

EL*C PERSPECTIVES ON THE EU CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

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Introduction

The EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community (EL*C) is a feminist, intersectional, pan-European network of over 200 LBQ-led and LBQ-focused civil society organisations in Europe and Central Asia, including all 27 EU Member States.

Our mission is to make LBQ women visible, strengthen their participation in decision-making, improve their access to human rights, social and economic justice, and wellbeing, and ensure that their realities are reflected in policies at national, regional, European, and international levels. EL*C's advocacy is grounded in substantial evidence base: over five years of sustained research, extensive community consultations, and continuous policy engagement at the EU and international levels. This makes EL*C the leading, and in many contexts the only, international organisation systematically documenting and representing the realities of LBQ women across Europe and Central Asia.

In the current context of political polarisation, rising geopolitical tensions and authoritarian trends in Europe and globally, civil society organisations (CSOs) are in crisis¹. However, they represent the backbone of democratic societies. Not only they provide essential services but also act as watchdogs against abuses of power and ensure that the voices of marginalised communities are included in decision-making. As recognised also by the European Commission, in the European Union, CSOs play a particularly critical role: they

¹ S. Nush, J. Hadden The end of the age of NGO, Foreign Affairs 3 July 2025 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/end-age-ngos>

support the implementation of EU law and policies on the ground and contribute to the safeguarding of fundamental rights, freedoms, and values that the Union is built upon².

The forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy provides a unique opportunity to respond to these challenges. It is also a chance to increase protection for NGOs that serve the interests of marginalised communities, grassroots organisations, and those working on intersectional issues and addressing multiple forms of discrimination. Such NGOs, including those led by and focused on women of the LGBTI community, often find themselves at the centre of politicised attacks, defunding, de-prioritisation, and structural barriers to accessing funding and policy spaces.

This paper sets out key concerns and recommendations to inform the Strategy. Drawing on evidence from EL*C's Observatory on Lesbophobia, EL*C capacity assessments of lesbian-led organisations in Europe, and wider reports by European and international organisations, it highlights the multiple roles of CSOs, the growing risks they face, and the measures needed to sustain them as central actors in defending democracy and EU values.

1. The Role of Lesbian Organising in the EU

LBQ-led and LBQ-focused civil society organisations (henceforth “lesbian organisations”) are fundamental for a diverse, open and democratic society. They perform multiple, interconnected functions that are essential both for their communities and beyond.

Civil society in general is key in offering mental health support, create cultural spaces of belonging, deliver community safety nets, and mobilise in moments of crisis³. As demonstrated by EL*C ongoing capacity assessments of its membership, because of their focus on an underrepresented and de-prioritised community, lesbian organisations are more often obliged to intervene where public systems fail and provide key services and filling gaps to under-resourced communities⁴. At the same time, the crucial CSO's role of monitoring compliance with fundamental rights and the rule of law, challenging

² European Commission, Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32023H2836&utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ FRA (2022) FRA – Protecting Civic Space in the EU – Key Findings and FRA Opinions https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-protecting-civic-space-key-findings_en.pdf

⁴ EL*C (2023) and (2024) Capacity Assessment Reports of EL*C members (not published, available upon request)

discrimination, and countering disinformation⁵ is especially important for LBQ communities. Lesbian organisations amplify the voices of LBQ women and people most at risk of exclusion thus ensuring that democratic participation is not reserved for the powerful but extends to those systematically silenced.

Lesbian organisations are also central actors in broader gender equality, LGBTI rights, democracy, and human rights movements, where they bring unique perspectives shaped by the intersection of sexism, misogyny, and LGBTI-phobia. Their contribution strengthens coalition work, enriches policy debates, and ensures that the voices of the most marginalised are heard.

Financial imbalance is a key element, especially within system that favour corporations, billionaires and well-funded anti-gender and anti-rights movements. Despite operating with extremely limited resources as most LBQ organisations in Europe work with budgets under €5,000 and no paid staff⁶, they fill critical gaps left by state and mainstream institutions. They make visible communities that are otherwise erased, while advocating for systemic change to ensure that gender equality and LGBTIQ rights are addressed together. Networks such as EL*C amplify this impact by collecting evidence, documenting lived realities, and connecting grassroots voices to policymaking at EU and international levels⁷.

2. Challenges and Risks Facing Lesbian Civil Society

As demonstrated by data collected in the EL*C Observatory on Lesbophobia⁸, since 2019, lesbian organisations face a distinct set of risks that go beyond those affecting civil society more broadly. These challenges are structural, political, and financial, and they interact in ways that systematically undermine the survival and impact of LBQ civil society.

First, lesbophobia itself constitutes a structural barrier. The Observatory documents how lesbophobia operates as an intersection of misogyny and social stigma linked with non-

⁵ OECD (2021), OECD – The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space

https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/support-materials/2022/12/the-protection-and-promotion-of-civic-space_c8a8caac/Civic%20Space%20Highlights-4a_ENG_final.pdf

⁶ EL*C (2023) and (2024) Capacity Assessment Reports of EL*C members (not published, available upon request)

⁷ EL*C reports and research are available here: <https://lesbiangenius.org/publications/>

⁸ EL*C reports on the activity of the Observatory on lesbophobia and hate crime, hate speech and discrimination against lesbians are available here: https://lesbiangenius.org/wp-content/uploads/2024-Observatory_final-report.pdf <https://lesbiangenius.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-Report-on-lesbophobia.pdf> <https://lesbiangenius.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Observatory-Lesbophobia-2019-2022.pdf>

conforming sexual orientation/gender expression: LBQ women, and people perceived as such, are punished both for their sexuality, for transgressing gender norms and are subject to forms of violence reserved to women. This translates into hostile environments where LBQ activists are subjected to disinformation, harassment, and physical attacks simply for being visible in public life. In 2023, more than 70% of cases of violence documented by the EL*C Observatory targeted publicly visible lesbians, including activists, with online hate spilling over into offline intimidation and assault⁹.

Second, lesbian organisations are targeted by coordinated political campaigns, particularly in a political environment that portrays gender equality as a societal threat and LGBTIQ identities as “ideologies.”. The 2024 Observatory highlights how “anti-LGBTI propaganda” laws and campaigns against inclusive education create hostile contexts where LBQ groups are branded as a threat to children or families. In Bulgaria and Hungary, legislation has been introduced that restricts freedom of assembly and expression, while similar legislations are discussed in other countries¹⁰. It is not a chance that attacks are often perpetrated during Pride, around political events and often met with inactions by public authorities.

Third, financial precarity is chronic. As mentioned above, ELC’s capacity assessments confirm that most LBQ organisations operate without paid staff, with budgets under €5,000. Recent event have shown how this leaves them unable to absorb shocks such as sudden defunding motivated by political reasons. As documented in an open letter to the Commission, signed by numerous European networks, “Amid increasing pressure on international funding for civil society — including the reintroduction of the Global Gag Rule and cuts to US-based funding streams such as USAID — many European NGOs, particularly those working on gender equality, women’s rights, LGBTIQ rights, and marginalised communities, are facing severe financial strain¹¹.

These defunding moves, compounded by national-level cuts in countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, have hit LBQ groups particularly hard¹². Adding to this that while EU funding has provided, thanks to the CERV programme, unprecedented resources for the lesbian movement, success rates remain extremely low for the equality and gender-based

⁹ <https://lesbiangenius.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-Report-on-lesbophobia.pdf>

¹⁰ EL*C (2024), Observatory on lesbophobia and hate crime, hate speech and discrimination against lesbians: https://lesbiangenius.org/wp-content/uploads/2024-Observatory_final-report.pdf

¹¹ <https://lesbiangenius.org/open-letter-to-the-european-commission-the-future-of-eu-funding-and-support-for-civil-society-organisations/>

¹² <https://lesbiangenius.org/eu-and-us-attacks-against-civil-society-multiply/>

violence strands, and co-funding requirements as well as burdensome administration constitute major barriers to access, especially for small and grassroots organisations that constitute the majority of the movement.¹³

Finally, invisibility in policymaking compounds these risks. LBQ organisations are often dismissed as “too niche” to be included in consultations, or their concerns are assumed to be represented by broader women’s or LGBTIQ organisations. As a result, structural issues (such as underreporting of violence against lesbians, or the specific barriers faced by LBQ women in accessing healthcare and family rights) remain absent from national and EU frameworks and LBQ women tend to “fall between the cracks” with their needs not fully addressed in equality policies and legislations.

a. Increasing the LBQ participation in public policies

Mechanisms for CSO participation exist in most Member States and at EU level, but they remain uneven, inconsistent, and often tokenistic.

At national, European and international level, lesbian organisations are frequently excluded from consultations, either because they are considered too “niche” or because policymakers assume their concerns are already represented by broader women’s or LGBTIQ organisations. Instead, this erasure means that specific challenges are often systematically overlooked.

At national level, undercapacity is also at the root of this exclusion. Most LBQ organisations operate without staff and with minimal budgets, which makes it difficult to prepare, attend, or follow up on consultation processes¹⁴. Even when they are invited, their ability to participate consistently and meaningfully is undermined by resource constraints. As a result, institutional dialogues often fail to reach the grassroots realities they could otherwise bring to the table. To overcome this, participation must be backed by targeted financial and logistical support (for example, covering travel costs, translation, and staff time) so that lesbian organisations can contribute on an equal footing.

¹³ In 2021-2022, the equality strand had the lowest success rate of 15% (only 116 applications were funded out of 784) while the Daphne programme (dedicated to fight gender-based violence) has a success rate of 26% (40 applications funded out of 154). Equality and Rights strand and Daphne (combating GBV) strand represent respectively 18% and 14% of the overall CERV budget (1,55 billions). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9a46813a-86e1-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹⁴ EL*C (2023) and (2024) Capacity Assessment Reports of EL*C members (not published, available upon request)

At EU level, consultations and dialogue spaces provide more opportunities, but access remains unequal. EL*C has worked extensively to bring the voices of women of the LGBTI community to the table, especially in shaping policies on LGBTI rights. Yet more is needed to ensure presence in gender equality processes and to guarantee LBQ women are named as part of the target groups. LBQ organisations should also be supported to take part in broader processes such as the Rule of Law and the Charter monitoring mechanisms, where their perspectives are currently missing. Their inclusion can be guaranteed through dedicated invitations, quotas for under-represented groups, and systematic recognition of LBQ organisations as distinct stakeholders rather than being subsumed into generic “women’s” or “LGBTI” categories.

Finally, exclusion is often justified by the lack of data or information concerning the specific realities faced by women of the LGBTI community. EU research bodies such as FRA and EIGE must prioritise dedicated research on this population, so that their realities are visible and integrated into policy frameworks. Without data, LBQ-specific barriers remain invisible and unaddressed. An operative way forward would be to mandate disaggregated data collection in all EU research exercises and establish partnerships with LBQ organisations to design and validate methodologies.

b. Protecting LBQ Human Rights Defenders

As documented in the EL*C Observatory as well as in other EL*C research and reports¹⁵, protection frameworks for civil society at the national level remain fragmented and often inadequate. Public authorities are frequently unwilling to defend minorities when they are attacked and are sometime at the origins of attacks. Hate crime legislation is inconsistent across Member States, and political violence targeting activists is rarely recognised as a specific form of gender-based violence.

To overcome these gaps, national authorities must guarantee safe and non-discriminatory access to justice for LBQ activists, ensure that attacks against them are recorded and prosecuted as hate crimes or political violence, and explicitly recognise lesbophobia as a form of gender-based violence. Strengthening the protection role of the police and judiciary is crucial and it requires targeted training to identify and respond effectively to lesbophobic

¹⁵ See in particular EL*C (2024) Comprehensive review of the implementation of CM/REC (2010)5 of the CoE on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity <https://lesbiangeni.us.org/wp-content/uploads/Comprehensive-review-ELC-report.pdf> and EL*C (2023) Lesbianising the Istanbul convention: Research on the implementation of the Convention to protect LBT women <https://lesbiangeni.us.org/lesbian-analysis-of-the-istanbul-convention/>

and politically motivated violence. In addition, States should establish safe reporting channels for activists facing harassment and provide safeguards against retaliation, so that reporting becomes both possible and effective.

At the European level, existing protection is tied almost exclusively to funding, and therefore fails to provide timely support in emergency situations, while political responses remain often limited, especially when actions by Member States authorities are involved¹⁶. To address these shortcomings, the EU should establish a dedicated protection mechanism for human rights defenders inside the Union, modelled on existing external action tools, and complemented by rapid-response funding that organisations can access without heavy bureaucracy when facing immediate threats.

Beyond financial support, EU institutions must also actively monitor and denounce smear campaigns and political attacks against equality defenders, ensuring accountability from Member States. Protection must extend to the digital sphere, with anti-doxxing and digital security measures mainstreamed into EU programmes. Finally, EU fundamental rights monitoring tools, such as the Rule of Law and Charter reports, should explicitly track threats to LBQ activists and organisations, making them visible in the Union's own assessment of democratic health.

c. Investing in LBQ organising

Funding remains the structural challenge that underpins all others. At national level, support for civil society is usually not stable, politically dependent, and often excludes marginalised communities. In hostile environments, authorities not only fail to provide funding but may actively withhold it or create administrative hurdles as a form of intimidation. Even where funding exists, it is rarely operational or long-term, forcing organisations to work on a project-to-project basis without stability.

At the European level, resources are insufficient compared to demand. Success rates under key programmes such as CERV remain extremely low, while co-funding requirements and heavy reporting obligations create additional barriers that make access nearly impossible for smaller organisations with no staff or reserves. As a consequence, EU funds remain largely inaccessible directly by grassroots organization representing marginalized

¹⁶ See for example the reactions to Budapest pride ban by Hungarian authorities: <https://lesbiangenius.org/budapest-pride-could-have-been-legal-and-safe-the-european-commission-chose-otherwise/>

communities. Lesbian organisations are a clear example of this structural exclusion. According to EL*C's assessments¹⁷, 68% have no paid staff and 86% lack multi-year funding. Only 18% accessed some form of EU funding in 2023–24. The consequences are severe: without predictable resources, organisations cannot build sustainable structures, retain staff, or plan long-term strategies. This undercapacity also limits their ability to participate in consultations, respond to attacks, or contribute to monitoring processes — further compounding their invisibility.

It is also deeply concerning that political actors in the European Parliament are increasingly attacking EU funding when it is used to support advocacy and watchdog activities¹⁸. Such narratives aim to delegitimise civil society, even though these roles are essential to prevent public discourse and policymaking from being shaped exclusively by corporations, billionaires, and ultra-conservative movements¹⁹. This is why it is particularly positive that the new Agora EU programme incorporates the current CERV funding, and it is crucial that the planned doubling of resources is confirmed in practice. Equally important is that the list of eligible activities under the new CERV+ strand explicitly includes watchdog functions and awareness-raising — including advocacy directed towards EU institutions. These activities are not optional add-ons but fundamental to ensuring that civil society can fulfil its role as a democratic counterweight and safeguard against shrinking civic space

One of the few positive practices to emerge in recent years within CERV funding mechanisms has been the use of re-granting schemes. Since 2023, ELC has redistributed around €3 million to grassroots organisations across Europe, achieving excellent results in terms of resilience, visibility, and sustainability. The effectiveness of these schemes depends on the choice of intermediaries: they must be community-based and genuinely connected to local and grassroots movements, as this is the only way to ensure that EU resources reach those most excluded from traditional funding mechanisms.

Community networks such as ELC have shown that funds can be redistributed efficiently, transparently, and with significant impact. This approach should not only be maintained but expanded in future funding mechanisms under the next Multiannual Financial Framework,

¹⁷ EL*C (2023) and (2024) Capacity Assessment Reports of EL*C members (not published, available upon request)

¹⁸ <https://lesbiangenius.org/eu-and-us-attacks-against-civil-society-multiply/>

¹⁹ <https://lesbiangenius.org/open-letter-to-the-european-commission-the-future-of-eu-funding-and-support-for-civil-society-organisations/>

with a clear commitment to prioritising intermediaries rooted in and accountable to the communities they serve.

Conclusion

Lesbian organisations are indispensable actors in Europe’s civic space, yet they remain underfunded, under-protected, and systematically excluded from decision-making. The evidence gathered through EL*C research, data collection and capacity assessments of its members shows that lesbophobia operates as a distinct and compounding barrier, exposing activists and communities to political attacks, financial precarity, and systemic invisibility. At the same time, lesbian civil society continues to provide vital services, document realities otherwise erased, and safeguard democratic values in increasingly hostile environments. It has a key role both in gender equality struggles as well as in the advancement of LGBTIQ rights and broader democracy and human rights movements.

The forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy is therefore a crucial opportunity to address these structural inequalities. It must create the conditions for LBQ organisations to participate meaningfully in policy processes, to be effectively protected when under threat, and to access sustainable funding that allows them to survive and grow. The recommendations below set out concrete measures for the Strategy to ensure that democracy in Europe is resilient, inclusive, and reflective of all its communities.

Recommendations

1. Participation

- Ensure the explicit inclusion of LBQ organisations in consultations at national and EU level, recognising them as distinct stakeholders rather than subsuming them under generic “LGBTI” or “women’s” categories.
- Provide targeted financial and logistical support (e.g. staff time, travel, translation, accessibility) so underfunded LBQ organisations can meaningfully engage in dialogues and monitoring processes.
- Establish structured consultation cycles with feedback loops to avoid tokenism and guarantee that LBQ input shapes policy outcomes.
- Mandate disaggregated data collection and ensure that EU research bodies (such as FRA, EIGE, Eurostat) systematically include LBQ women in their analysis, in partnership with community organisations.

2. Protection

- Encourage Member States to recognise lesbophobia as a form of gender-based and political violence and ensure that hate crimes against LBQ activists are properly recorded, investigated, and prosecuted.
- Establish an EU protection mechanism for human rights defenders inside the Union, modelled on external action tools, with rapid-response funding accessible without heavy bureaucracy.
- Extend protection to the digital sphere by mainstreaming anti-doxing and digital security measures and by ensuring that EU monitoring tools (Rule of Law, Charter reports) explicitly track threats to LBQ activists.

3. Funding

- Safeguard and expand funding for advocacy, watchdog, and awareness-raising activities, explicitly recognising them as core democratic functions, and protect them against political attacks.
- Confirm the doubling of resources under the Agora EU programme, ensuring that the new CERV+ strand provides stable, multi-year, and operational support alongside project-based funding.
- Address structural barriers by lowering co-funding requirements and simplifying reporting obligations to make EU funding accessible to grassroots LBQ organisations.
- Scale up re-granting schemes through intermediaries that are community-based, trusted, and connected to local realities, ensuring that EU funds reach those most excluded from traditional mechanisms.

ABOUT EL*C

The EL*C - EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community is a non-governmental organisation, representing over 200 lesbian organisations in Europe and Central Asia. It focuses on uplifting the voices of lesbian, queer, bi women (both cis and trans) and non-binary people perceived or socialised as LBQ women.

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