

Tackling discrimination

A discussion with Bruno Selun, Secretary of the European Parliament Intergroup on LGBT Rights



THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S
INTERGROUP ON
LGBT RIGHTS 

The Intergroup on LGBT Rights is one of 27 working groups in the European Parliament (EP) dedicated to specific issues. According to its secretary, Bruno Selun, the Intergroup helps members to ensure that they are able to effectively promote rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The main priorities of the Intergroup are the freedom of movement of LGBT people in the EU, the monitoring of the European Commission, combating LGBT discrimination at EU and Member State level, fighting for the rights of transgendered people and monitoring human rights in the external actions of the EU, to ensure that EU work in third countries takes account of the LGBT aspect of human rights.

The Intergroup holds briefings, distributes press releases and keeps MEPs informed about developments across the EU, covering civil society and NGO activity. "My job at the secretariat is to co-ordinate the work of the Intergroup. I write the press releases and case studies and put news on our homepage, our Facebook group and Twitter. I brief MEPs, and help to organise group visits and events," says Selun.

The Intergroup is currently made up of 118 MEPs from 20 Member States and

the five 'mainstream' political groups: European United Left/Nordic Green Left, the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the Greens/European Free Alliance, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the European People's Party (EPP). Although there are no members from the more conservative parties the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD), Selun says that votes "show that in general when it comes to human rights the Parliament is very concerned also about issues of LGBT people. Usually we get the majority."

The Intergroup is led by six presidents with Briton Michael Cashman (S&D) and Austrian Ulrike Lunacek (Greens) currently acting as the two main presidents. Lunacek and Cashman set the direction of the Intergroup and oversee its work. Each MEP has an assistant who specifically deals with LGBT rights; Bruno Selun is assistant to Michael Cashman.

The Intergroup on LGBT Rights seeks to reinforce and safeguard the human rights of LGBT people; "After we've gone through gender equality and race equality the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity is very much on people's minds. People acknowledge that it's one of the defining debates of the time," says Selun. Although LGBT rights are part of the discussion when it comes to social and human rights in the EP, there is no committee dedicated to issues of sexual orientation, while there is for example an EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality which is very concerned with questions of gender equality. As part of the Lisbon Treaty discussions it was emphasised that at the beginning of each new mandate the EP should carefully consider the organisation of its committees and assignment of official

powers. It is up to the EP presidents to make decisions on the formation of committees but at the moment the dedicated home of the LGBT rights issue remains a working group rather than a committee.

The discussion of LGBT rights in countries seeking membership of the EU is very important and plays a part in the accession negotiations, as is the case with Turkey at the moment. The EU is conscious of the fact that in Turkey a large number of transsexual people have been murdered recently. "These facts are being discussed during the accession negotiations and in Turkey's accession reports," says Selun.

Monitoring the work of the Parliament and the Commission and organising meetings and seminars is the main work of the Intergroup and this goes on throughout the year. "On average we would organise a meeting or a seminar maybe four to five times a year. The events are advertised on the website, where there is also information on how to register for members of the public, NGOs and journalists. The hearings are also open to anyone in the EP," says Selun. Interaction with NGOs is part of the Intergroup's work, although it's not easy to define the relationship precisely. "We inform NGOs of what happens in the EU. Occasionally we work with Amnesty International on individual cases, for example to make sure that LGBT Pride parades are allowed and take place safely. More often we partner up with ILGA Europe (the European branch of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association)" Selun says.

On 3rd May there was a seminar on the free movement of same-sex families in the EU, with panels discussing the overall theme of free movement of same-sex



Meeting of the Intergroup in May

families as an EU competence and how the EU can improve the current situation of same-sex families with regards to policy barriers. Only five EU countries allow marriages of same-sex couples: Portugal, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. In more conservative countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic states, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Malta and Italy, there are no rights allowing civil partnerships or marriages for same-sex couples. At the moment there are 16 million international couples across Europe, including gays and les-

bians. However, the Intergroup doesn't specifically work on marriage and civil partnerships because this is not an EU competence; according to the Treaty of the European Union the EU does not have the right to interfere in marriage laws of Member States. In marriage legislation there is therefore a lot of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Adoption is also not an EU competence and so discriminatory non-recognition of adopted children can create an obstacle to the free movement of same-sex families within the EU. In Sweden, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands same-sex couples can adopt children. The civil status of a parent can therefore change when a gay father or lesbian mother moves to a different EU country if there are no adoption and marriage rights for LGBT people. One parent is suddenly no longer legally regarded as a parent and the validity of the marriage is also questioned. There is also an uncertainty with regard to property rights and family support maintenance. Children of same-sex couples don't have the same rights as children of heterosexual couples and the families of same-sex couples can face a raft of legal uncertainties in different jurisdictions. Legal

certainty, sensitive constitutional laws on marriage and adoption and equal treatment of EU citizens are required.

In addition to organising events and providing information the Intergroup sometimes takes on another mission: trying to prevent people from being deported from Europe to their country of origin when the people in question could be imprisoned, tortured or killed for being LGBT. These people often contact the Intergroup through NGOs working with asylum seekers. Unfortunately the Intergroup can only take up very extreme cases when the situation allows for such intervention.

Looking ahead to future progress for LGBT rights Selun actually finds it hard to do futurology: "It's up to MEPs to vote progressively. Eventually I believe we will achieve full equality at some point or other. But there is a lot of opposition, especially religious opposition."

Ansgar Skoda

Visit the website of the Intergroup on LGBT Rights at www.lgbt-ep.eu. A version of this interview appears on campus-web.de.

