

A hand is shown holding a rainbow flag, with the flag's colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple) fanning out from the hand. The background is a solid dark purple. The year '2023' is printed in white, bold, sans-serif font over the hand and flag.

**2023**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

**BILITIS RESOURCE  
CENTER FOUNDATION**

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**bilitis**

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# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



Dear friends,

As we bid farewell to 2023, a year marked by both challenges and triumphs, I am filled with pride and gratitude for our collective resilience and achievements at Bilitis and as a community as a whole.

In 2023, our esteemed Executive Director, Lilly Dragoeva, made the difficult decision to step down from her position and leave Bilitis. Lilly's leadership has been pivotal in guiding Bilitis through periods of growth and transformation, and we are deeply appreciative of her contributions. However, her departure marks a new chapter in our journey.

Responding to the evolving needs of our community and the broader social landscape, Bilitis underwent significant organizational changes this year. One of the key changes is that Bilitis now has two directors, myself and Pol Naidenov. We also welcomed two new members, Kalin Kisyov and Mira Mars, and embraced our new organizational structures, including horizontal and matrix approaches, reflecting our commitment to inclusivity, transparency, and effectiveness. These changes signify a bold step forward in our quest for a more dynamic, resilient, and responsive organization.

This year, a significant victory for LGBTI rights was achieved as Bulgaria's Parliament passed amendments to the Penal Code, targeting hate crimes and discrimination. These amendments represent years of advocacy and signify a step forward in our quest for equality.

Despite the challenges faced by the Rainbow Hub, our community center, we secured a long-term home and underwent renovations, thanks to the support of organizations like Shalom, Bulgarian Fund for Women, Mama Cash, Sigrid Rausing Trust, and the EU. The New Rainbow Hub officially opened its doors in December 2023, marking a new chapter in our journey.

As we reflect on the past year, let us continue to stand united in our commitment to equality, justice, and dignity for all. Together, we have overcome adversity and created a brighter future for our community.

With gratitude,  
**Manuela Popova**  
Co-Director

# 2023 IN NUMBERS



## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

50+ Community mobilizing events  
2000+ Participants  
30+ Volunteers who supported us

## TRAININGS

92 Conducted trainings  
400+ Participants

## RESEARCH

5 Publications

# 2023 IN NUMBERS



## ADVOCACY

12 Advocacy campaigns

300+ Participants, supporters and allies

## MEDIA APPEARANCES

10+ Mainstream media  
appearances

## SOCIAL MEDIA

17 Facebook events

300 New Followers

660,000+ Reach

50,000 Facebook engagement



# **KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN MAKING THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE**



# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN MAKING THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

Despite facing numerous challenges, the year 2023 marked significant progress in Bulgaria's journey towards equality for LGBTI individuals. Through resilient efforts, partnerships, and legislative strides, the community witnessed remarkable advancements, paving the way for a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

## 1. Showing persistence in sustaining the Rainbow Hub community center

The community center Rainbow Hub was relocated to a safer and more sustainable place that was rebuilt and refurbished with the financial help of some of our main donors. It opened its doors in December 2023 as a safe and welcoming space for the LGBTI community in Sofia. Partnerships were the key factor for the creation of the new Rainbow Hub. Our long-term partner and Rainbow Hub's co-managing organization, GLAS Foundation, negotiated with the Association of the Bulgarian Jews Shalom renting their property free-of-charge for 10 years after the renovation.



# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN MAKING THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

## 2. Making strides in LGBTI legislation

In a monumental win for LGBTI rights, Bulgaria's Parliament approved the second reading of several amendments to the Penal Code, including provisions against hate crimes, among them harsher penalties for murder, assault, abduction and denial of employment rights if the motive is the victim's sexual orientation.

The amendments also step up punishments when people with a different sexuality are victims of bodily injury, kidnapping, or illegal imprisonment. Preventing someone from taking up employment, or forcing the person to leave employment on homophobic grounds will result in a sentence of up to three years in prison.

The amendments have been made possible after many years of work and public pressure on the part of LGBTI organizations in Bulgaria, international and European institutions and numerous activists and public figures.

## 3. Impact on the academic gender discourse

Our book "Legal Gender Recognition in Bulgaria: Present and Prospects" by Radoslav Stoyanov, Sylvia Petkova, Galina Cheshirova and Velina Todorova is the first academic publication on the subject, written by Bulgarian authors. It lays the foundation for future collaboration with the academia for reviving the suppressed gender discourse which suffered tremendously by the anti-gender movement campaigning in the last few years. (More about the book in the section on LGR - see below).







# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS

# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## Re-Opening of the Rainbow Hub

Since its opening in 2018, the only non-commercial community center in Bulgaria Rainbow Hub, has faced a multitude of challenges, including the impact of Covid-19, a physical attack by an armed group of intruders in 2021 and a following eviction by the property owners. However, Rainbow Hub finally found its long-term home in 2023.

The place, rented with a 10-year lease contract from our ally, the Organization of the Bulgarian Jews, Shalom, was renovated with the help of Mama Cash exit grant and EU grant (CERV-Rainbow Hub Project). With the continuous financial support of our core support donors, the Sigrid Rausing Trust and the Bulgarian Fund for Women, the space will offer an increased number of community services.

The New Rainbow Hub was officially opened in December 2023. Due to the momentous occasion, the teams of Bilitis and GLAS foundation celebrated accordingly with a total of 3 separate events. The first was aimed at allies on a national and international level such as politicians and ambassadors that have supported the community center throughout the years. The second gathered allies and friends from the NGO sector. Both events had an attendance of over 40 people. The third one was a 2-day event meant for the community. It was visited by over 50 community members and included events such as a meet-up with the activists from the 2 organizations and playing board games.



# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## Sofia Pride 2023

Sofia Pride 2023, held on June 17th, showcased a vibrant celebration of LGBTQ+ rights despite challenging weather conditions. With a focus on celebrating diverse families and standing against hate and discrimination for the 16th consecutive year, the event attracted attendees from various backgrounds. The march, accompanied by increased security measures, proceeded peacefully, emphasizing unity and solidarity within the community. Pre-event activities, including a concert, provided opportunities for community engagement and expression of support. Sofia Pride 2023 served as a powerful platform for advocacy, promoting equality and social justice in Bulgaria.

Sofia Pride 2023 emphasized the theme of celebrating families and unity against hate, discrimination, and inequality for the 16th consecutive year. This commitment was reflected in various cultural and sporting events organized as part of Sofia Pride Arts, Sofia Pride Film Fest, and Sofia Pride Sport.

Visual symbolism played a significant role in this year's Pride, with organizers drawing inspiration from Bulgarian folklore. Traditional elements of Bulgarian embroidery and carpentry were incorporated into the event's visual representation, symbolizing the intersection of LGBTQ+ rights and national heritage.

Pre-event activities, including a concert held in front of the Soviet Army Monument, provided a platform for community engagement and expression of support. Attendees waved rainbow-colored flags, symbolizing solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community.

Sofia Pride 2023 served as a powerful platform for advocacy, promoting equality and social justice in Bulgaria. Despite challenges posed by weather conditions, the event underscored the resilience and determination of the LGBTQ+ community and its allies in the ongoing fight for rights and recognition.



# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## Sofia Pride Human Rights Forum

The Sofia Pride Human Rights Forum took place on June 16 2023, a day before Sofia Pride. It was co-hosted by the Embassy of Sweden in Sofia on the occasion of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the LGBTI Intergroup at the European Parliament.

The aim of the Forum was to create space for discussion around three topics of great importance to the LGBTI community in Bulgaria - hate, freedom and security, which is the topic of the current project, the rights of rainbow families, and the attack on the human rights of trans people in Bulgaria. The forum created a space for discussion among key actors who have never been at the same table before, and together with key national and international stakeholders explored solutions to the existing discrimination and stigmatization of LGBTI people in Bulgaria.

The Forum was well attended by a total of 26 representatives of different institutions. In fact, this is the first time that so many high-level officials and politicians gather at an event dedicated to the topic of LGBTI rights.

**SOFIA PRIDE  
HUMAN RIGHTS FORUM**

FRIDAY  
16 JUNE 2023

HOUSE OF EUROPE  
SOFIA, BULGARIA

**bilitis** **GLAS** **B|S|T** The Black Sea Trust  
for Regional Cooperation



# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## Presentation of book: “Legal gender recognition in Bulgaria - present and perspectives”

The event invited participants to the Literary Club "Peroto" on December 13th, 2023, to hear directly from the authors about the creation process of the book and its key findings.

The event attracted more than 50 participants from different professions and fields, including human rights defenders, activists, lawyers, journalists, mental health professionals, students, and others. The first panel included an in-depth presentation of the book, the authors sharing insights from the creation process, and a discussion on the next steps, opportunities, and development plans. The second panel offered external perspectives on the book from three different angles: a community member experiencing the lack of legislation directly, a lawyer with a direct role in applying legislation, and a journalist communicating with the broader public. Following the two panel discussions, guests were encouraged to stay for a cocktail and engage in free discussion.



# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## Protests and marches

### *Protest against the Supreme Cassation Court's decision on legal gender recognition in Bulgaria*

On the 20th of February 2023, after a long wait, the Supreme Court of Cassation (SCC) announced a decision that rejects the possibility of legal gender recognition of transgender people in Bulgaria, despite the procedure's long history in the country. Several lawyers and experts have voiced their concerns and opinions on the decision, one even saying "...this decision is a legal absurdity, at the bottom of the pit of legal thought...".

A protest was held 2 days later, on the 22nd, to showcase that transgender people have always been here and will remain despite the government's attempts to erase their existence and limit their rights. It was attended by more than 150 transgender people, allies and human rights activists.





# KEY VISIBILITY EVENTS



## *Protest for justice for Gabriela Bankova*

On the 20th of November a protest was held in solidarity with Gabriela Bankova, a transgender woman who began a hunger strike after her case for legal gender recognition got a rejection from Bulgarian authorities. The protest aimed to continue the public discourse on transgender people's rights and specifically Bankova's case.

The event amassed more than a 100 community members and allies to the cause and included speeches from a Bilitis team member and representatives from the trans community who shared their stories along with their demands for a more fulfilling future for trans people in Bulgaria.





# **COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**



# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



In 2023, we got funding from the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) call and continued the collaboration with GLAS foundation to create a sustainable non-commercial community center for the LGBTI community in Bulgaria.

**The Rainbow Hub project** has achieved significant milestones in its first year, embodying our steadfast commitment to uplifting the local LGBTI community. The close partnership with GLAS has been key to overcoming challenges and maximizing opportunities for growth. Regular coordination meetings ensure effective communication and proactive problem-solving, contributing to the project's resilience.

A notable achievement is the development of a straightforward guide outlining the project's aims and objectives, providing a clear roadmap for success. Active participation in key events, such as the Kick-off meeting in Brussels, has expanded our network within the broader LGBTI sector.

Our commitment to transparency is evident through diligent project monitoring, including financial oversight, venue management, and community feedback through surveys. An external expert evaluation further reinforces our dedication to maintaining high standards.

Operational challenges led us to relocate to a safer space, supported by the Jewish organization Shalom. A donated apartment underwent extensive renovation, and a ten-year lease agreement was secured, establishing a stable foundation for the Rainbow Hub's future. This new

location is in the ideal center of Sofia, on Maria Louisa boulevard right next to the main underground station of Sofia, which will allow us to ossify a safe space for our events and communities, a venue that people can easily access. The long-anticipated grand reopening in December 2023 signified the project's culmination, showcasing extensive efforts and community engagement with the LGBTI community, government officials and ambassadors, as well as civil society members that support human rights.

Notable progress has been made in community groups, with BraveLab and TransMission holding regular meetings, BraveLab inspired an offspring group in Veliko Tarnovo. Affinity groups like QueerFemme and BInonymous were set for revitalization. Additionally, the project has identified potential partners in other European countries, including Slovenia, Georgia, Czech Republic, Montenegro, Poland, Belgium, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Portugal. These partnerships, identified through the RainboWelcome map, aim to facilitate a network for practices exchange in 2024.

# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



## Community Voices

In 2022, Bilitis participated in the “Community Voices” project, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the Active Citizens Fund of Bulgaria within the Financial Mechanism of the EEA, coordinated by GLAS Foundation, and in partnership with AEJ-Bulgaria and Oslo Pride. By implementing a large-scale communication campaign that will cover 500,000+ citizens, as well as by conducting seminars and trainings for different public speakers and opinion leaders, incl. journalists, LGBTI activists and allies, the project aims to overcome negative stereotypes towards LGBTI people and other vulnerable groups in society who are victims of hate speech.

Within the same project, Bilitis in collaboration with AEJ-Bulgaria conducted 5 media trainings for LGBTI people and their allies. A total of 44 people took part in 5 one-day trainings, with a methodology developed by the partner AEJ-Bulgaria and held at the radio-television center of the New Bulgarian University. The workshops were led by one of the most prominent journalists in Bulgaria with many years of experience - Lora Kumova. The largest percentage of participants were people from the LGBTI community, activists for LGBTI rights and women's rights, as well as from environmental NGOs. People from the Roma and Jewish communities also participated in the trainings, as well as a Ukrainian refugee. Representatives of project partner Oslo Pride contributed to exchange of best practices with local LGBTI community. A number of meetings with youth LGBTI activists, meetings with journalists, as well as other workshops and activities were held.

## Research on community needs

In the beginning of 2023 we conducted an online survey among members of the LGBTI+ community in Bulgaria as part of the revision of the Bilitis Foundation's strategy. The online survey on the needs of LGBTI+ people in the country was conducted in April 2023 and gathered 727 valid responses from individuals living in the country and abroad.

# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



The topics covered in the report include, but are not limited to:

- Access to health, legal and psychological services specific to the needs of the respondents;
- Community connection, ways of connecting with it, and opinions on community-focused events and initiatives;
- Relationship and sentiment towards activism and volunteering for the LGBTI+ movement;
- Values related to the presence of the wider LGBTI+ community in mainstream society.

This report will play part in creating new initiatives and services as well as improve existing ones. The whole report can be found [here](#).

## Forward

The general objective of the “Forward” project, funded by the CERV programme of the European Union, was to enhance LGBTI rights in Bulgaria by implementing a comprehensive initiative for institutional changes in Bulgaria with focus on hate crimes on homophobic and transphobic grounds and access to public services. The project invested in awareness raising, capacity building and coalition building in a broad sense of creating meaningful relationships and recognizing shared interests, while raising awareness on challenges for LGBTI rights, with specific social groups and sectors, which also served as the project target groups (civil society organizations, public institutions and expert organizations, political parties and actors, and segments of the general public).

In regards to Bilitis’ work throughout 2023, we worked with LGBTI with trained LGBTI leaders and engaged civil society organizations to run small initiatives and campaigns, which aimed to introduce awareness about LGBTI rights and build support. Five initiatives were implemented and supported, of which 1 fully in the countryside and 1 partially in the countryside. The campaigns reached almost 3000 people across the country through social media and gathered a total of 283 participants in meetings and events. Among the highlights of the campaigns are the formation and growth of 2 collectives, one in Sofia ([Neurodiversity Foundation](#)) and another in Veliko Turnovo ([Generation Rebellion](#))

# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

The list of civil society organizations which have been contacted, engaged and partnered in different activities in work package 2 indeed shows a big diversity. Generally, it appears that the projects efforts have invested in strengthening existing coalitions and alliances, while reaching out outside of the “bubble”. The latter is particularly valuable in the successful breakthrough in the countryside, either with campaigns (Veliko Tarnovo) or with secured willingness to work on LGBTI+ rights (Youth Centres in Stara Zagora and Shumen). Through this project we also continued to develop our network of ally NGO’s through a total of 9 individual meetings and participating in a total of 14 events.





# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



## Rainbow Network

In 2023, we embarked on an exciting journey with the launch of the Rainbow Network project, supported by the German Marshall Fund. This is a visionary initiative aimed at catalyzing change in the landscape of LGBTI rights across Bulgaria. Focused on building a resilient network of activists and community leaders, this project aspired to amplify the voices of the LGBTI community, especially in towns and villages away from the capital.

Since its inception in September 2023, the Rainbow Network project has witnessed remarkable progress. The recruitment and selection campaign exceeded expectations, with over 30 individuals expressing their commitment to fostering positive change in cities throughout the country. The anticipation builds as we approach the eagerly awaited LGBTI Leadership Academy scheduled for February 2024. This foundational training promises to equip our ambassadors, mainly composed of dynamic individuals under 35, with the skills and knowledge needed to serve as local contact points and community advocates.

As we step into 2024, Bilitis is poised for a year of transformative impact through the Rainbow Network project. Our focus will be on deepening engagement with local stakeholders in various cities, establishing safe spaces for the LGBTI community. We will work towards ensuring a more widespread accessibility to the services we, other LGBTI organizations and ally organizations in Bulgaria offer to the community. Strengthening our ambassador network will be a core priority, with ongoing training and support aimed at enhancing their role as vigilant monitors of rights violations, active participants in local democratic processes, and champions for the broader cause. Through these concerted efforts, we anticipate contributing to a positive change for the LGBTI community in Bulgaria.

The Rainbow Network will continue expanding in 2024 with additional financial support from the CERV Program of the European Union. A new grant was approved at the end of 2023, which will help us build upon the successful start-up achieved with the GMF funding.

# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



## LBTI+ voices in action in our signature event, the LGBTIQ Community Festival

Our LGBTIQ community fest has been taking place toward the end of every year for over 15 years. It started as a space held up by queer women and non-binary people and continues to be organized by those groups to this day. It has solidified itself as a place for community empowerment, exchange and an opportunity to gather together around shared ideas and values.

Over the years, the community fest maintained its key focus on lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer women and non-binary persons' voices, perspectives and experiences. In the end of 2023, Bilitis won a grant from the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian\* Community for a special issue of the Community Fest to be held in the pride month of 2024. With this we would be empowering queer women and non-binary people to participate actively in civic processes and pass on their valuable knowledge of community organizing and empowerment to hundreds of LGBTIQ people, thus reinforcing intersectional feminist perspectives within the movement. We will be able to support financially disadvantaged LGBTI people from the countryside to present their ideas at the festival and also take part in the pride.





# **COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

# COMMUNITY SUPPORT



## Data Collection about Domestic Violence against LGBTI People in Bulgaria

This project, funded by ILGA-Europe, is focused on enhancing access to justice and victim support services for LGBTI individuals who face domestic violence. In collaboration with the GLAS Foundation, Bilitis Foundation are joining efforts to refine the reporting mechanisms for domestic violence cases, bolster the responsiveness of law enforcement institutions, and lay the groundwork for updating national legislation. The overarching goal is to ensure equal protection for all victims of domestic violence, irrespective of their Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC).

This project is set to yield an analytical report, created through a blend of field and desk research, which will form the backbone of evidence-based advocacy. The envisioned outcome involves heightening awareness among LGBTI individuals and fostering improved cooperation with public institutions to tackle this critical issue. As of now, 91 people have taken part in a survey to the study of knowledge and attitudes on the topic of domestic violence, which resulted in a couple of insightful interviews for further clarity on specific cases. An awareness campaign is currently in progress, aiming to encourage and empower individuals to come forward and report incidents of domestic violence.





# COMMUNITY SUPPORT



## AGEE: Economic opportunities

In 2023, Bilitis launched a new service to the LGBTIQ community: economic empowerment for individuals that face multiple challenges in labor market integration due to their gender identity or gender expression. At the heart of this project, funded by the Alliance for Gender Equality in Europe (AGEE), in partnership with GLAS Foundation, is a mission to foster greater inclusion in the professional landscape for lesbian, trans, and non-binary individuals. These individuals often face unique challenges, making their journey to secure employment more intricate.

Spanning a two-year timeline, the project has already welcomed 23 participants into its embrace. Each individual who is looking for support, is invited to an in-depth interview, is connected with a Career Adviser, Psychologist, or directly with companies offering open positions. Adding a dynamic touch, several job fairs are in the pipeline in 2024 and 2025. These fairs stand as vibrant platforms, allowing program participants to engage with employers actively seeking new team members. A “teaming up” approach will maximize the effectiveness of these events, as Bilitis and GLAS negotiated to set up branded stands at the most popular job fair chain in Bulgaria, the Career Show.



# EDUCATION

## Humanitarian aid

In February 2021 Bilitis launched the LGBTI Humanitarian Fund aiming to provide humanitarian support to the LGBTI people in Bulgaria who are severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, after the start of the war in Ukraine, we redirected our efforts in supporting people affected by the war.

Throughout 2023, we received a notable influx of applications, indicating a growing awareness of the Fund's existence and its capacity to provide crucial assistance. We received 56 applications from individuals in need and we were able to support a total of 34 individuals, offering vital aid in various forms. These included financial assistance for essentials such as food, medication and accommodation. Moreover, we provided over 20 psychological consultations to applicants who expressed a need, recognizing the importance of addressing not only the material needs but also the emotional well-being of those we serve. Altogether, in 2023 we have distributed a little over €10000 to members of the community residing in different parts of Bulgaria.

We would like to extend our gratitude towards all individual donors of the Fund, as well as the Bulgarian Fund for Women and AllOut who have provided targeted grants for LGBTI migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. These grants were open until the end of July 2023.

In order to sustain the Humanitarian Fund and support more LGBTI people in need, we continue our fundraising efforts. Donations are being collected [here](#) all year round.





# EDUCATION

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# EDUCATION



## Colourful childhoods

The Colourful Childhoods project, a dynamic collaboration across six European countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain), funded by the European programme Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), aimed to empower LGBTI children in vulnerable contexts, taking a decisive stand against gender-based violence during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a child-centered and interdisciplinary approach, each participating country conducted online national surveys, engaged in interviews with stakeholders, and facilitated insightful focus groups involving LGBTI children aged 6-17.

In this transformative journey, the Bilitis Foundation played a pivotal role, contributing significantly by crafting a comprehensive training module. This module found its way into national training sessions across partner countries. In February 2023, a Bilitis expert actively participated in an international Training of Trainers (ToT) in Palermo, Italy. Following the ToT, a subsequent national-level training unfolded in Bulgaria, with experts from Syndicate Education Podkrepa engaging 63 participants. The collaborative efforts resulted in a detailed national report encompassing insights from 193 participants, interviews with eight educational professionals, and an evaluation of six impactful programs addressing the unique needs of LGBTI children. The evaluation unveiled a crucial revelation - a deficiency in targeted services for these resilient young individuals.

A crowning achievement of the project was the creation of a Handbook on Preventing and Combating Gender-Based Violence, translated into six languages and made available for free, ensuring wider accessibility.

Amidst these impactful initiatives, a Children's Council (for students 14 to 18) emerged, hosting four online meetings to address security concerns. This innovative platform allowed five inspiring LGBTI teens to share their experiences and actively engage in the project. Simultaneously, a Permanent Seminar, focused on professionals in child welfare, triumphed with a diverse group of 10 participants, fostering meaningful knowledge exchange and collaboration.



# EDUCATION

The Colourful Childhoods project concluded with a Final Conference in Madrid, bringing all partners together to discuss and celebrate the fruitful outcomes. Following this, Information Days were held in each participating country, marking a pivotal moment for the project in Bulgaria, where 41 participants actively engaged. The collective efforts, coupled with a meticulously planned social media campaign, have not only addressed the unique challenges faced by LGBTI children but have also paved the way for informed decision-making and policy formulation, ultimately enhancing their well-being and fostering inclusivity.





# **LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION**

# LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION



The “**Enhancing Access to LGR for Trans and Intersex People in Bulgaria**” project was funded by the Bloomberg Philanthropies and completed at the end of 2023. The project contributed to:

- Raising awareness of trans and intersex people’s needs and experiences among different specialists
- Empowering the trans community to voice their opinions in participatory policy development;
- Placing legal gender recognition on the policy agenda;
- Attracting allies from the academia and practicing lawyers for reconstructing the gender identity discourse.

A key project outcome was the publishing of the book “Legal Gender Recognition in Bulgaria: Present and Prospects”, written collaboratively by Radoslav Stoyanov, Sylvia Petkova, Galina Cheshirova and Velina Todorova. It is the first book in Bulgaria to expand on LGR in Bulgaria and include not only the history of transgender people world-wide, but also the second research into the last decade worth of LGR cases in Bulgaria. The book succeeds in providing an in-depth resource for human rights and law experts and advocates.

One of the hallmarks of the project are the new relationships with several institutions and umbrella organizations that were established for long-term collaboration on trans and intersex rights protection: the Prosecution, the Ombudsman, the Union of Judges, the Union of Medical Students, as well as individual politicians, members of parliament, practicing lawyers, and university professors.

Throughout the project, a total of 10 judges, 30 prosecutors and 25 medical students have been educated on the lives of trans people and how they can improve their work with them.



# SECURITY



# SECURITY



The “**Regional Work to Enhance the Safety of LGBTI Rights Advocates**” project was funded under the Black Sea Trust for regional cooperation program of the German Marshall Fund. It ensured the engagement of 20 activists from the Black Sea region in a webinar and training on digital and physical security. This activity resulted in the creation of new and improved protocols for inside organizational use that were built with the help of the experts involved with the training on digital and physical security.

Another major part of the project’s activities was the communication strategy implemented in order to educate the public on the safety risks experienced by LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria. The [video](#) and posts made showcased how rampant hate crimes in public are for LGTBQ+ people. It has reached over 50 000 people all over the country.

The culmination of the project came with a roundtable that became a part of the program of supporting events to this year’s Sofia Pride under the name Sofia Pride Human Rights Forum. The Forum took place on June 16, 2023, and was co-hosted by the Embassy of Sweden in Sofia on the occasion of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the LGBTI Intergroup at the European Parliament. This was one of the most impactful forums on LGBTI rights in Bulgaria which had a high political and public presence with a total of 26 political stakeholders present. Over 110 participants were present in the room and another 9819 people watched the event live on Sofia Pride’s [website](#) and [Facebook](#)! [Here is the full 3-hour recording from the forum.](#)



# **SPORTS AND WELLBEING**

# SPORTS AND WELLBEING



## Fair Play

The “**Fair Play**” project, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the Active Citizens Fund of Bulgaria within the Financial Mechanism of the EEA, addressed a problem that is not talked about enough in our country: discrimination based on gender and gender identity, as well as gender-based violence in sport. The long-term outcome of the project is the strengthening of mechanisms to counter gender-based violence in sport leading to a strengthened civil society. Coordinator of the project is the Bokaya Association. More information is available on the [project website](#).

Within the project, Bilitis conducted a situation analysis on the topic of gender-based violence in sports and produced the *Gender-Based Violence in Sports: Current Situation and Good Practices in Bulgaria and the EU report*. The objectives of the research were generating new knowledge about the current situation in Bulgaria regarding gender-based violence in sports by conducting an online survey among 205 professional athletes and active sports enthusiasts; and identifying and documenting good practices from abroad in relation to developing and proposing a set of recommendations to form the basis of a Handbook with rules for preventing and combating gender-based violence in sports.

The *Preventing and Fighting Gender-Based Violence in Sports: A Handbook for Coaches* describes rules for the work of sports organizations in order to improve the prevention and fight against gender-based violence, and is the first of its kind for Bulgaria. It is designed for coaches and managers of professional and amateur sports clubs who want to improve their management policies and practices. The Handbook is entirely practically oriented and includes a questionnaire for self-assessment of the degree of implementation of the proposed policies and practices. We believe that this Handbook will contribute to improving the self-regulation of sports organizations in the field of preventing discrimination and hate speech based on gender stereotypes, and that it will increase the intolerance of sportspeople, professional athletes and other stakeholders to gender-based violence in sports.

# SPORTS AND WELLBEING



## MESIS

The “Missing pieces for educators and local stakeholders addressing inclusive sport” (MESIS) project aims to foster LGBTI inclusive sport communities by developing new pedagogical tools and competences in the field of the “Education ThroughSport” (ETS) methodology. The idea has been developed starting from the outcomes of Erasmus+ project “Outsport” (2017-2019). This project involves 5 partners from Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Bulgaria and the Netherlands.

The project will generate e-learning and practical tools for organisations and youth operators involved in sport, in particular coaches and PE teachers, and will develop local strategic partnerships in the field of LGBTI and ETS, by selecting 15 local stakeholders (schools, local authorities, sport associations).

In 2023, after a preliminary Training of Trainers meeting, the project trainers started to involve 60 coaches and PE teachers in specific capacity building sessions in order to transfer the key competencies on LGBTI issues in sport and make them able to deliver ETS exercises to their audience.

The outcomes of these actions will lead to the design of open e-learning content in 7 different languages, structured for operators who train sport coaches and PE teachers and for educators who directly work in the field. The project also foresees 8 dissemination events to deliver and test project outputs. Starting from the achieved know-how and results, the partnership aims to create a EU-wide model by implementing a Policy Vademecum designed for local policy implementation in the fields of sport and education.





# **PARTICIPATION IN ERASMUS+ PROJECTS**

# ERASMUS+ PROJECTS

In 2023, we successfully sent four participants from Sofia and Plovdiv to the Queer Ambassadors training held from June 14th to 22nd in Ommen, Netherlands. Participants in the Queer Ambassadors program gained invaluable skills and knowledge to become effective advocates for LGBTQIA+ rights and inclusivity within their communities.

Looking forward, we are exploring deeper integration within the Erasmus+ program through applying for various youth exchanges & training courses, and participation in the European Solidarity Corps. We are currently in the process of designing our first Training Course project in this direction, and more details will be forthcoming in the near future.





# ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This year marked a significant milestone for Bilitis Foundation as we embarked on a journey of organizational transformation. Recognizing the need for agility and collaboration in our approach, we initiated strategic changes to our organizational structure. Our aim was to enhance efficiency, promote cross-functional collaboration, and strengthen our capacity to address the diverse needs of the LGBTQ+ community.

One of the key highlights of this year was the successful launching of our new hybrid organizational structure. By blending elements of a flat structure with a matrix approach, we have created a dynamic framework that fosters collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity across our operations. This new structure empowers our team members to work collaboratively across functions, leveraging their diverse expertise to drive impactful change.

# ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



## Key Features of the New Structure:

- **Core Leadership:** Our core leadership, comprising the financial manager, communications manager, project manager, and project coordinators, serves as the central decision-making body of the organization. Through collective decision-making, the team ensures strategic alignment and effective governance.
- **Matrix Structure for Projects:** We have adopted a matrix structure for project management, enabling cross-functional teams to collaborate on initiatives spanning different areas of focus. This approach enhances resource utilization, promotes knowledge sharing, and accelerates project delivery.
- **Resource Allocation Committee:** In line with our commitment to optimizing resource utilization, we have established a dedicated Resource Allocation Committee. This committee oversees the allocation of resources, ensuring alignment with our strategic priorities and maximizing impact across our programs and initiatives.

## Impact and Achievements:

Through the implementation of our new structure, we have witnessed tangible improvements in our organizational effectiveness and impact. Our cross-functional teams have demonstrated remarkable agility in responding to emerging challenges, delivering innovative solutions, and advancing our mission of LGBTQ+ inclusion and empowerment. From advocacy initiatives to community outreach programs, our collective efforts have made a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals and communities we serve.

## Looking Ahead:

As we reflect on the achievements of the past year, we remain committed to driving positive change and advancing LGBTQ+ rights and equality. The process of restructuring, which commenced in 2023 and is set to conclude in 2024, marks a pivotal moment in our organizational journey. However, our commitment to growth and adaptation does not end here. We recognize that organizational evolution is an ongoing process, and we are dedicated to nurturing a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Moving forward, we will build upon the foundation laid by our new structure, seizing opportunities for learning, collaboration, and expansion. Together, we will chart a path towards a future where LGBTQ+ individuals are celebrated, empowered, and afforded the dignity and respect they rightfully deserve.



# ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



## Rainbow Hub Without Borders

In August 2022 we launched the “Rainbow Hub Without Borders” project, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the Active Citizens Fund of Bulgaria within the Financial Mechanism of the EEA. Its aim was to train the team of the Rainbow Hub community center to provide adequate support to refugees and build close cooperation with relevant organizations working in the field (NGOs and public). Throughout the project duration, the team underwent a total of 6 capacity building trainings. The first 3 focused on the rights of sex workers and the state of sex work in Bulgaria from a legal and material point of view, as well as on trafficking human beings at the intersection with LGBTI, what are the available referral mechanisms and the current situation in Bulgaria, both conducted by experts from the Dignita Foundation; and on the migration situation in Bulgaria, as well as the reception centers in Bulgaria, conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The next three focused on refugee law, access and procedure for gaining a refugee status and the road of a migrant from their country into ours. Those were implemented with the help of the organizations Voice in Bulgaria, Mission Wings, CVS-Bulgaria and Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR).

In addition, 10 work meetings with relevant stakeholders were held, incl. with representatives of the US Embassy in Sofia, Safe Place International, CVS-Bulgaria, FAR, Council for Refugee women, Amnesty International and others.

Along with this, the community center’s website has been updated and includes information on contact points for LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers. We also made a total of 24 posts for our social media accounts on the services of the Rainbow Hub along with 3 informational videos providing information on LGBTI refugees, sex workers and victims of human trafficking experiences and access to services.

The final event of the project was held on the 12th of September and showcased the project’s results to the LGBTI community, especially the volunteers for GLAS foundation and Bilitis. A discussion was held on the topics of LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers, human trafficking victims and sex workers and their access to human rights in Bulgaria.



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Bilitis is very proud that it has been supported with core funding by the following donors:

- Sigrid Rausing Trust: a multi-year core support grant, approved in 2022 is currently the backbone of our organizational sustainability and helps to manage project funding fluctuations and retain our full-time staff.
- Astraea Lesbian Foundation of Justice Intersex Fund has continuously funded Bilitis since 2015 to enhance our activities in the sphere of intersex human rights.
- Mama Cash Foundation - the End of Trajectory Grant, received in 2022, was invested in the renovation and upgrading of our community center, the Rainbow Hub, and helped cover 50% of the total renovation costs, completed in 2023.
- Bulgarian Fund for Women: a new 2-year core support grant received at the end of 2023 will help streamlining our organizational development processes, hiring an organizational consultant, and expanding the services that Bilitis offers to the community.

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