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Beyond waving rainbow flags

Using the rainbow flag to highlight an east-west divide in Europe risks playing into the hands of authoritarian leaders

Two weeks ago the international symbol for the LGBTI community, the rainbow flag, took centre stage in European politics and media. The Union of European Football Associations provoked a critical storm when it denied a request from the mayor of Munich to have the Bayern Munich stadium lit in rainbow colours, during the Germany *versus* Hungary European Championships game, as a protest against legislation just introduced in Hungary banning the inclusion of LGBTI people in material in schools or in media for under-18s. Suddenly, from football players to politicians to businesses, everyone was waving rainbow flags, rowing in on the human rights of LGBTI people and the chastisement of Hungary.

Meanwhile, political wheels were spinning in the European Union and, before the week was out, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, denounced the Hungarian legislation and pledged to use all the powers of the Commission to ensure the rights of all EU citizens were guaranteed. Since then, 16 countries have supported a statement urging the commission to take action against the Hungarian law and LGBTI rights have been pushed to the top of the political agenda, with an EU heads-of-state meeting discussing the Hungary situation.

Major caveats

This large wave of solidarity and political commitments is as welcome as it is overdue. But that comes with major caveats.

Considering some of the exchanges of the past week — from media outlets using the rainbow as a symbol of an apparent east-west divide on LGBTI rights in Europe, to leaders such as the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, telling journalists that ‘Hungary has no place in the EU any more’ — there is a real risk that the rainbow flag could end up antagonising rather than uniting.

In the wake of Orbán's latest anti-LGBTI legislation, thousands of Hungarians took to the streets to protest.

Allowing the flag and LGBTI rights to become the symbol of an 'us and them' argument will not play out well. At the weekend, Poland announced it was working on a similar anti-LGBTI bill to the Hungarian one — a clever strategic move designed to exploit the rainbow divide which came to a head last week.

The political machinations in both countries are as well-trodden as they are clear. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, want to create internal enemies to distract from their own failures and thereby maintain power. The internal enemy they have largely created is LGBTI people, and now they are instrumentalising the same minority to turn their populations against the European values everyone in the 'forward thinking' part of Europe is defending. In using the rainbow flag as an instrument to castigate whole countries, we might thus unwittingly contribute to isolating LGBTI people in countries such as Poland and Hungary, rather than bringing people along in support of equality.

Support growing

And public support for LGBTI communities is growing across Europe. In the wake of Orbán's latest anti-LGBTI legislation, thousands of Hungarians took to the streets to protest. Thousands turned up in Warsaw the same week, to participate in the Pride march or support it from the sidelines. We should foster popular support where it is continuing to grow, working first and foremost with and on behalf of the LGBTI communities directly affected by this law and other violations of fundamental rights across Europe.

All EU figures need to think through carefully how they talk about the current situation for LGBTI people across Europe.

We cannot allow the rainbow flag to become a distraction from this work. Symbolic acts, such as lighting buildings and waving flags, do matter of course. They send a message of support, they help prompt conversations and they create political momentum to discuss LGBTI issues. But they risk drawing attention from what really matters. Beyond making us feel good, what is the impact of posting a picture of a rainbow on our Twitter or Facebook profile, for the community in a country such as Hungary? What are EU politicians doing concretely to translate into action the declaration of the EU as an 'LGBTI freedom zone' by the European

Parliament in March?

It is much easier to wave a flag than to work out how to make sure infringements of EU procedures are tackled or how to change the financial regulations to make sure LGBTI activists in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria have much easier access to the funding they need. Amid the rainbow distraction, the danger is of failing to act where policy-makers can, and should, do so — and thus of losing public credibility and trust.

All EU figures need to think through carefully how they talk about the current situation for LGBTI people across Europe. It's a lot more complex than a blanket statement such as Rutte's or simply waving a rainbow flag to show one is on the 'good' side. Opinion formers and political leaders alike need to address what needs to be done in an inclusive rather than divisive way —walking the walk as well as talking the talk as they step on the rainbow crossing.

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