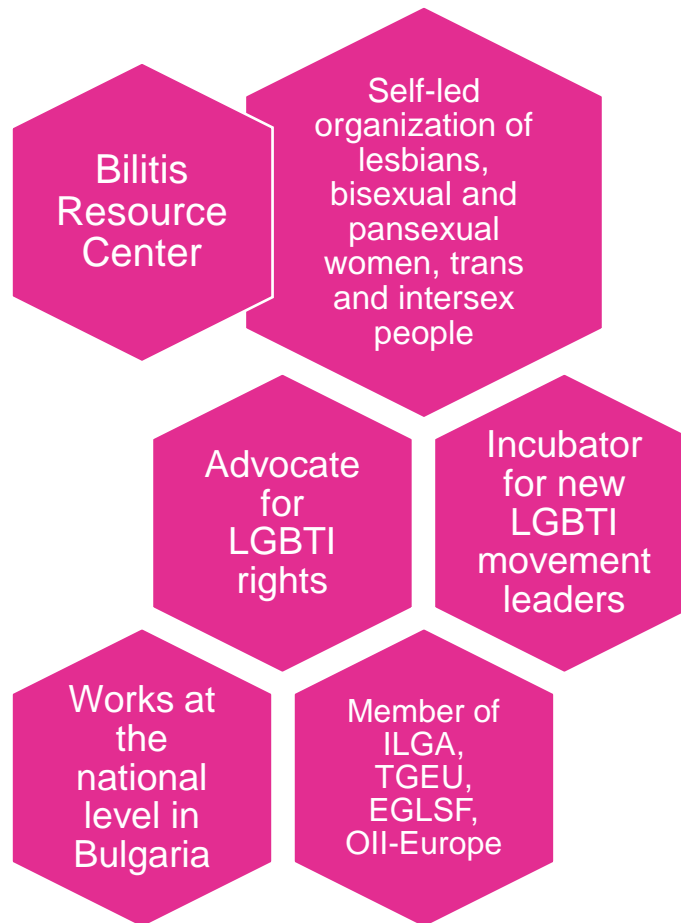


# Bilitis Resource Center Foundation

## Strategic Plan 2016-2020

### Who is Bilitis?



Bilitis began its activity as a self-support group of lesbians and bisexual women in 2004. Today, Bilitis advocates actively for eliminating all forms of discrimination and achieving full equality of LGBTI persons in Bulgaria.

Bilitis is a lesbians and bisexual women, trans and intersex people-led organization. Our approach takes into account the interconnectedness between gender, race, class, sexual orientation, gender expression, ethnicity, religion, disability, and other factors, which shape the social status of the individual. We work to counterbalance the hetero-patriarchal norms, creating inequalities based on gender, restricting people into the binary gender norms for male and female, and thus fueling homophobia and transphobia.

# Mission and Strategic Goals

(As in our By-Laws that is registered at the Sofia City Court)

The mission of Bilitis is eliminating all forms of discrimination and achieving full equality for LGBTI people in Bulgaria.

For achieving of its mission, Bilitis has designed the following **Strategic Goals**:

## Strategic Goal 1

Improve the legal framework for full recognition of LGBTI rights in Bulgaria and change policies in partnership with other NGOs, activists, political allies, donors, institutions and citizens

## Strategic Goal 2

At the grassroots level: activate, empower and involve LGBTI people, support new leaders, and strengthen the LGBTI movement in Bulgaria

## Strategic Goal 3

At the level of wider society: disseminate the values of intersectional feminism and overcome the heteronormative structures, including gender stereotypes

## Vision

Bulgarian society free of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex (intersex), embracing equality and diversity as unquestionable and productive factors for social progress and individual/community wellbeing.

## Values

Respect for and recognition of human rights, which are indivisible and universal, and which include cultural, social, economic, civil and political rights, with a particular emphasis on equality and freedom from discrimination, on gender equality and on the right to self-determination.

Respect for the diversity within the LGBTI groups/movements.

International solidarity with LGBTI people and with other discriminated groups of people.

Democratic involvement of the people who we represent in our decision-making and action.

Transparency and accountability.

## Background: Context and Existing Strategy

Bulgaria's progress towards full adoption of the EU values has been rather slow since its accession in 2007, and in the last few years, the government was openly criticized by the European Commission for ineffective enforcement of the rule of law and the democratic mechanisms. Failing legal reform, political corruption, growing far-right populism, and oligarchic mode of governance are the key features of the context we live and work in. In this context, the application of the democratic strategies for political mobilization to influence policy change has a limited effect. The massive civic protests in 2013 demonstrated that civil society pressure is not the main factor, which can change the status quo. External geo-political factors, often contradictory in essence, play a far more important role in shaping the Bulgarian political environment. The main to be mentioned are the influence from the EU (especially when it includes financial sanctions) – a driving force for closing legal gaps in relation to human rights, and the influence from Russia, which fuels the radical nationalism and works in the opposite direction. The general public discontent from the political, social and economic situation has led to political fragmentation: no party is able to win a majority of votes and form a government on its own; hence, only coalition governments have ruled in the last 12 years. The role of radical nationalist parties for forming a government has grown, and they serve as a force, which slows down the democratic processes related to protection of the rights of minorities. The stagnation of democracy in the country has led to severe demographic crisis and brain drain, combined with shrinking space for civil society and ongoing attacks against the NGOs, which are actively promoting the EU values. The NGO Sustainability Index (according to annual reviews, conducted by the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law<sup>1</sup>) shows no progress in the last few years. The financial sustainability, infrastructure and public image of the third sector are in decline for a fourth consecutive year; the biggest decline in 2015 was reported in the sphere of legal environment.

In the context described above, Bilitis has adopted over the years a survival-and-growth strategy, shaped by trial-and-error approach, which includes:

- A flexible governance-operation structure, which allows to maintain a relatively stable operation level even in periods of decrease of funding: the operating board of committed individuals plays a central role; the staff is small, and project-based; the organization collaborates actively with informal groups (currently the LGBT-HHH Collective), which gives us access to volunteers and also helps attract new leaders;
- Relying primarily on independent private foundations, which share the same values, for our core costs; gradually enhancing our capacity to access EU funding for expanding the work of the organization in new spheres;
- Increasing our cross-European cooperation and becoming a member of several international networks (ILGA, TGEU, OII, EGLSF) which provide capacity-building opportunities as well as networking with LGBTI organizations for joint work and fundraising from EU sources;
- Collaboration with other like-minded human rights organizations in the country to oppose discrimination and negligence of the rights of LGBTI (and other minorities), which is widespread;
- Taking part in broader national-level coalitions to oppose sexism, gender-based violence, xenophobia, neo-Nazism and far-right populism;

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bcnl.org/bg/articles/1695-индекс-за-устойчивост-на-неправителствените-организации-нпо-в.html>

- Taking every existing opportunity to be part of the EU/UN-driven government-initiated consultancy processes, which are related to law amendments and policy building (to make the voice of LGBTI heard);
- Advocacy and lobbying for improving the legal/policy framework: sending out opinion statements and reports including calls for action, one-on-one meetings with Ministers, building of political allies to close the identified law and policy gaps, which create inequalities for LGBTI people in the country;
- Using litigation as a way to advance new policies, enforce the anti-discrimination law, and signal for infringements of the rights of LGBTI individuals in any sphere;
- Co-organizing public events, involving the community and oriented to the mainstream (Sofia Pride, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes) linked with targeted communication campaigns that aim to reframe the public discourse on LGBTI and gender-based discrimination/violence;
- Working consistently at the grassroots level to attract, inspire, motivate, educate and prepare for political action new LGBTI leaders, and to strengthen the movement;
- Maintaining internal diversity in our staff and board, by involving at least one self-identified activist from each of the groups that we stand up for: lesbians, bisexual and pansexual women, trans and intersex people (so far, we do not have gay men in our staff or board, but we actively collaborate with other national LGBT organizations which include them).

## Strategic Question

The main question for us, in our strategic planning process was: **How can we influence sustainable change towards full equality for LGBTI people in the context we work in?**

Sub question: Is our current strategy effective, or do we need to reshape it in order to achieve greater impact?

The progress of the LGBTI movement in the other EU countries and internationally, demonstrates that sustainable change in the lives of LGBTI people happens when there are coherent changes in laws, public policies, the practices of the public institutions and also in the private sector and in society at large. In other words, sustainable change involves reaching out to the citizens and changing their way of thinking and acting. The mobilization of the LGBTI communities as drivers of change has also played a key role in influencing the processes in other countries. Hence, our determination to maintain our work at the grassroots level, and to prioritize bottom-up strategies in influencing social change. This goes in combination with enhancing of our capacity for advocacy and lobbying for influencing laws and policies.

## Process

This strategic plan is the result of a year-long process of internal discussions, consultations with our volunteers, and with other LGBT organizations in Bulgaria. This process began in July 2015 with the help of 2 facilitators from ILGA-Europe, continued at 2 staff retreats, and was finalized in July 2016.

## Our Theory of Change

We understand social change as a complex process, which involves five distinct components: Inspiration, Innovation, Collaboration, Knowledge (dissemination) and Funding. We formulated key strategic questions within each of these components and used them as the basis for review, revision and detailing our strategy for action.

## Inspiration

This component involves the attracting of supporters, leaders and donors, who believe in our cause. The questions we asked here were:

Whose potential have we not unleashed so far? Who else, in addition to our current volunteers, partners and donors could be interested in supporting us? What would motivate them? Who should we reach out to beyond the “usual suspects” (LGBTI organizations, women’s rights organizations, and human rights organizations)? How to bring in “fresh blood” into the movement? How to achieve an effective engagement strategy?

The main conclusion from our discussion on this component was that while we are quite good at inspiring like-minded organizations and individuals, and forming coalitions with them, we need to do a lot more work in addressing and engaging new supporters from the mainstream. We have so far worked effectively in collaboration with other human rights and minorities’ rights organizations, as well as women’s rights organizations. We have collaborated with the State Commission for Protection against Discrimination (although this connection can be strengthened even more). We are not so successful in attracting support from other state bodies (for example, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education) or public schools, public universities, although we have tried reaching out to schools in some of our projects and offering ideas to work together.

How to make the next step in this area?

Our decision was to invest more efforts into working methods, which reach out to the general public, and aim to reframe the public understanding of LGBTI issues through targeted communication campaigns. Collaborate with the other LGBT organizations in designing and implementing these campaigns. Try inspiring new donors from the private sector in relation to our main visibility events: Sofia Pride and Walk a Mile in Her Shoes. Pay more attention into promoting our cause to mainstream NGOs – especially those working at the national level for civil society strengthening.

For attracting “fresh blood” into the movement: continue the collaboration with the LGBT-HHH Collective and try out new methods of attracting people, by providing new services to the community: movie club, LGBTI support center (new ideas are discussed in the next section).

## Innovation

This component involves generating new solutions to long-standing problems. This usually happens when we change the perspective and start looking at a problem from a new angle. It also involves the provision of new services or changing the way we work in a given field. The questions we asked ourselves here were the following:

What new elements can strengthen the impact of our work? What new services could we offer to the LGBTI communities? What other ways of addressing the problems we tackle are applied by peer organizations in other countries (that could be replicated in Bulgaria).

Our main conclusions from the discussion on this component were the following:

We can improve the information services that we offer to the LGBTI groups by upgrading our web site with new resources, clearly outlined in different sections. The web-site can be restructured to provide resources on different themes (family, asylum, education, health, employment, trans issues, intersex issues). The resources should point out to services, which the LGBTI people can receive in the local context, and inform of best international practices in the respective area.

New services, which we are interested to offer (and for which we have identified community need) include: LGBTI Help Line (Hot Line) and an LGBTI Center providing space for workshops, discussions, library. In order to raise sufficient resources for starting these services, we need to join forces with other interested LGBTI Organizations. The other organization, which has expressed an interest in developing an LGBTI Center is Deystvie LGBT Youth Association. We can work together to develop a plan for the center. In the absence of local government support for such center the most feasible option for starting it would be a social enterprise. Hence, we need to look into sources of funding for social enterprises and develop a start-up plan.

Another new service, which we are interested to offer to the LGBTI communities as a way of attracting “fresh blood” is a movie club. LGBTI movies are not screened in Bulgaria. The only space for screening such movies and documentaries is the Sofia Pride Film Festival, which has grown in the last few years to attract around 200 people per night (every night during the Pride Week). If we offer a movie club with regular monthly screenings of awarded LGBTI feature film and movies, we suppose this will lead to the formation of a group of regular viewers, who are a potential group of supporters / leaders for the movement.

## Collaboration

This component looks into the process of coalitions and partnerships building which increase the impact of the organization in its field. These partnerships could be from one sector or cross-sectoral.

The key questions we asked ourselves here were:

What new partnerships we should explore to increase the impact of our work. Which coalitions are feasible and which are unfeasible for us. What outcomes do we expect from the new partnerships?

The conclusions we made are the following:

We have a very good working relationship with all currently active LGBT organizations in the country: Deystvie LGBT Youth Association and GLAS Foundation. We also have a string partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Recently, we have developed a new relationship with the Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights. We have been part of theme-based coalitions (such as coalition against gender-based violence) with women’s rights NGOs and with other minorities’ rights NGOs. In the last year, we entered into collaboration with NGOs, working in the sphere of inclusive education, in relation to a joint advocacy initiative targeting the Ministry of Education. This was a step towards extending our partnerships with organizations “beyond the usual suspects”.

How to make the next step in this area?

In the first place, we need to build sustainable work relationships with, and be recognized as a point of reference (as experts) on LGBTI rights by the public institutions that deal with human rights and hate-based crimes. These are the following: Office of the Ombudsperson, the State Agency on Refugees, the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice, Labor, the Court System, the Police, and the Prosecution. We need to work towards establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with them, so that they will benefit from our in-depth understanding of LGBTI issues and increase their competences how to work on LGBTI issues. This will lead to advancements in our advocacy for closing legal gaps and policy change.

We have recently been pro-active in getting involved in a cross-sectoral work group at the Ministry of Justice, which deals with the transposition of the Istanbul Convention into the Bulgarian Criminal Code. This approach led to our voice being heard in a formal consultative process. We need to monitor closely all consultative processes, initiated by government bodies, and use any other existing opportunity for becoming part of such processes.

Project-based partnerships with governmental institutions can also be further explored. In the last year, in relation to an application to the European Commission (DG Justice) we received letters of support from the National Police Academy, from the Union of Judges (sponsored by the state budget), and from the International Cooperation Department of the Sofia Directory of Internal Affairs. These formal agreements to work jointly on a project (if the latter wins a grant) could be the start of long-term partnerships with these institutions. They create a spirit of collaboration that needs to be constantly strengthened.

We decided to be much more pro-active in seeking new partnerships in the third sector for joint work in a specific thematic area, such as inclusive education, hate crime prevention, improvement of health services to marginalized groups, elimination of discrimination at the workplace, etc. A step in this direction was our moving to the NGO House (renting a place in the co-working area) which made us more visible in the “mainstream” of the third sector.

International collaboration with other LGBTI organizations plays a key role for fundraising from EU sources. We have so far participated in different coalitions for applying for different projects. In addition to project-based coalition building, we should pay more attention to issue-driven coalitions, and learn to attract and use international support from peers and from EU-level institutions in promoting our cause to the Bulgarian authorities. We should also improve our knowledge on using the UN mechanisms for advocacy and lobbying purposes.

## Knowledge

Social change also involves the ability to use new knowledge for increasing the effect of our work. This knowledge is often generated on the basis of trial-and-error-approach, and often accessible only for the leaders of the organization. The questions we asked ourselves here were:

Are we using effectively the knowledge gained by our leaders (some of the more active board members) to engage and educate new activists, and thus increase the scope and effect of our work? What new knowledge and skills we need to adopt in order to influence more effectively the community, the mainstream, the public institutions, and to produce lasting social change? What knowledge, gained by our organization, needs to be disseminated to a wider audience in order to inform policy-changes?

Our conclusions were the following:

We need to improve the internal mechanisms for knowledge sharing within the organization and especially with new activists who are volunteers. Although we are good at attracting new people, we do not organize an adequate number of meetings/staff retreats/ to be able to transfer the knowledge gained by the leaders (the ones who attend international trainings/gatherings of activists) to everyone from the organization and to all our volunteers. We need to schedule more hours per month/quarter dedicated to sharing and learning from each other. Last year, two of our board members, and one of our staff members attended international trainings on topics relevant to our capacity building. These were trainings on: organizational development, community organizing, working on LGBTI asylum issues, working on intersex issues (organized by ILGA-Europe, TGEU and OII respectively). The knowledge

gained in these trainings needs to be more effectively disseminated internally, and to the volunteers who are supporting our work.

In addition, we need to dedicate time to self-evaluation at least once per month. We are driven by planning and implementing (with pressing deadlines), and there is a feeling that we do not talk enough about what worked well and what could be improved. Hence, this aspect of our work should also be improved. A step in this direction was taken in relation to our key visibility events, oriented towards the mainstream, such as Sofia Pride, Walk a Mile, and the LGBTI Community Fest. After each of these events we organize a reflection/evaluation meeting of all co-organizers.

In relation to new knowledge, we agreed that we need to improve our knowledge on how to use the EU-level and UN-level mechanisms for influencing the law and policy-making process in Bulgaria. We need to learn to use more effectively the support of international NGOs, such as ILGA Europe, Amnesty International and OSCE for advocacy and lobbying, and in developing policy initiatives.

Last, but not least, we should disseminate to a wider audience all of our research reports, which present unique findings about different issues affecting LGBTI people in Bulgaria. Bilitis has developed a capacity for qualitative research and report writing, which can be used for evidence based advocacy. Over the last 5 years, we have produced reports on: the legal practice for gender recognition in Bulgaria; the domestic and dating violence against LBT women; the situation of LGBTI students and teachers in the Bulgarian schools, and in 2016 we are researching and will produce a report on rainbow families in Bulgaria. These reports have not been effectively disseminated to the institutions dealing with the mentioned issues, and they have not been used as a reference in the development of new policies. We need to improve our knowledge and skills on doing evidence-based advocacy. Sending a report to the relevant public institution is obviously not enough. In most cases, the institutions do not respond to our requests for follow-up meeting, or the meeting is conducted with a public servant who does not bring the issue forward to the decision-making level. We need to follow-up on sending out a report more actively, and to build alliances for joint advocacy action on the pressing issues identified in these reports.

## Funding

This component is linked to the sources of funding and other measurable resources that we can access to achieve sustainable social change. We reviewed potential funding sources both in terms of quantity and in terms of quality (structure of funding, length of funding, value-based funding).

The key questions we asked ourselves here were:

Are there any sources of funding for LGBTI rights, accessible for organizations from our country/region that we have not explored so far? What other sources of funding in addition to grants are being used by peer organizations from our country, which work in the area of human rights? Are there any other sources of core funding (institutional support) in addition to the international women's funds that we have not explored so far? Can we increase the percentage of individual donations to our budget? Can we explore other approaches for self-financing, such as social enterprise?

The conclusions we reached here were the following:



We are primarily dependent on private international funding sources, and more specifically women's funds, for covering our core costs. This is because there are no national funding sources, which give a priority to LGBTI issues, and to self-led organizations working on these issues. It is difficult for us to compete with GONGOs on accessing the funds coming from the European Union and distributed by governmental agencies. Private philanthropy is very underdeveloped in Bulgaria, so it would be too difficult to raise money for our core costs from individuals or companies, but we have been successful in increasing the percentage of individual/company donations to Sofia Pride and the efforts in this direction will continue. We have also been successful in winning small project grants (up to 8000 EUR) from ILGA-Europe in the last few years, and these were grants advancing our work in the thematic areas, which play key importance in promoting LGBTI equality. Hence, our fundraising from ILGA-Europe will continue.

What could be the next step in our fundraising?

We can further develop a relationship with Open Society Foundation, which we have approached without success so far. This is a potential source for core costs, or for expanding our work in a new thematic area. We can use the help of Mama Cash for reaching out to them.

We will continue applying to international public sources: the EU funding programs; US Government Funding, and the EEA Grants. We should explore the new phase of the EEA Grants program, expected to start in 2017. We will continue applying (once per year) to the Small Grants Program managed by the USA State Department, and accessed through the USA Embassy (we have a good working relationship with the Embassy, but have not been successful in winning a grant from this program until now). We will continue applying a few times per year to programs managed by the European Commission. This funding is very competitive, but very useful for expanding our work into new areas when available. It also helps strengthen our relationships with peer organizations from across Europe, and with some government bodies who are attracted as associate partners. Our experience shows that if we access at least 1 EU project per year (usually as a partner in an international consortium), this increases our activity outputs with 30% and strengthens the image of the organization in front of government bodies. At the same time, accessing EU funding usually requires 20% cost-share, which would not be possible if we did not have access to the flexible funding for core costs, provided by Mama Cash in the last 5 years. Hence, the ability to access EU funding largely depends on the ability to secure core costs that would serve as cost share in any EU project.

The NGOs working in the sphere of human rights in Bulgaria are sustaining their work mainly on grants from international sources (similar to us). Fees for services have been developed by some of the larger human rights NGOs, who maintain professional staff, however, they form a relatively small percent of their overall budget.

Other donors on the national level that we have not accessed so far: America for Bulgaria Foundation, created with the proceeds from the Bulgarian-American Enterprise Fund, has an endowment of about 500 million USD, invested in the United States. It is a long-term donor operating on the national level, which should be further explored. However, their Civil Society Director has declared in private conversation with our board chair that they are a conservative foundation, not interested in LGBTI rights. It is a pity because they give large operation grants to other national-level organizations, whose activity matches their priority areas of intervention. A possible alternative approach could be to approach their Education Program Director for a project in the sphere of education. The Bulgarian Fund for Women has limited funding for grantmaking. It can be approached for a small project grant (up to EUR 1,000), but will not be able to support our core costs.

Self-generated income: income from a social enterprise should be explored as an additional source. We should think of developing an LGBTI Center as a social enterprise. However, this approach may drive away some of the most needy clients of the center: the very poor. To prevent this, the center should offer a combination of subsidized services and paid services. Some other activities, such as offering movie screenings, can generate small fees, which will be reinvested for maintaining the service. Self-generated income from services is a potential source for covering partially some of the services we offer to the LGBTI people, however, having in mind that we work with the most marginalized from within the LGBTI communities – we should not overestimate the amounts that we can raise in this way.

Based on the analysis of the key components of social change and our work in each component until present, we proceeded to detailing of our Strategic Goals for the period 2016 – 2020.

## Strategic Goals – Detailed

### Strategic Goal 1

Improve the legal framework for full recognition of LGBTI rights in Bulgaria and change policies in partnership with other NGOs, activists, political allies, donors, institutions and citizens

Our work in this strategic area will be further detailed to meet specific objectives within several clearly defined themes of key importance to LGBTI equality: asylum, education, hate crime and hate speech, family, employment, legal gender recognition, freedom of expression and association, health. There is strong commitment within the board and staff to expand our advocacy work to gradually cover all spheres outlined above with the purpose to close legal gaps and to assist the public institutions in effective implementation of international standards related to LGBTI rights protection.

#### Asylum

A very pressing new issue is the issue of LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers coming in Bulgaria. We learned that the State Agency for Refugees has received a record number of applications this year (over 100) from LGBTI asylum seekers, and they did not know how to process them. We have a limited experience in this area, but we recently increased our knowledge how to work on LGBTI asylum issues by sending one of our board members to a training organized by ILGA Europe and TGEU. Following up on this training, we offered our support to the State Agency for Refugees for reviewing applications based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Our letter has not yet been answered, so we will approach the Agency pro-actively in the autumn.

Objectives in this area:

- To achieve effective implementation of European and international standards in Bulgaria by monitoring and documenting application of these standards into the practice of the State Agency for Refugees, and by supporting strategic litigation cases where relevant to close gaps in the legal protections afforded by European human rights law.

- Build an alliance with other human rights organizations, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Deystvie LGBT Youth Association for sharing good practices, and for jointly assisting the State Agency on Refugees in reviewing of LGBTI asylum cases.

## Education

We have experience in conducting qualitative research and writing reports in this area, and also in teacher training (within a EU-funded project in 2012). We have in-depth knowledge of the issues facing LGBTI students and teachers in the education system, which we are attempting to use in order to influence the educational standards promoted by the Ministry of Education and the educational practices.

Objectives in this area:

- To enhance the application of the right to education for LGBTI people by strengthening national legislation and policies aimed at protecting against bullying, violence and discrimination in access to education, and creating space for discussion of the LGBTI identities in non-discriminative manner, so that to overcome negative stereotypes of LGBTI in the Bulgarian schools;
- Monitor all policy-making processes, initiated by the Ministry of Education and submit policy statements on the new education law, the new educational standards (that are in process of development, and we were not invited to be part of the work groups, although we offered support);
- Strengthen alliances with NGOs working in the sphere of inclusive education for joint advocacy initiatives, for joint applications on teacher-training public contracting procedures, and for dissemination of good practices.

## Employment

We have not worked in this area so far, but we are interested to start working in this area.

Objectives in this area:

- To achieve effective implementation of the Bulgarian anti-discrimination law, and the EU standards in this area by monitoring and documenting application of these standards into workplace practices, and by supporting strategic litigation cases where relevant to close gaps in law enforcement, particularly in relation to protection against discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression and sex (intersex).
- Develop awareness-raising activities and build alliances with companies to promote standards of non-discrimination and diversity management, which improve the status of LGBTI people in the workforce.

## Hate Crime and Hate Speech

We are currently part of a work group for the transposition of the Istanbul convention in the Bulgarian Criminal Code, at the Ministry of Justice. This creates an opportunity to propose changes in the Criminal Code, which recognize homophobia, biphobia and transphobia as aggravating motives in hate crimes. It also enables us to tackle a very outdated article in the part dedicated to sexual crimes, which treats homosexual rape differently than rape of heterosexual people. Our proposals, developed in partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, were included in the protocols, but received small support even from the work group members. They will be further reviewed by the Parliament and voted upon.

In 2016, we became a partner in an international consortium that applied to the European Commission with a proposal for providing support to victims of anti-LGBTI hate crimes. The proposal won a grant, and the project will start in December 2016. This will increase our competences and fieldwork in the area of hate crimes prevention. It also involves seminars with police officers, lawyers and judges to promote good practices in providing support to victims of anti-LGBTI hate crimes.

Objectives in this area:

- To increase the protection against bias-motivated violence and hate speech targeting LGBTI people by developing adequate legal protection mechanisms in the revised Bulgarian Criminal Code (adequate hate crime law).
- To enhance the capacity of law-enforcement bodies and the judicial system to adequately address bias-motivated violence and hate speech targeting LGBTI people particularly through exchange of knowledge and good practices among European and national actors.

## Family

We have recently began doing research of rainbow families in Bulgaria and will produce a research report to be used for evidence-based advocacy. Our intention to advocate for the legal recognition of the LGBTI families was part of our work plans for many years, without any progress made towards this objective. The main reason for lack of progress was the absence of allies, who would help us promote such draft law. In the last year, we began identifying potential allies and also same-sex couples who are ready to become faces of a targeted communication campaign in support of same-sex civil unions (registered partnerships). That is why, we are re-entering this objective in our strategic plan and the research that we are currently doing will inform an advocacy campaign.

Objectives in this area:

- To achieve legal recognition of partnerships of same-sex couples and trans people in the Bulgarian Family Code through strategic litigation and evidence-based advocacy at the national level.
- To increase public awareness and visibility for the diversity of families in Bulgaria.

## Freedom of Assembly, Association and Expression

There have not been serious violations of these freedoms of LGBTI people in Bulgaria in recent years, however, every year the local government argues with us on the route and timing of Sofia Pride, and we are constantly pressed to restrict the scope of this event. We have even appealed a decision of the local government in 2012, which severely restricted a public exhibition of LGBT Athletes, which we planned for the Pride Art Week. We will continue to be vigilant that these essential freedoms are not violated by the authorities and use every possible method of action within the law to oppose violations.

Objectives in this area:

- To monitor and report on human rights violations and/or risks of human rights violations to European and national institutions to ensure these three freedoms are guaranteed.

## Health

This year Bilitis became a partner in a cross-European project implemented by ILGA-Europe, which draws attention to LGBTI health and access to the health services. The project includes a review of grey literature and conducting 2 focus groups. The 1<sup>st</sup> focus group will consist of diverse members of LGBTI communities; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> - diverse healthcare professionals and/or specialists (whether LGBTI or not) with an interest in the equitable delivery of healthcare to LGBTI people. The results from the focus groups will be sent to the University of Brighton for thematic analysis and a final report. This is our first project in the LGBTI health sphere. Our preliminary knowledge shows that some groups (trans, intersex) experience severe difficulties in accessing adequate health services. We are interested to expand our work in this area.

Objectives in this area:

- Research and document obstacles to the equal access to health services for LGBTI people in Bulgaria; raise awareness among health professionals of the problems faced by different groups of LGBTI in access to health services;
- To achieve depathologisation of the trans identities including through evidence-based advocacy, strategic litigation, awareness raising activities;
- Stop the “normalizing” body corrective surgery and other medical interventions conducted on intersex children without their informed consent: raise awareness of families and doctors that the right of bodily integrity is an essential human right of the intersex individuals, and should not be infringed; advocate for banning the normalizing surgery of intersex infants.

## Legal Gender Recognition

Since 2012, when Bilitis published its research on the legal practice for gender recognition in Bulgaria, we have become a point of reference for many trans people who wish to change their legal gender, or to start an HRT. We have provided legal support to several people in starting legal gender recognition cases at the regional courts, based on their permanent address. We have assisted 2 appeals of court decisions. The legal practice for legal gender recognition of trans and intersex people in Bulgaria is still very arbitrary: some cases are finalized after the first hearing with a positive decision, while others need to be appealed. It depends largely on the personal attitude of the judge. Bilitis will continue working in this area, and we are planning to approach the Highest Administrative Court with a request for a public statement which will contribute to establishing clear standards for reviewing of cases of legal gender recognition.

Objectives in this area:

- To improve the legal practice in Bulgaria by introducing clear standards for legal gender recognition; to ensure that legal gender recognition is a quick, transparent and accessible process for all trans and intersex people, through litigation and evidence-based advocacy at national and European levels;
- To raise the capacity of judges and lawyers for dealing with cases of legal gender recognition by conducting training on trans and intersex issues (possibly funded within EU projects).

Our commitment to work in all of the above areas requires a stronger fundraising capacity and increasing the number of project-based staff. Hence, we will continue to participate in

international consortiums for accessing EU funding, and look out for any existing opportunities to support the expansion of our advocacy and awareness raising work.

## Strategic Goal 2

**At the grassroots level: activate, empower and involve LGBTI people, support new leaders, and strengthen the LGBTI movement in Bulgaria**

Bilitis recognizes the need of active LGBTI people, who will be the driving force for social change towards gender equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, gender expression and sexual orientation. We believe in democratic politics and in bottom-up solutions for issues affecting our lives. We also believe that respect for diversity is a productive force for social progress, and should be encouraged and made visible in all areas of life.

Our commitment to working at the grassroots level is long-standing and has taken different forms during the years. Initially, Bilitis acted as a self-support group for lesbians, bisexual women and trans people. Gradually, the organization was transformed into an advocate for LGBTI rights, monitoring law and policy gaps, and designing advocacy campaigns to fill in these gaps. This led to gradual change in our strategy, but the determination to continue working on the grassroots level has been preserved.

In 2014, we realized that we can play the role of an incubator for new leaders of the LGBTI movement, and we can support informal groups that originate as a result of some of the services/activities we offer to the community, and then spin off and start independent activity. Such groups play an important role as source of volunteers for all of Bilitis activities, and are an inspiration for many of the public protests that we have co-organized.

The LGBT-HHH Collective was born in December 2014, because of the annual LGBT Community Festival, organized by Bilitis since 2005. This Collective was the main driving force for carrying out public protests against the lack of recognition of anti-LGBTI hate crimes in 2015 and 2016. The Collective also provided volunteers for Sofia Pride 2015 and 2016. It has co-organized the LGBT Community Festival in 2015. Bilitis supported a capacity building camp for the members of the Collective in 2015. We will continue working together on community mobilizing and designing public actions that increase the visibility of LGBTI people in Bulgaria.

Bilitis is the only LGBTI organization in Bulgaria, which works on intersex issues and we are going to expand this area with core support from Astraea Foundation. We are also one of the 2 NGOs working on trans issues. We are planning to hire one new coordinator of trans-related activities in order to expand our work in this area and maintain its self-led character.

In 2015 – 2016 Bilitis organized a series of feminist workshops on topics such as: body politics (decolonization of the female bodies); queer photography and filmmaking (with practical experiences), LGBTIQ issues in the Roma communities; the symbols of hate in the modern societies; history and practice of feminism (feminisms). All of these workshops were open to LGBTI people and allies, and helped disseminate the values of intersectional feminism that we share. The last workshop was organized in collaboration with a university professor (teaching sociology of gender), who popularized the workshop among her students

at Sofia University. This increased the diversity of the participants and helped attract some new supporters of our work.

Objectives in this area:

- Identify, attract, train, involve and motivate for action new leaders of the LGBTI movement.
- Strengthen inter-organizational relationships (with current and new allies), which foster the LGBTI movement.

Key Activities in this area:

- Maintain a close relationship with the LGBT-HHH Collective and inspire its members to become the future leaders of the LGBTI movement in Bulgaria; provide capacity-building opportunities for self-identified leaders of underrepresented groups (trans and intersex), and involve them as much as possible in our organizational life (with the possibility of hiring some of them as staff members).
- Expand our services to the LGBTI people by working collaboratively with other LGBTI groups/organizations on the start-up of an LGBTI Center and an LGBTI Hot Line, LGBTI Movie Club and other ideas that respond to community-identified needs.
- Transform our web site into theme-based archive of useful information on all topics identified in Strategic Goal 1 that will be used by the LGBTI people.
- Maintain the Annual LGBTI Community Festival as a key event oriented towards the LGBTI people from across Bulgaria, which provides space for meetings, discussions, performances and self-expression and is one of the few outlets for the creative energies of the LGBTI people in Bulgaria.
- Contribute to the organizing and the growth of Sofia Pride as the main LGBTI visibility event in Bulgaria, which encourages the LGBTI people to come out, to be brave in being who they are, and contributes to changing the public discourse on sexual and gender identities.
- Maintain the series of feminist workshops as a way of attracting new supporters from different spheres (NGOs/academia/business women), and new volunteers, and an instrument for disseminating the values of intersectional feminism, which we share.

## Strategic Goal 3

Our statute contains the following formulation of Strategic Goal 3:

- At the level of wider society: disseminate the values of intersectional feminism and overcome the heteronormative structures, including gender stereotypes.

The discussion of this goal led to the conclusion that this is a horizontal principle, which comes across all our activities in any of the thematic areas outlined in Strategic Goal 1, as well as in the objectives of Strategic Goal 2. Hence, we do not see a need to maintain a separate strategic goal 3.

At the same time, we have realized that Capacity Building of our board and staff is of key importance for the achievement of the first 2 strategic goals, outlined above. Hence, we have decided to transform Strategic Goal 3 into the following:

## New Strategic Goal 3

Strengthen the capacity of Bilitis to be at the forefront of social change towards full equality of LGBTI people in Bulgaria and sustain its work in a changing (challenging) environment.

Objectives in this area:

- **Expertise:** Increase professionalism of board and staff to be recognized as experts on LGBTI issues by government bodies, international organizations and national partners;
- **Continuity:** Ensure sufficient access to new human resources from our target groups to compensate staff turnover;
- **Stable Finances:** Ensure financial stability without compromising the mission, goals and values; attract at least one more long-term donor for core costs.
- **Diversity, Transparency and Accountability:** attract and involve self-identified leaders of each of the target groups that we stand up for (lesbians, bisexual and pansexual women, trans and intersex people) as staff and board members; involve a broader constituency in our decision-making;
- **Networking/Partnerships:** Maintain ongoing mutually beneficial relationship with other LGBTI organizations in the country (and other allies) and jointly design strategies for promoting the equality of all LGBTI groups – including gay men.

Key Activities in this area:

- Provide capacity-building opportunities to our staff and board by sending them to appropriate trainings organized by some of the international umbrella organizations that we are part of (ILGA, ILGA-Europe, TGEU, OII, EGLSF);
- Provide capacity building opportunities also to volunteers, some of whom are potential staff members;
- Strengthen peer learning and sharing across the organization (among board and staff members, and volunteers) by organizing regular staff/board/volunteer meetings;
- Organize strategic communication campaigns in partnership with other LGBTI organizations in Bulgaria, in order to be able to reframe the public discourse on LGBTI identities in Bulgaria and promote new laws;
- Create new partnerships and alliances with other human rights and equality organizations in Bulgaria, as well as with universities (for example, the Political department of New Bulgarian University) to be able to reinforce our strategies for social change;
- Field-test using the EU and UN mechanisms to influence in-country policy-building processes (search advice from ILGA-Europe and the other umbrella organizations that we are member of);
- Approach all possible donors, interested in LGBTI issues; watch out for potential project funding, and build a diverse funding portfolio, which sustains our work.



## Our Approaches

Bilitis will use the following approaches in order to accomplish the strategic goals and objectives outlined above:

- Research and documentation to create a body of knowledge which can be used for evidence-based advocacy;
- Advocacy and lobbying for promoting legal and policy change;
- Communication and awareness raising of wider society;
- Litigation, including strategic litigation when the options of the national court system are exhausted;
- Building partnerships and coalitions to increase the impact of our work;
- Grassroots mobilization – creating space for new LGBTI leaders self-identification and self-empowerment;
- Capacity building of our staff and board, as well as of volunteers, in order to serve as incubator of new leaders of social change.

## Internal Monitoring and Self-Evaluation

This section looks at the roles that will be played by our board, staff and volunteers in implementing the strategic plan, checking if we make progress towards the objectives, and revising the plan if needed.

Bilitis will maintain its operating board and try to enlarge the number of staff members to be able to expand its activities in new areas. Each of the board members has specific thematic focus, while each of the staff members have specific project-based roles.

The chairperson of the board will also play the role of an executive director, hiring staff and overseeing project-based work. The project coordinators of different projects will report to the chairperson. Project reporting is the responsibility of each coordinator with support from the chairperson. The reporting of institutional support grants will be the responsibility of the chairperson with input from all staff and board members.

Board-staff meetings will be organized on bi-weekly basis, and in more intense work periods (October – December and March- June) on weekly basis to check progress on planned activities, and discuss outputs and outcomes.

Every six months a strategic meeting will be organized, in which the board-staff-volunteers team will discuss the overall progress towards our strategic objectives and take decisions about revisions in the strategic plan if necessary.

Once a year, a strategic retreat will be organized to self-evaluate the progress over the entire calendar year and discuss/adopt the annual plan for the following year. The chairperson together with staff will have the obligation to prepare the draft annual plan and present to everybody for input and discussion.

Ongoing monitoring of the finances is done with the help of an external certified accountant, who has assisted the organization in the last ten years, and knows well our work. She is responsible for preparation of the annual tax reports and financial reports, which meet the requirements of the National Revenue Agency, and is also responsible for assisting the project coordinators in preparation of financial reports to different funders.