

LGBTIQ activists celebrate Moldova's most peaceful Pride march yet

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Moldova's LGBTIQ community calls for marriage equality as, for once, Pride celebrations are not marred by violence

Moldova's LGBTIQ community held the most peaceful Pride march in the country's history last weekend. More than 500 people took part, with a smaller police presence and fewer counterprotesters than in previous years, shortly after the country was recognised for its improved stance on LGBTIQ rights.

The event, which was organised by GenderDoc-M (GDM), Moldova's oldest and most prominent LGBTIQ group, was held on 18 June in the capital, Chişinău, and attracted people from neighbouring countries. Participants held signs in support of LGBTIQ rights, in Romanian (Moldova's official language), English, Russian and Ukrainian. Parents of LGBTIQ children wore white smocks that read "free hugs *de la mama/tata*".

Some protesters linked to the Orthodox Church stood downtown near the parade route, with [placards reading](#): "We stand for the traditional family". But there were fewer than 100 of them, less than in recent years. There was also no contact between participants and counterprotesters, when previously direct harassment was been commonplace.

There were still hundreds of police in riot gear, but a GDM statement [described](#) the police contingent as "less dense" than usual, and also said there were no recorded incidents of harassment, unlike in other years. "The Inspector General of Police did his job correctly and professionally, for which we are very grateful," the statement continued.

The Pride symbol this year is two intertwined rings, because the event is part of a campaign to legalise civil partnership and same-sex marriage. So far, the only post-Soviet country to allow same-sex marriage is [Estonia](#) - which did so just this week, on 20 June.

25 years of LGBTIQ development

GDM has a lot to celebrate this year, including its 25th anniversary - in a country that has been independent for only 30 years, following the fall of the Soviet Union.

"This is extremely important for Moldova," GDM's executive director Anastasiia Danilova told openDemocracy. "Currently, we have new initiatives [such as the marriage equality campaign], which for me is a sign of our development."

The development of LGBTIQ rights in Moldova has been slow but significant. In 2022, the government added legal protection for sexual orientation and gender identity in workplaces, schools and hospitals, and outlawed hate speech. ILGA-Europe, an advocacy group that tracks LGBTIQ legislation in 49 countries, moved Moldova up 14 places, to 23rd, on its [2023 Rainbow Map](#).

But there remains much room for improvement, Danilova said, explaining: “We still have a lot of issues with the implementation of the legislation.”

According to ILGA’s [annual review](#) for 2023, hate speech by pro-Russian politicians and the Orthodox Church in Moldova remains a “serious issue” – especially by the pro-Russian mayor of Chişinău, Ion Ceban, who (as he did last year) [threatened to refuse authorisation](#) for the march, just six days before it was due to take place.

GDM is working towards the day when tight security will no longer be necessary at the Pride march. The group had advised attendees (and openDemocracy) to arrive at the gathering point by noon to be allowed to join the crowd, holding rainbow banners and encircled by hundreds of riot police.

“We decided that it’s very important to have the march, because we get huge coverage from the Moldovan media,” said Danilova. “The media records and provides this picture of us being free on the streets in public.”

The contrast with 1988, when GDM was formed – three years after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Moldova – is stark. Back then, due to security concerns, Pride celebrations amounted to a few events in cafés with a limited number of queer activists, said Danilova.

The group wasn’t able to [successfully host a Pride march on the streets until 2013](#), a year after GDM [won its case](#) against the state at the European Court of Human Rights for the right of LGBTIQ people to safely gather in public spaces. Previous events had been marred by anti-LGBT protests, and verbal and physical violence, from both counterprotesters and the police.

“It was a sign for Moldovan society in general that it is possible to organise public events for LGBT people in Moldova,” Danilova said. “And that the police will protect us.”

Test case for marriage equality

Marriage equality was one of the themes of this year’s Moldova Pride, because the country currently does not recognise same-sex unions. “We do not expect that marriage equality will be available in Moldova next year,” said GDM’s Danilova. “That’s why we decided to start at this scale, and to keep repeating this topic.”

A test case is currently underway, thanks to the actions of Leo Zbancă and his partner Angelica Frolov. When they requested a marriage application in March, the process went smoothly – until the queer couple handed over their passports.

“They looked at the passports and saw [the gender markers were] the same sex. The reaction was really funny,” Zbancă, a transmasculine nonbinary person and coordinator of a support group for transgender and gender-nonconforming people at GDM, told openDemocracy. “They were shocked, they said, ‘why don’t you go to Europe?’”

“We said – ‘Because we want this right now in our country. We don’t want to go to Europe,’” recalled Zbancă, who uses he/they pronouns.

Zbancă and Frolov, the first out-lesbian to [host a TV show](#) in Moldova and also GDM’s advocacy programme coordinator, expected a refusal. In fact, they wanted one so that they could sue the Public Services Agency (ASP) in charge of registering marriages – which they are doing now, having filed a lawsuit in April.

“We went first because we are in a privileged position, and wanted to make it public,” said Zbancă.

Their push comes after the [landmark ruling](#) in January by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) that member countries of the Council of Europe, which includes Moldova, must legally recognise and protect families formed by people of the same sex. If Moldova refuses to recognise Zbanca and Frolov's union in court, they are [prepared to take their case](#) to the ECtHR.

Russian invasion of Ukraine

Moldova is sandwiched between Romania to the west and Ukraine to the east, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has inevitably added a layer of anxiety to life in the country. It has affected the LGBTIQ community in Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, said Danilova.

Moldovan president Maia Sandu, the country's first woman and first pro-European leader, [said](#) in May that the European Union should grant Moldova membership "as soon as possible". The EU [granted](#) both Moldova and Ukraine candidacy status in June 2022.

Same-sex marriage is [not yet legal in Ukraine](#). If an LGBTIQ soldier dies fighting Russia's invasion, their partner fears they will not be notified of their death or even invited to the funeral because "legally, they are nobody to each other," Danilova said.

"We have the example of Ukraine, which is very close to us, where LGBT people are fighting for the independence of their country," Danilova explained. "Sometimes they even give their lives. And their partners are not even able to take their bodies, which is so unfair."

Moldovan-Ukrainian lesbian couple Albina Ciuprin and Anhelina Kulyk were the third same-sex couple out of a total of five to have so far applied to get married in Moldova. All have been refused.

"Five couples applying for marriage is a huge step," said Kulyk, who is originally from Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine and works at a shelter for Ukrainian refugees. "We are doing it for the LGBTIQ community and the next generation."

Before the Russian invasion, Kulyk and Ciuprin were travelling the world, posting videos about their travels and relationship to their 9,000 followers on TikTok. But they want to get married in Moldova, not anywhere else. "I don't want to run away and do it in Spain, or the Netherlands," Ciuprin said. "I want to be here. I want my and her parents to be here."

Kulyk and Ciuprin have also made what they call "vows to the government", informal promises to "have a house in the village so that Moldovan villages don't die" and to try for a pregnancy via IVF. Ciuprin said with a chuckle: "The government would benefit from us getting married."

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