

Protection of LGBT Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Age

Regional Focus: Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA)

The submitting organization is [ECOM](#) - Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity is an international non-governmental association based in Tallinn, Estonia. We are a membership association open to non-profit organizations and activists working in the field of rights and health of LGBT communities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This submission responds OHCHR call for inputs within HRC Resolution 58/23 and focuses on LGBT human rights defenders (HRDs) in the EECA region¹.
- LGBT HRDs face an acute convergence of threats: Russian-model repressive legislation, state-sponsored digital surveillance, online entrapment, coordinated harassment, and transnational repression targeting exiled activists.
- Civic space across EECA as narrowed, obstructed, repressive, or closed in every country of focus not one offers a fully open environment.² The situation has deteriorated sharply in 2024–2025, with cascading legislative attacks directly targeting LGBT defenders and the digital spaces in which they organize. The report on shrinking civic space in the EECA confirms self-censorship by civil society organizations with organizations closing social media channels, removing website content, modifying public communications, and shifting entirely to closed or offline formats in response to surveillance risks and propaganda law exposure.³
- This has a direct epistemic consequence: the evidence base on which OHCHR, UN Treaty Bodies, and international advocacy rely is being systematically degraded. Organizations cannot safely document violations if documentation itself is a liability. Victims cannot report to monitoring systems if those systems are surveilled. Organizational shutdowns and increasing surveillance mean that the actual scale of violations is substantially greater than any monitoring system can capture.
- These inputs used information from ECOM's 2025 report on human rights violations against LGBT people, which has not yet been published and is scheduled for release on April 2, 2026; the full report is attached to this submission as an annex.

2. LEGAL AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

¹ Call for Inputs – Protection of human rights defenders in the digital age

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-protection-human-rights-defenders-digital-age>

² Shrinking Civic Space and Marginalised Communities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2026.

<https://risedecriminalize.org/shrinking-civic-space-eeca-report/>

³ IBID

2.1 The Russia-Model Legislation Cascade

- A defining feature of the current period is the systematic replication of repressive Russian legal frameworks across the EECA region. Three overlapping legislative mechanisms are in force or being introduced simultaneously, creating a legal architecture that directly targets LGBT HRDs' digital activities. Documented transmission chains run these laws: (a) "Anti-LGBT propaganda" laws criminalizing information about LGBT lives, particularly online; (b) "foreign agents" laws requiring NGO registration as entities serving foreign interests; (c) laws equating LGBT visibility with pornography or harm to children.
- Anti LGBT propaganda laws enacted or proposed in seven countries across Europe and Central Asia, with foreign agent laws adopted in multiple EECA states.⁴
- Digital content restrictions on HRDs coupled with financial, administrative pressure and criminal liability forces organizations to self-censor or shut down entirely.

2.2 Criminalization of Digital Advocacy

- In Belarus, since March 2024, any public mention of LGBT people including online is equated with pornography under Ministry of Culture Decree No. 24 (Article 343 Criminal Code: up to 10 years).⁵ On 13 March 2026 Belarus' lower house of parliament approved a law introducing penalties for so-called "LGBT propaganda," equating same-sex relationships and gender transition with criminal acts like pedophilia and enabling broad, arbitrary enforcement. The move comes amid increasing repression of LGBT people and initiatives, including fines, arrests, and the designation of community resources in social media as "extremist."⁶
- Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain states where consensual same-sex relations are explicitly criminalized, making any digital evidence of relationships or advocacy criminal evidence in itself.

3. COUNTRY PROFILES:

Armenia

- Armenia parliamentary elections scheduled for June 7, 2026 represent a critical juncture and identifies hate speech including SOGI-based hate as a key domestic electoral risk. Opposition forces and Russian-linked actors have accused PM Pashinyan of pushing "an LGBTQ agenda" and waging "a war against Christianity".

⁴ ILGA-Europe, Annual Review 2025: Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia (Brussels: ILGA-Europe, 2025). <https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/annual-review-2025/>

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Belarus Calls LGBT Lives 'Pornography'," April 12, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/12/belarus-calls-lgbt-lives-pornography>

⁶ Adoption of Anti-LGBT law <https://tbelarus.com/en/post/lgbt-propaganda-ban-approved-in-the-second-reading>

- DFRLab documented Kremlin-linked campaigns targeting Armenia with 'Ukrainization' narratives; Matryoshka bot network circulating AI-generated videos against the government in which anti-LGBT+ framing is embedded; EU has allocated €15 million to counter these threats.⁷
- Armenia has no comprehensive anti-discrimination law with SOGI protections; content in Armenian receives minimal platform moderation; LGBT+ HRDs face digital environments saturated with targeted harassment that carries no legal consequences for perpetrators.⁸

Azerbaijan

- Confirmed client of NSO Group's Pegasus spyware exploit granting complete access to calls, messages, photographs, and device location creating grounds for blackmail and forced outing of LGBT HRDs.⁹
- Azerbaijani regime documented using coordinated inauthentic Facebook profiles to attack exiled journalists; state-linked troll networks expose identities of LGBT defenders to harm.¹⁰

Georgia

- Two interlinked laws passed in 2024: Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (28 May 2024) and Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors (17 September 2024), a package of 19 anti-LGBT measures.
- Digital implications: bans LGBT content in education, media, and arts; requires organizations to open digital communications to government inspection; criminalizes online speech about gender recognition or same-sex partnerships.
- 2026 individual HRDs (not just organizations) face up to five years' imprisonment, rendering individual digital activist work and any criticism of government illegal.¹¹

Kazakhstan

- In Kazakhstan, anti-LGBTI activists and pro-natalist groups have disrupted LGBTI gatherings and engaged in harassment campaigns targeting LGBT human rights defenders on social media and in public spaces, while police have responded by detaining LGBTI activists rather than the perpetrators, with victims subjected to smear campaigns using AI-

⁷ Kremlin-origin campaigns target Armenia with 'Ukrainization' narrative

<https://dfrlab.org/2025/12/23/kremlin-originated-campaigns-target-armenia-with-ukrainization-narrative/>

⁸ Masiumova, Nadira. National Report on Violations of the Rights of LGBT People in Armenia, 2024. ECOM, Tallinn, 2025 <https://ecom.ngo/en/library/national-report-armenia-2024/>

⁹ Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, "The Pegasus Project," July 2021; Citizen Lab, "Hide and Seek: Tracking NSO Group's Pegasus Spyware to Operations in 45 Countries," Research Report No. 113 (Toronto: Citizen Lab, 2018). <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/09/hidden-and-peek-tracking-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware-to-operations-in-45-countries/>

¹⁰ 'Facebook isn't interested in countries like ours': Azerbaijan troll network returns months after ban

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/13/facebook-azerbaijan-ilham-aliyev>

¹¹ Georgia: New laws threaten to paralyze independent media <https://www.mfrr.eu/the-international-press-institute-ipi-today-strongly-condemns-the-georgian-parliaments-adoption-of-a-sweeping-new-legislative-package-that-criminalises-foreign-funding-and-cooperation-warn/>

generated content to mock and degrade them, creating an unsafe environment despite authorities' failure to provide protection from vigilantism and aggression.¹²

- “Anti-LGBT propaganda” law passed by Mazhilis on 12 November 2025, signed by President in December 2025; grants authorities power to block websites without court oversight.^{13,14}
- Confirmed Pegasus client: Amnesty International documented Kazakh activists' devices infected, noting those notified were “likely only a fraction” of those targeted.¹⁵

Kyrgyzstan

- Adopted both a “foreign representatives” law and an “Anti-LGBT propaganda” law in 2024; ECOM monitoring documented many NGOs shutting down rather than face criminal liability.¹⁶
- Coordinated digital harassment and surveillance, including the public disclosure of personal data of LGBT rights activists in videos allegedly created by law enforcement using government databases, while social media “troll factories” using fake accounts spread false information to discredit civil society activists.
- In April 2021, “Kyrgyz Indigo’s staff members personal information including names, photographs, and SOGI was disclosed publicly in a video allegedly created by law enforcement and published on Youtube, putting employees at serious risk¹⁷.

Tajikistan

- Hundreds of civil society organizations forced to 'voluntarily' suspend activities by law enforcement and security agencies; Tajikistan ranks among the most prolific state practitioners of transnational repression globally.
- Digital contact between exiled defenders and family members in Tajikistan provides both surveillance opportunities and coercion-by-proxy leverage points — a documented transnational repression technique.¹⁸
- In Tajikistan, laws against pornography and “immorality” are vaguely defined and often used by authorities to detain, harass, or blackmail people suspected of being LGBT, as evidence they pictures shared between people.

¹² Kazakhstan: Authorities in Kazakhstan must ensure protection of LGBTI rights defenders facing harassment from anti-LGBTI activists <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/kazakhstan-authorities-kazakhstan-must-ensure-protection-lgbti-rights-defenders>

¹³ OHCHR, "Kazakhstan: Proposed LGBT Propaganda Law Risks Institutionalising Discrimination, Say UN Experts," November 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/11/kazakhstan-proposed-lgbt-propaganda-law-risks-institutionalising>

¹⁴ ECOM, "ECOM Statement on the Draft Law on So-Called 'LGBT Propaganda' in Kazakhstan," December 18, 2025. <https://ecom.ngo/en/news/ecom-statement-lgbt-propaganda-law-kazakhstan/>

¹⁵ Amnesty International, "'Unlawful Intrusion:' Kazakh Activists' Mobile Devices Infected with Pegasus Spyware," December 9, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-activists-pegasus-spyware-intrusion/31601709.html>

¹⁶ ECOM, Regional Report on Violations of the Human Rights of LGBT People in the Countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2024 (Tallinn: ECOM, 2025). <https://ecom.ngo/en/library/regional-report-2024/>

¹⁷ Kyrgyzstan: surveillance, marginalisation and targeting of LGBT defenders (joint communication) <https://srdefenders.org/kyrgyzstan-surveillance-marginalisation-and-targeting-of-lgbt-defenders-joint-communication/>

¹⁸ Citizen Lab, Submission to OHCHR on "Protecting Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Age," March 2026. <https://citizenlab.ca/submission-to-the-ohchr-on-protecting-human-rights-defenders-in-the-digital-age/>

Uzbekistan

- Same-sex relations criminalized under the criminal code Article 120 digital evidence (messaging content, photographs, social media) routinely used in prosecutions.
- Uzbekistan 2025: ruling party leader announced drafting of an Anti-LGBT propaganda law, deepening already impossible conditions for any form of digital advocacy.

4. DIGITAL THREATS: METHODS AND TOOLS

4.1 State Surveillance and Commercial Spyware

- Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in the list of NSO Pegasus clients based on the data leaked¹⁹. Pegasus is a zero-click exploit providing complete, covert access to calls, messages, location, and camera compromising even encrypted communications.²⁰
- For LGBT HRDs specifically: SOGI-sensitive private communications become blackmail material; contact networks are mapped for simultaneous targeting; chilling effect induces self-censorship and withdrawal from advocacy.

4.2 Dating Application Entrapment: Platform Architecture as a Persecution Tool

- A recurring and documented pattern across EECA is the deliberate use of digital dating platforms including Grindr, Hornet, and local equivalents by both state and non-state actors to identify, target, and entrap LGBT+ persons. In 2025, ECOM documented 20 cases of so-called "fake date" operations across the region, concentrated in Kyrgyzstan (16.7% of country cases) and Tajikistan (12.8%).²¹
- Grindr and Hornet are the primary platforms through which LGBT people in EECA form community and make contact, precisely because public LGBT spaces are absent or unsafe. This structural dependency is systematically exploited by state and criminal actors.
- In Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, police officers have been documented creating fake profiles on Grindr and Hornet, uploading fabricated photographs, and arranging dates with users. Upon meeting, officers threaten to expose users' sexual orientation to family members unless payment is made of sums documented between USD 50 and USD 5000. Victims cannot report this to police because doing so risks self-incrimination.²²

¹⁹ Revealed: leak uncovers global abuse of cyber-surveillance weapon

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/revealed-leak-uncovers-global-abuse-of-cyber-surveillance-weapon-nso-group-pegasus>

²⁰ Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, "The Pegasus Project," July 2021; Citizen Lab, "Hide and Seek: Tracking NSO Group's Pegasus Spyware to Operations in 45 Countries," Research Report No. 113 (Toronto: Citizen Lab, 2018). <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/09/hidden-and-peek-tracking-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware-to-operations-in-45-countries/>

²¹ Kovtun, Oksana. Between Law and Reality: Report on Human Rights Violations against LGBT People in EECA. 2026. ECOM. <https://ecom.ngo/en/library/lgbt-rights-violations-report-eeca-2025/>

²² The Diplomat, "Life in the Closet: The LGBT Community in Central Asia," January 30, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/life-in-the-closet-the-lgbt-community-in-central-asia/>

- In an Uzbekistan national report, ECOM documented that police officers arrest LGBT people using dating apps under Article 120 of the Criminal Code and offered to “close criminal cases in exchange for information about other LGBT people and LGBT activists.”²³
- Neither Grindr nor Hornet has published country-specific safety guidance for EECA users, despite years of documented law enforcement use of these platforms as entrapment tools.

4.3 Social Media Targeting, Troll Operations, Non-Consensual Outing, and Doxxing

- Privacy violations outing or threatened outing of SOGI constitute the most consistently documented category across years both reflecting the unique leverage that exposure of sexual orientation or gender identity holds in societies where criminalization, family violence, and employment discrimination are predictable consequences of disclosure.
- In 2024, ECOM documented approximately 125 outing or threatened outing cases (23% of all cases). In 2025, 113 cases were recorded (17.5%). The stability of this category across both years confirms it as the foundational mechanism of digital persecution: it is both the most common standalone violation and the trigger that initiates chains of compounding violations.
- In Georgia DFRLab documented far-right group Alt-Info coordinating physical attacks on Tbilisi Pride via Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok simultaneously. The coordinating video calling followers to physically suppress Pride was published across multiple anonymous Facebook pages and a Telegram group of 2,000+ members. Facebook failed to remove the content before violence occurred. Russian state media retroactively validated the attack, embedding it in a transnational anti-LGBT narrative.²⁴
- State-adjacent troll operations targeting LGBT HRDs by name usually operates in local languages in which no major platform employs reviewers with adequate proficiency.
- Forced outing on social media - publishing SOGI-revealing photographs, Grindr screenshots, or private WhatsApp content to public Facebook or Telegram channels is documented across Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. The consequences cascade: job loss, family violence, eviction, and in criminalizing jurisdictions, arrest. Victims who report outing content to platforms report near-universal non-removal.

4.4 Legal Weaponization of Digital Content

- Social media posts, website content, messaging, and photographs used as primary evidence in administrative and criminal proceedings; propaganda legislation in Kazakhstan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus explicitly targets digital content.
- Foreign agents laws require disclosure of internal digital communications to authorities, eliminating confidential organizing; the combination of surveillance capacity, forced

²³ Masiumova, Nadira. National Report on Violations of the Rights of LGBT People in Uzbekistan, 2024. ECOM, Tallinn, 2025. <https://ecom.ngo/library/natsionaljnyy-otchet-uzbekistan-2024/>

²⁴ DFRLab (Atlantic Council), "Online Calls for Attacks against Georgia's LGBTQ Community Result in Offline Violence," Medium, July 2021. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/online-calls-for-attacks-against-georgias-lgbtq-community-result-in-offline-violence-b3fad0538d59>

disclosure, and propaganda laws places LGBT HRDs in legal jeopardy at every stage of digital activity.

- The ECOM 2025 SRHR Needs of LGBT Youth study shows that LGBT youth across EECA rely on digital platforms as their main source of health information, peer support, and community, due to unsafe or inaccessible formal services especially transgender, non-binary, and rural youth. This creates a double bind where “Anti-LGBT propaganda” laws, criminalize the very online spaces youth depend on, leaving them without safe alternatives.²⁵

4.5 Mass raids to the LGBT spaces with systematic digital evidence collection

- Authorities have conducted coordinated raids on LGBTQ+ spaces, including the Labyrinth LGBT club in Azerbaijan, as well as multiple LGBT venues in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2025, often resulting in their forced closure.
- These raids are frequently framed under allegations of drug distribution, which authorities use to legitimize shutting down LGBT spaces despite limited transparency or evidence.
- During such operations, law enforcement officers commonly record videos of detainees and the premises, later publishing this content on official or affiliated social media channels.
- The circulation of these videos fuels widespread online harassment and hate speech, further targeting LGBT individuals based on their SOGI.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For States

- Repeal or refrain from adopting “Anti-LGBT propaganda” laws, foreign agents laws targeting LGBT organizations, and content laws equating LGBT visibility with pornography or harmful content
- Impose moratoriums on purchase, export, and deployment of commercial spyware until human rights-compliant regulatory frameworks are established
- Treat SOGI data as sensitive data requiring heightened legal protection; prohibit law enforcement entrapment via digital platforms and dating applications
- Investigate and prosecute officials responsible for doxxing, outing, and publication of confiscated private materials

For Technology Companies

- US-EU Joint Guidance on Protecting HRDs Online (March 2024)²⁶ explicitly names LGBTI HRDs as disproportionately impacted. Companies must:

²⁵ Batyrgaliev, Uluk. Exploring the SRHR Needs, Barriers, and Perspectives of LGBTQI+ Youth in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia: Informing Inclusive Policy Development. ECOM, Tallinn, 2025. Available at: <https://ecom.ngo/en/library/srhr-needs-lgbtqi-youth-eeca/>.

²⁶ United States and European Union Release Joint Guidance for Online Platforms on Protecting Human Rights Defenders Online <https://2021-2025.state.gov/united-states-and-european-union-release-joint-guidance-for-online-platforms-on-protecting-human-rights-defenders-online>

- Publish transparent, disaggregated content moderation data by language and country with SOGI-specific breakdowns
- Invest in EECA-language moderation (Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek) to close the structural gap that enables troll operations
- Implement expedited 24-hour review pathways for coordinated hate mobilization ahead of announced events, audit dating platforms for law enforcement entrapment patterns
- Refuse government data requests targeting users by SOGI without human rights-compliant court oversight; remove content published by police-affiliated accounts from confiscated private materials

For the OHCHR and UN Mechanisms

- Name Anti-LGBT propaganda laws explicitly as a coordinated regional architecture of digital repression in the forthcoming report
- Develop specific guidance on the intersection of digital threats and SOGI-based persecution as a distinct risk profile for LGBT HRDs
- Call on dating apps to strengthen their practices and policies to ensure safer use, including better user verification, privacy protections, and rapid response to reports, in order to reduce the risk of these platforms being used to target and entrap LGBT people.
- Urge social media platforms to improve monitoring and review of hate speech in relation to SOGI and attacking LGBT HRDs.