities, pushes association activities into the middle of dire uncertainty.

LGBTI + organizations, which were able to get on the same side with public authorities in certain thematic areas in the pre-pandemic period, face the risk of not being addressed by the public authorities in the post-pandemic period due to the atmosphere that is created by anti-LGBTI+ policies and justified by the pandemic.

LGBTI+ organizations, which can carry out their activities in closed areas during the Ankara Bans, are faced with the threat of losing these areas as well during the pandemic. There is also a serious uncertainty as to whether the pandemic bans will impose new bans specifically directed at LGBTI+'s under the influence of anti-LGBTI + policies.

In this challenging situation, organizations are facing the necessity to find alternative actions and implement them safely during the times of increasing intensity of the pandemic and the escalating anti-LGBTI+ political atmosphere.

The increasing Covid-19 exhaustion in the society and the masses demoralized by this exhaustion bring along a serious uncertainty in terms of participation in organizations and activities.

It is also unclear what LGBTI + opposition, which turned into a public discourse during the pandemic, will evolve in the post-pandemic period. It is predicted that anti-LGBTI+ policies will increase and smear campaigns will become widespread.

### **Recommendations**

- In this period of rising LGBTI+ hostility, it is important for the LGBTI+ rights struggle to organize processes that can develop regulatory transformations.
- The importance of monitoring studies is increasing in this political conjuncture; the scope and depth of monitoring and reporting activities of LGBTI + organizations should increase too.
- An increasingly oppressive atmosphere brings deficiencies in language and efficiency to directly transform public opinion. At this point, LGBTI+ organizations need to increase their expertise and develop different communication strategies.
- It is necessary to mobilize national and international organizations against the globally increasing organized right-wing populism. While this mobilization can be more practical with the opportunities that arise in pandemic conditions, it is better to take steps without ignoring security concerns.
- It becomes a necessity to develop communication strategies that analyze the effects of increasing conservatism on the LGBTI+ community and break the current isolation experienced the LGBTI+ community.
- The fact that economic, social and cultural rights are progressive rights and the absence of international conventions binding these rights; caused serious damage to economic, social and cultural rights, especially of healthcare and employment, in the triangle of crisis, pandemic and LGBTI+ hostility. Against this destruction, it is necessary to plan a strategy that focuses on these rights, especially in the field of healthcare and employment. It is predicted that developing various solidarity networks against the employment problem will empower LGBTI+ subjects.

- While conducting risk analysis, factors such as pandemics should also be taken into account. It is essential to include the difficulties experienced during the pandemic and the fact that the pandemic is still going on in the risk analysis and to develop a practical policy accordingly. The possibility that the effect of the pandemic will last until 2021 and 2022 should be taken into consideration.
- It is important to emphasize that the internet is a right, especially considering disadvantaged groups who have problems with internet access.
- It is necessary to conduct an impact analysis of the current social media law and consider the measures and possibilities regarding the sustainability of social media, which is an important field of activity.
- Organizing the field of activity to include invisible and inaudible communities will reduce the effects of the pandemic on these communities and strengthen them; managing policies in this way becomes a necessity in this period.
- It is important that the planned projects be formed in a way that will strengthen the organizational capacities and the activists, and the items not needed during the pandemic, such as travel and accommodation, should be updated according to this approach while preparing the project budgets.
- It is predicted that inter-organizational communication and notification activities will increase their impact area and strengthen the LGBTI+ community against the conflicts that can occur due to moving the activities to the online stage.