



Research report – LGBTQ+ Advocacy in Europe

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Dr. Bastiaan Redert (bastiaan.redert@uantwerpen.be)

Faculty Social Sciences – Department Political Science
City Campus, M.282
Sint-Jacobsstraat 2-4
2000, Antwerpen
Belgium

1. Introduction

The equality and rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and other queer people are under pressure across Europe. Across various European countries, LGBTQ+ rights are scrutinized, attacked, or even annulled. As right-wing, conservative and populist parties gain parliamentary power, issues concerning gender, sexuality, and diversity and minority rights more generally, have become increasingly politicized. Previous scholarly work on contestation of LGBTQ+ rights among European Union member states highlights the politicization of LGBTQ+ topics and has been linked to the interrelated phenomena of threat perception (Ayoub, 2014), nationalism (Mole, 2011) and Euroscepticism (Slootmaeckers, 2020). Yet, academic research pays less attention to the effects that this contestation has on those organizations that advocate for LGBTQ+ equality on a daily basis.

This research report presents first findings of a large-scale research project on LGBTQ+ advocacy in Europe, led by Dr. Bastiaan Redert at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. The research project systematically analyses how LGBTQ+ organizations navigate increased contestation, and how this affects their advocacy in terms of its organization, strategies, collaboration and effectiveness. The project lasts between September 2024 and September 2031, and is financed through a Senior Postdoc research grant of the *Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (FWO – Grant nr. 1230725N) and the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (FNRS – Grant nr. 40024610).

The first section of this report explains how the researcher collected the data used. Next, it explains the methodology used for arriving at the results, and describes the organizations that have participated in the research. In the next section, key findings are presented following the logic of advocacy, addressing key questions: what issues do organizations advocate for; what strategies do they use; which other (political) actors do these organizations target in their advocacy efforts; with who do organizations collaborate; and lastly, to what extent are organizations influential?

In short, this report discusses the following main findings:

- **LGBTQ+ organizations remain active despite increasing contestation and hostility.** Organizations continue to advocate for LGBTQ+ equality even when facing opposition, polarization, disinformation, and direct hostility.
- **Contestation is particularly pronounced around gender identity, trans rights, and self-determination.** Other commonly contested issues include discrimination, hate crimes, legislative reform, and opposition to so-called “gender ideology.”
- **Organizations predominantly rely on outside advocacy strategies.** Social media campaigning, public communication, and engagement with the media and broader public are more common than insider strategies or litigation.
- **Insider strategies remain important but is often directed towards supportive political parties.** Organizations tend to engage most frequently with parties that already hold favorable positions on LGBTQ+ equality, although some also engage with less supportive parties.

- **Collaboration is widespread.** More than 85% of surveyed organizations report collaborating with other organizations on at least one of their selected policy issues, particularly with other national LGBTQ+ organizations.
- **Collaboration primarily involves political coordination rather than pooling organizational resources.** Joint political strategies and statements are common, whereas sharing staff, fundraising, supporter lists, or research is much less frequent.
- **Organizations perceive themselves as moderately effective.** They generally report greater effectiveness in raising awareness than in influencing public policy, with no clear difference in perceived effectiveness between controversial and uncontroversial issues.
- **Organizational resilience comes at a cost.** Social opposition, threats and violence, administrative hurdles, legal restrictions, and political exclusion are experienced by substantial shares of organizations.
- **Overall, the findings point to resilience under pressure.** LGBTQ+ organizations remain politically active and collaborative, but the report raises important questions about how sustained hostility affects their organizational capacity, strategies, resilience, and ability to influence policy.

The data used in this research report will further be analyzed, complemented with additional sources of data, and presented in academic publications. These publications will be freely available for participants of the research. For further questions about the research project, please contact Dr. Bastiaan Redert (bastiaan.redert@uantwerpen.be).

2. Data and methodology

The results presented in this research report are based on data collected through a survey instrument, fielded between 28 January and 18 May 2026. This fielding period was deliberately long to accommodate the limited resources of many organizations and allow sufficient time to schedule participation. The sampling frame covered nine countries, but the final survey sample included organizations from six countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain¹. We selected these countries to maximize context-level variation as well as the number of active interest organizations.

In order to map as many LGBTQ+ organizations across the countries as possible, multiple strategies were used:

- **Pride parade participation:** All organizations participating in national Pride parades were included.
- **European umbrella organizations:** Members of European umbrella organizations working on LGBTQ+ issues, inequality, discrimination, fundamental rights, or related issues were included.
- **EU consultations:** Organizations that had responded to at least one EU Have Your Say consultation on LGBTQ+ rights were included.

¹ Organizations from Denmark, Hungary, and Poland were also invited to participate in the survey, but did not complete the survey.

- **European registers/databases:** Organizations working on fundamental rights and justice and listed in the European Transparency Register or relevant NGO databases were included.
- **Snowball sampling:** Additional organizations identified through the websites or networks of sampled organizations were added.
- **Newsletters:** Organizations mentioned in newsletters of LGBTQ+ organizations as collected by Dr. Bastiaan Redert were included.

All mapped organizations were screened. Organizations that had ceased to exist or were not LGBTQ+ interest organizations (e.g., company networks, public authorities, apolitical organizations, sports clubs) were removed from the sample.

In total, 650 LGBTQ+ organizations across were invited to participate in the research. For each organization, either an advocacy specialist or the director was invited to participate. Over the fielding period 66 unique LGBTQ+ organizations completed the survey (response rate: 10.15%²). Even though the sample included organizations from Denmark, Hungary and Poland, no organizations from these countries completed the survey. Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of responses across countries. The following presented data is always based on organizations based in one of these six countries.

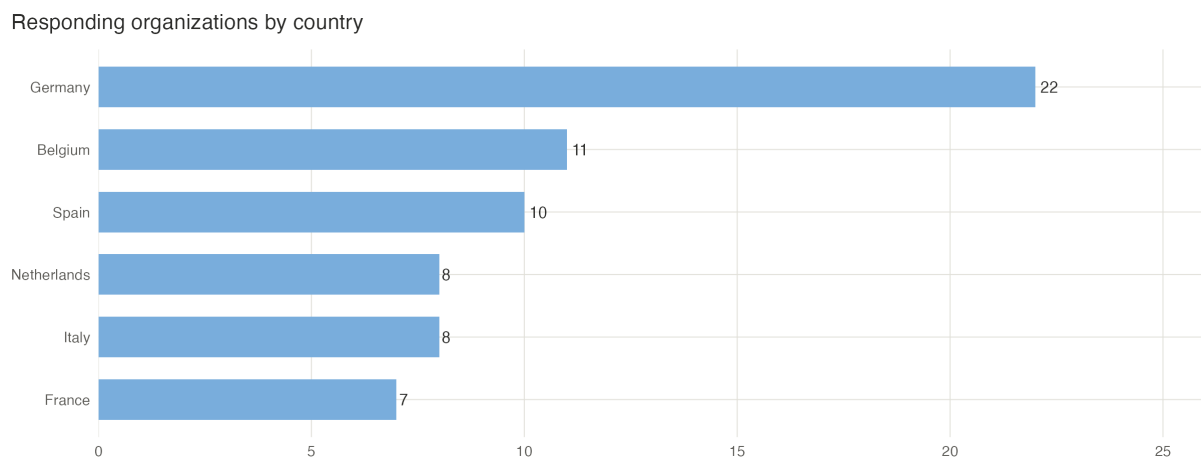


Figure 2.1

The organizations that completed the survey are diverse in terms of their organizational characteristics (also see Figure 2.2). First, most organizations (n = 37) have limited budgets up to 50.000 EUR. Only 13 organizations have budgets that exceed 500.000 EUR. Second, 62.1% of organizations in the dataset have formal paying members. Third, organizations represent varying constituencies. Although most organizations (n = 49) represent LGBTQ+ people in general, a large portion of organizations also indicate to focus on specific subcommunities, such as trans (n = 29), non-binary (n = 25) or intersex people (n=23). Third, next to representing LGBTQ+ people, some organizations also indicated to represent other social groups. This explicit intersectional approach to

² The response rate of 10.15% is consistent with other research on LGBTQ+ politics and interest organizations.

representation is most gauged towards migrants and refugees, youth, women and people living with disabilities.

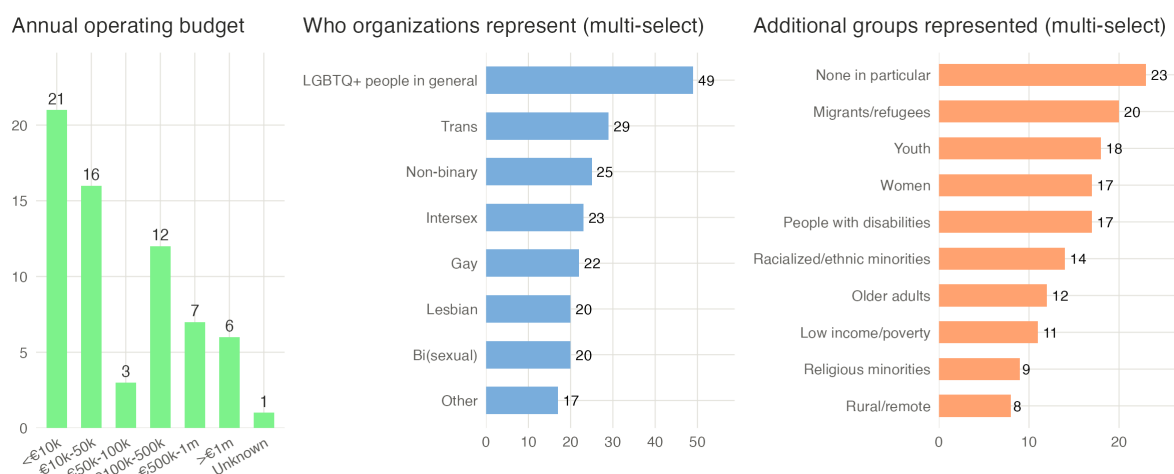


Figure 2.2

3. Results

The survey was structured in five key modules following the strategic choices LGBTQ+ organizations make in their advocacy efforts: 1) which issues they are active on; 2) which strategies they use; 3) which actor they target; 4) whether and with what other organizations they collaborate. The fifth module assessed to what extent organizations perceive their advocacy efforts as effective. The following section will discuss the key findings across each of the modules.

3.1. The issues organizations fight for

The first module asked respondents to give two examples of policy issues their organization worked on in the past 12 months. They indicated one controversial and one uncontroversial issue. The following questions always asked respondents to compare these issues based on the level of contestation their organization encountered. To gain insights in the common themes, a quantitative text analysis was carried out. Based on thematic coding of the translated issue descriptions given by the respondents, we can analyze the most common themes across countries. Figure 3.1 below highlights these common themes and divides them by controversial and uncontroversial issues³.

³ These themes were first roughly coded by hand, and later checked with a large-language model (OpenAI, Claude model Sonnet 5 – 17 August, 2026).

Themes mentioned in issue descriptions

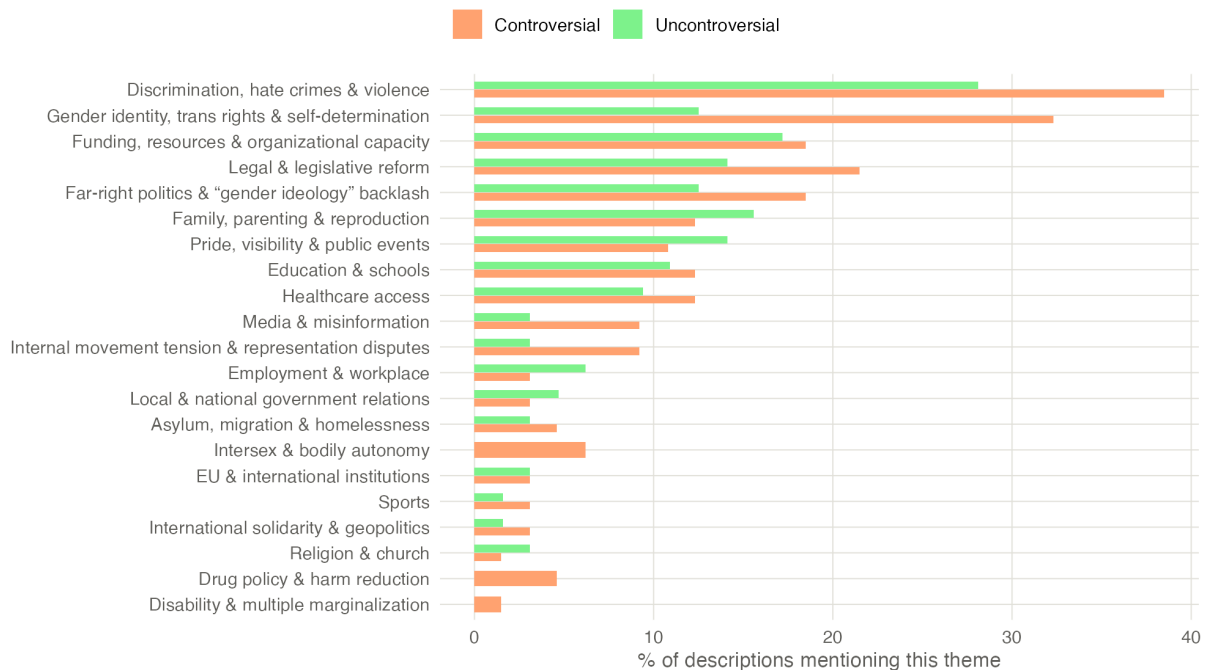


Figure 3.1

Rather unsurprisingly, yet importantly, we find that issues that mention gender identity, trans rights and self-determination are often mentioned as controversial. Other themes often mentioned as controversial are discrimination, hate crimes and violence; legal and legislative reform; and far-right politics and 'gender ideology' backlash. Themes that commonly recur under the uncontroversial issues are discrimination, hate crimes and violence; funding, resources and organizational capacity; family, parenting and reproduction; and pride, visibility and public events. Interestingly, we see that organizations tend to differ in their interpretation of controversy of issues. A large portion of organizations, for example, marked issues dealing with discrimination, hate-speech and violence as their uncontroversial issue. Likewise, funding, resources and organizational capacity has also often been mentioned as controversial issue, e.g. when governments decided to cut funding of organizations.

Next, the survey aimed to understand the issue characteristics further. First, we asked organizations to indicate to what extent they experienced opposition from different sources. Figure 3.2a below visualizes the main sources of opposition for both the controversial and uncontroversial issue. As one would expect, we found that the main sources of opposition are right-wing political parties and social media, followed by opposition from the general public and news media. Opposition from left-wing parties and other NGOs is low but not absent. Surprisingly, however, on average across organizations and countries, opposition seems to be relatively low (opposition from right-wing parties: 2.5 on a 5 point-scale). When dividing the data by country (Figure 3.2b), we do see notable differences. Organizations in the Netherlands and Belgium, for example, report low opposition across all sources, while German, French and Italian organizations report relatively higher levels of opposition from right-wing parties and social media. Spanish organizations report relatively high levels of opposition across all sources.

Opposition faced, by source

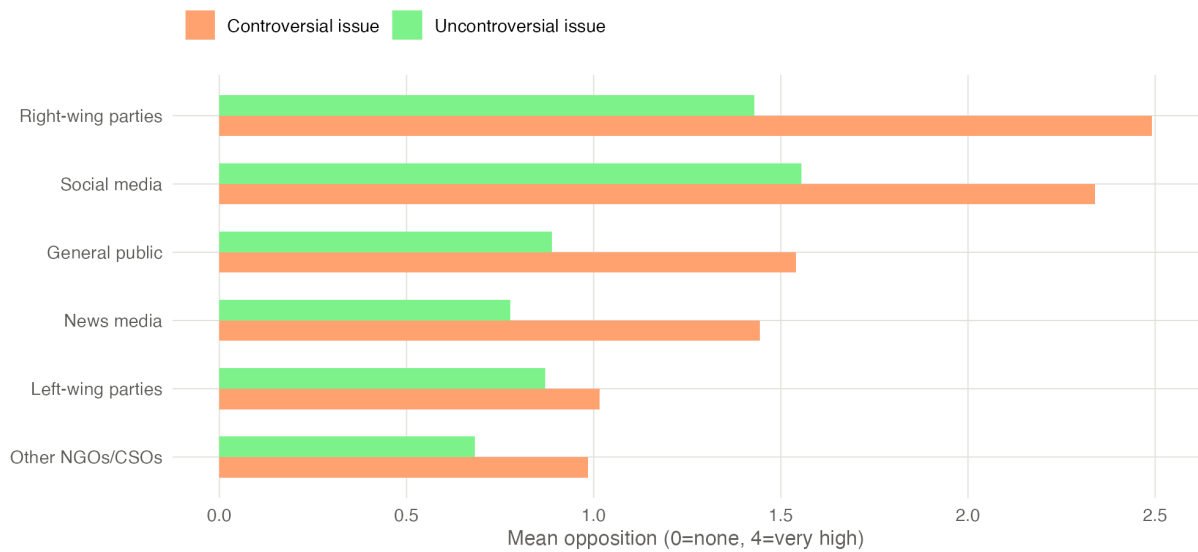


Figure 3.2a

Opposition faced, by source, by country

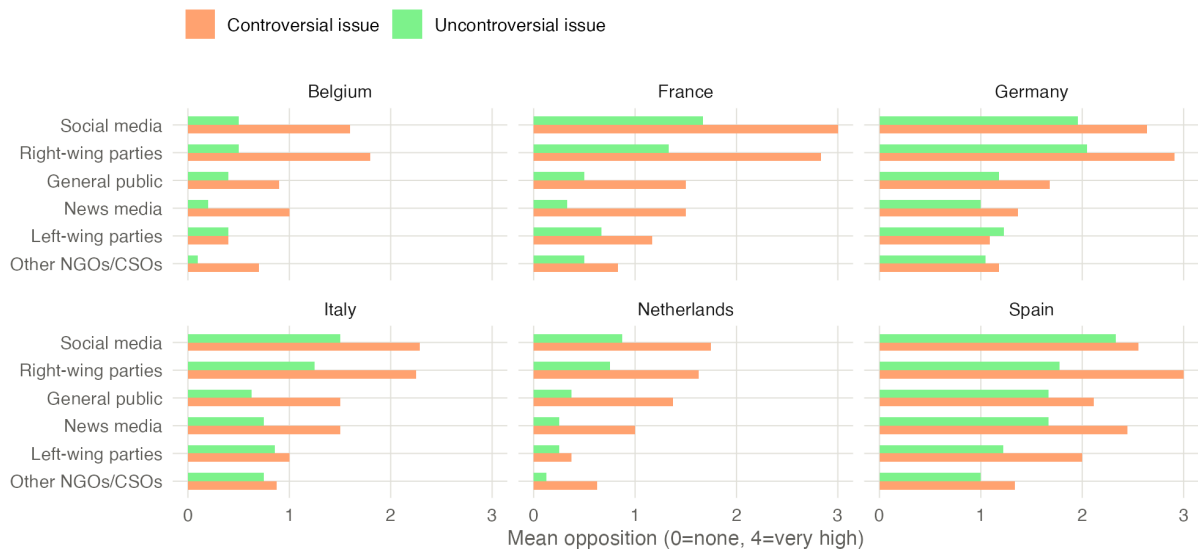


Figure 3.2b

Second, next to opposition, we asked respondents to indicate some other characteristics of the contestation climate surrounding each of the issues, such as the degree of disinformation around the issue, presence of media bias towards the issue, and lastly whether the debate around an issue was polarized (see Figure 3.3a). On average, across countries, we see that organizations indicated high levels of polarization (5.6 on a 7-point scale) and disinformation (5.4 on a 7-point scale), particularly for the controversial issues. Organizations experience media bias to a lesser extent. When splitting the data by country (Figure 3.3b), we particularly note that across all countries, controversial topics are characterized by high levels polarization. For some countries this is complemented with high levels of disinformation regarding the particular issues. This can

be partially explained by the fact that many organizations mentioned issues dealing with gender identity, trans rights and self-determination – an issue that is often met with extensive disinformation and scaremongering on social and news media. Particularly organizations from Spain, Italy, Germany and France report high levels of disinformation. Important to mention is that in all countries perceived disinformation, media bias and polarization is reported to be lower (or equal) for the uncontroversial issue and the controversial issue – yet never absent. This highlights that issues dealing with LGBTQ+ people are always, at least to some extent, met with contestation.

Contestation climate around each issue

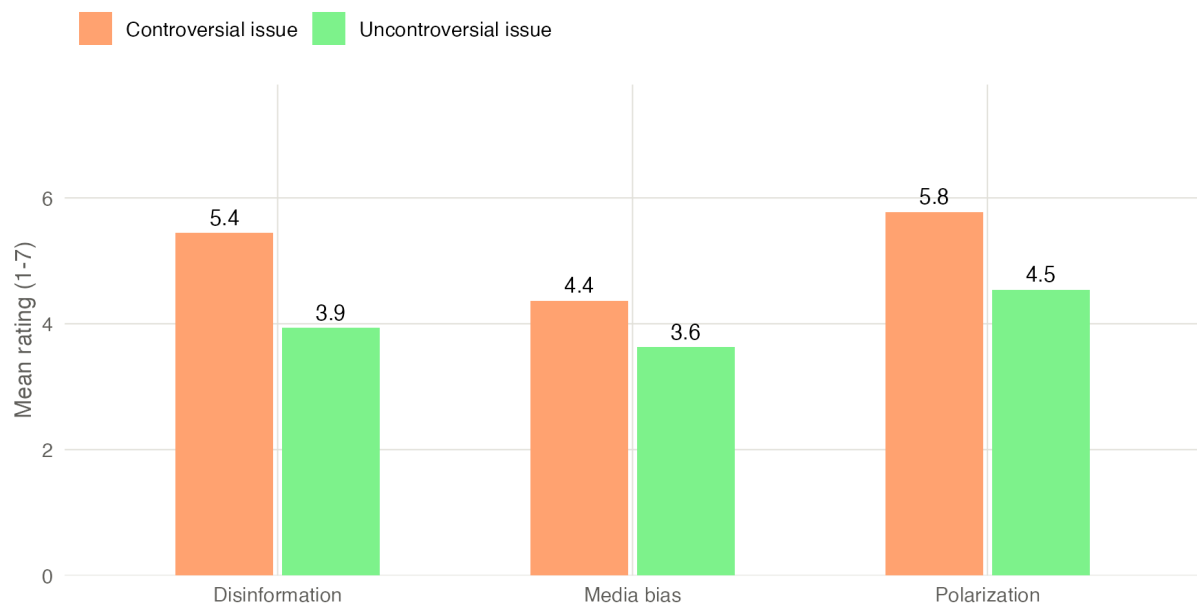


Figure 3.3a

Contestation climate around each issue

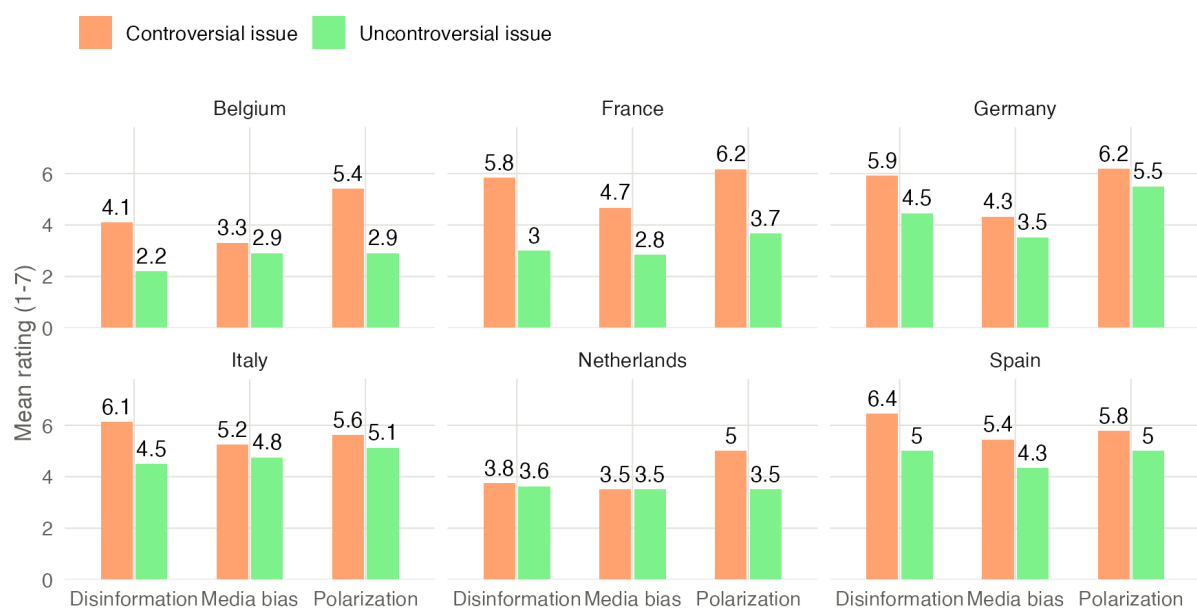


Figure 3.3b

3.2. Choosing a strategy

Having analyzed on what issues the participating organizations were active on, the next module measures organizations' use of different strategies. Within academic literature, there are three broad categories of strategies: inside, outside and litigation strategies. Inside strategies refer to those strategies that are aimed directly at politicians and policymakers, such as direct contacts, writing position papers, participation in consultations, having a seat in advisory councils, etc. Outside strategies refer to strategies that use (social) media and the general public to indirectly influence public policy, such as (social) media campaigns, protests, demonstrations, petitions, contacting journalists etc. Lastly, litigation strategies refer to efforts to influence public policy through judicial means, such as direct litigation, submitting legal complaints, providing legal assistance, etc.

The participating organizations in the sample indicated to be mainly active in outside strategies (see Figure 3.4): almost all organizations engage in raising awareness through outside strategies focused on the general public and the media. Many organizations, albeit to a lesser extent, are involved in inside strategies as well. Only few organizations are involved in litigation. Whereas there is no difference in organizations' use of inside and outside strategies between the controversial and uncontroversial topics, we do see a significant difference in the use of litigation. Relatively more organizations are at least somewhat involved in litigation when it concerns a controversial issue compared to an uncontroversial issue. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that litigation is used as a last resort: only when contestation is very high and other strategies are deemed ineffective, organizations tend to get involved in litigation strategies. Of course, organizations rarely use only one strategy and instead use different strategies to attain their goals. When pooling strategy use across the controversial and uncontroversial issue, we see that on average organizations spent most of their time (61.9%) on outside strategies, namely public communications and media strategies (see Figure 3.5). About 34% of their time is spent on direct engagement with politicians and/or policymakers.

Strategies used, by issue type

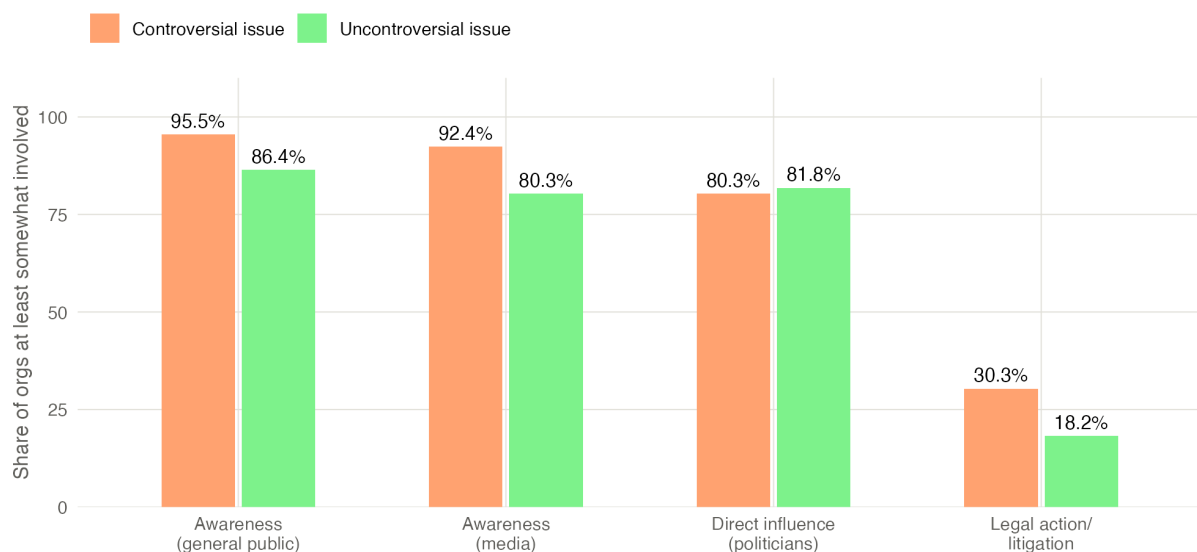


Figure 3.4

How multi-strategy organizations split their effort
% Time spent on given strategy (average)

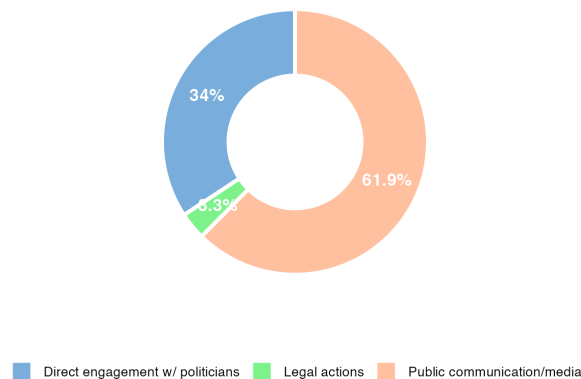


Figure 3.5

Next to this general involvement in the three broad categories, the survey also asked participating organizations more specifically about their strategies. First, focusing on outside strategies, we asked organizations to indicate what specific outside strategies they regularly (i.e. at least monthly) used for either of the issues (see Figure 3.6). Most organizations (57.3%) are regularly involved in social media campaigning. This is by far the most prevalent strategy. A smaller portion of organizations are involved in public activities (e.g. publishing policy positions online, organizing public events, etc.), mobilization (e.g. petitions, writing campaigns, etc.) and media activities (e.g. press conferences, contacting journalists, interviews etc.). Only 6.3% of organizations are regularly involved in protest activities⁴. These results highlight the overall prominence of social media strategies in LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts.

Public-facing activities pursued regularly

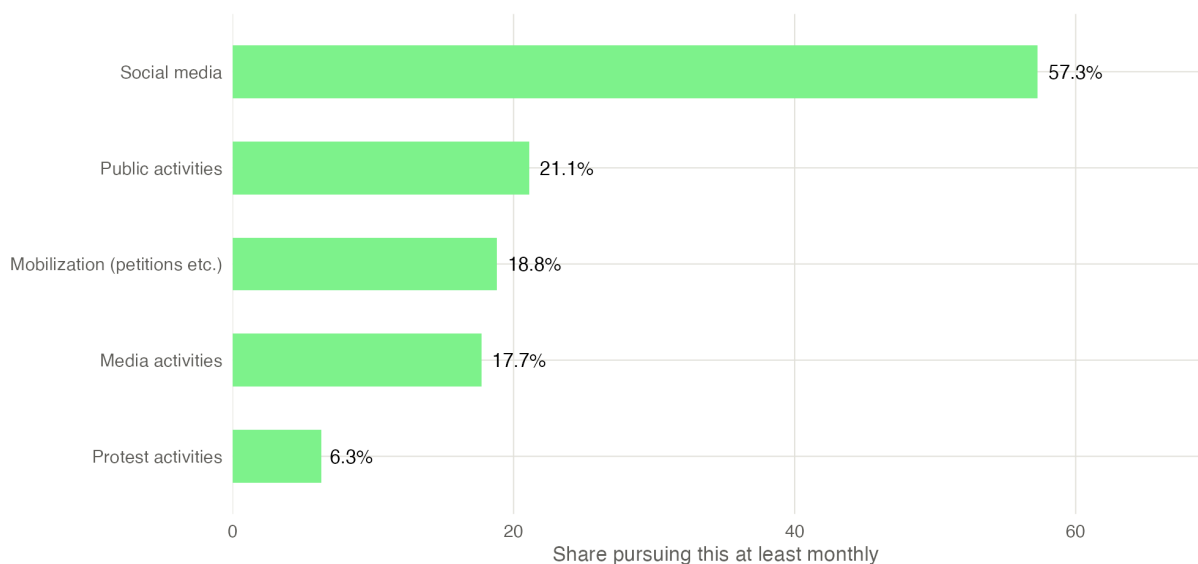


Figure 3.6

⁴ Considering that Pride parades are organized once per year, it is logical that regular (i.e. monthly) involvement in protest activities is relatively low.

Turning to inside strategies, the survey asked respondents to indicate which political party or parties they contacted regarding the given issue. Contacting political parties is one of the key functions of politically oriented NGOs or civil society organizations. Likewise, LGBTQ+ organizations also often contact their national political parties. Figure 3.7 visualizes the extent to which organizations contacted their respective political parties. Bigger dots indicate more organizations that contacted that specific political party. The x-axis (left-right) visualizes the party's stance towards LGBTQ+ equality and rights⁵: dots on the left of the graph are supportive, while parties on the right of the graph are opposed to LGBTQ+ equality. The color of the dots indicates to what extent parties agreed with the organizations' stance on the issue: bright green indicates full agreement, orange indicates disagreement with the organizations' stance. Grey dots indicate that no organization has contacted this party and simply reflects the stance of that party towards LGBTQ+ equality more generally.

Which parties do organizations actually target?

Grey = full CHES 2024 party landscape (context). Colored bubbles = parties survey orgs contacted – size = number of org-issue contacts with that party, color = whether contacted parties agreed.



Figure 3.7

⁵ These data come from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data (2024). See: Rovny, Jan, Jonathan Polk, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Seth Jolly, Gary Marks, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. 2025. "The 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on political party positioning in Europe: Twenty-five years of party positional data." *Electoral Studies* 97 (October). doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102981

First, these results highlight that organizations are mostly in contact with parties that are supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, as indicated by the fact that bigger dots occur at the left hand side of the graphs more regularly. The pattern is striking: most organizations concentrate on already-sympathetic parties (Belgium's Groen/Ecolo, Germany's Grünen/SPD, Spain's PSOE/Sumar - all high contact, high agreement). However, there are important exceptions. Italy's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, and Spain's PP, get contacted despite low agreement, which probably reflects pragmatic engagement with governing parties. These findings are largely in line with other literature on lobbying, which expects that interest groups tend to contact their supporters, rather than trying to convince opposing political parties. Interestingly, these parties also tend to agree on organizations' stance on the particular issue.

Next to national political parties, organizations may also seek contacts with European Union institutions. Although these contacts often occur through the European umbrella organizations, such as ILGA Europe or Transgender Europe, organizations in the sample still indicated to have contacted EU institutions. In the sample 17.5% of organizations targeted the European Parliament and the European Commission, followed by the European Council (12.7%), the national delegations (8.8%) and the European Court of Justice (4.9%) (see Figure 3.8). This shows that even though the European institutions might be relatively distant from national LGBTQ+ organizations, they are not ignored in advocacy efforts.

Contacted this EU institution
(either issue)

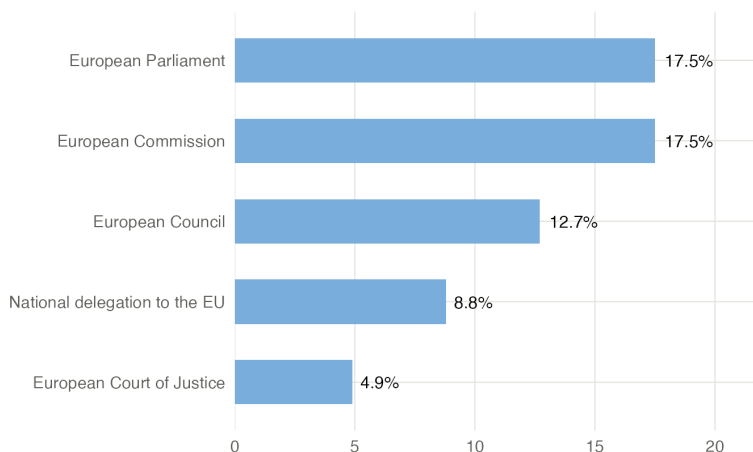


Figure 3.8

3.3. Strength in numbers

Advocacy is often carried out in collaboration with other organizations. In fact, coalition-building and collaboration is one of the most commonly used strategies among interest organizations. This also applies to LGBTQ+ organizations across Europe. Across all countries, 85.6% of surveyed organizations indicate have cooperated with other organizations regarding either the controversial or uncontroversial policy issue. Among organizations that reported collaboration, 87.6% partnered with other national LGBTQ+

organizations, followed by other citizen or interest groups or companies (54%) (Figure 3.9). The results also highlight that a large portion of LGBTQ+ organizations build partnerships with local, national and regional governments (respectively 47.8%, 31.9% and 27.4%). The results highlight that partnerships are often built horizontally, meaning within the same governmental level (i.e. local or national). Partnerships with European LGBTQ+ organizations occur much less (31%), and also partnerships with European institutions remain largely limited (18.6%).

Who organizations partner with

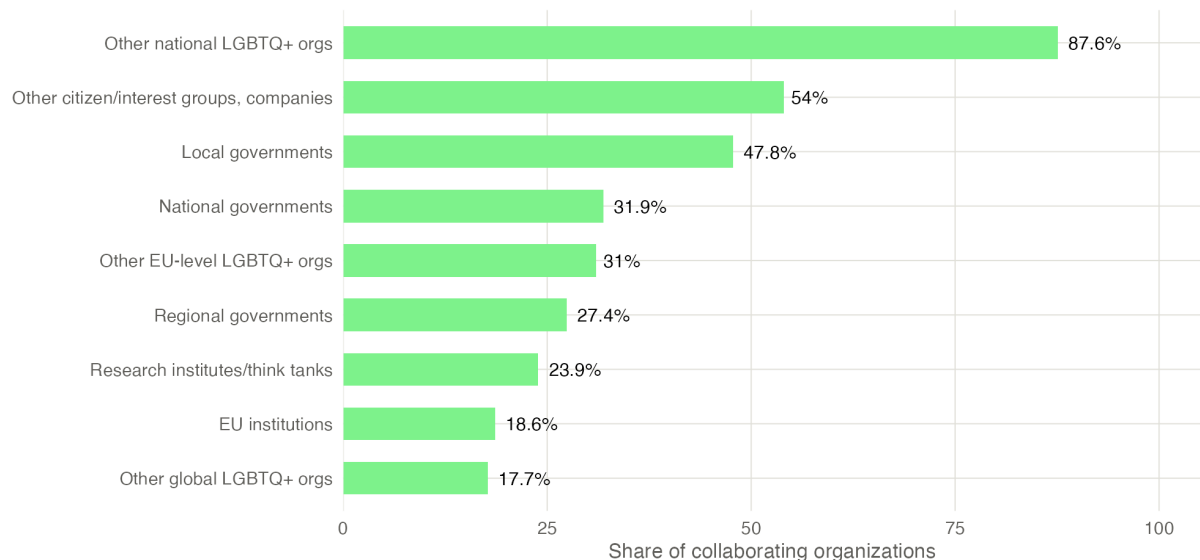


Figure 3.9

Zooming in on the types of partnerships that LGBTQ+ organizations engage in (Figure 3.10), the findings highlight that organizations are mainly cooperating politically, for example by coordinating their political strategies (66.4% of collaborating organizations) and writing and publishing joint political statements (62.8%). We also see that some organizations (36.3%) also represent each other's members or supporters on committees or advisory boards. Organizational partnerships occur much less: only a handful of organizations collaborate with other organizations through swapping supporter lists, organize joint fundraisers, share staff or fund research.

How organizations cooperate

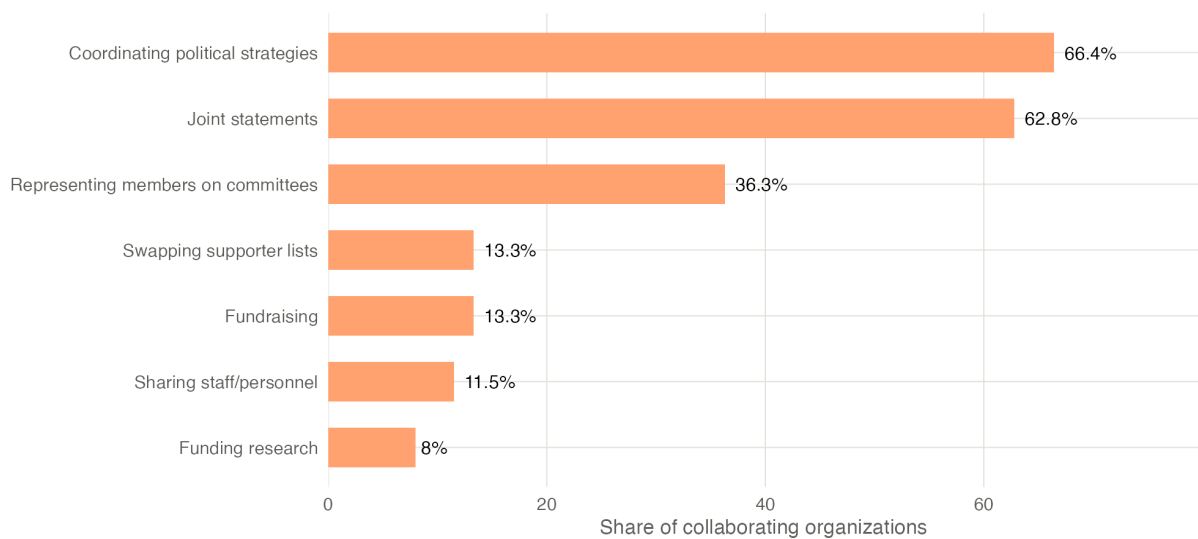


Figure 3.10

3.4. How effective are organizations' efforts?

It is key to understand whether and to what extent these used strategies were deemed effective. Organizations may be effective when they were able to raise awareness about an issue (e.g. raising awareness for a specific problem among the general public or on social media) and/or when they were able to have influence on an issue (i.e. convincing politicians to vote in favor of a policy proposal, or managing to get an issue to be discussed in a parliamentary meeting). In the survey, organizations were asked to self-assess their achieved effectiveness in terms of awareness and influence for both the controversial and uncontroversial issue. Pooling all organizations together, we see that organizations indicate to be nor effective nor ineffective in raising awareness and influencing policies, with values around 5 on an 11-point scale. Also, organizations indicate to be slightly more effective in raising awareness (5.3–5.9 on a 11-point scale) than in having an influence on policies (4.7–5.2 on a 11-point scale). This is not surprising, since achieving influence is much more difficult than raising awareness for an issue. That said, the results show no apparent differences between their effectiveness across policy issues (Figure 3.11a). This is interesting: contestation does not necessarily diminish organizations' effectiveness.

Self-rated effectiveness, by issue type

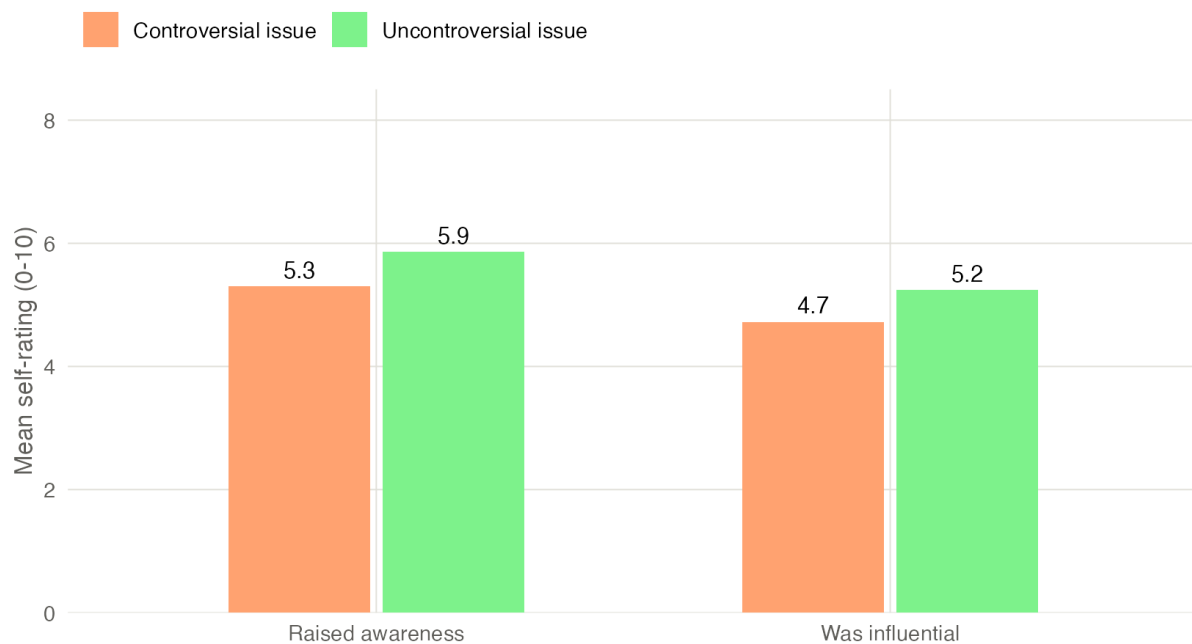


Figure 3.11a

Splitting the data by country (Figure 3.11b), we see similar patterns within most countries: 1) most scores range between 4.5 and 6, indicating not strong effectiveness nor strong ineffectiveness; 2) organizations indicate to be more effective in raising awareness than being influential; and 3) contestation does not necessarily decrease organizations' self-assessed effectiveness. However, we do see some notable differences between countries. First, in France, organizations indicate to be effective in influencing public policy (7.5 on an 11-point scale) concerning an uncontroversial issue. Likewise, organizations in Belgium reported to be slightly influential in raising awareness concerning their uncontroversial issue. Second, Italian organizations report low effectiveness scores across issues and types of effectiveness. This pattern may reflect the political environment in which Italian organizations operate, although the small number of observations ($n = 8$) limits the conclusions that can be drawn. Third, German organizations clearly indicate to be much more effective in raising awareness (5.3 and 6.3) than in having an influence (3.4 and 4.3). Fourth, interestingly, Spanish organizations report their efforts to be more effective concerning their controversial issues compared to their uncontroversial issues.

Self-rated effectiveness, by issue type, by country

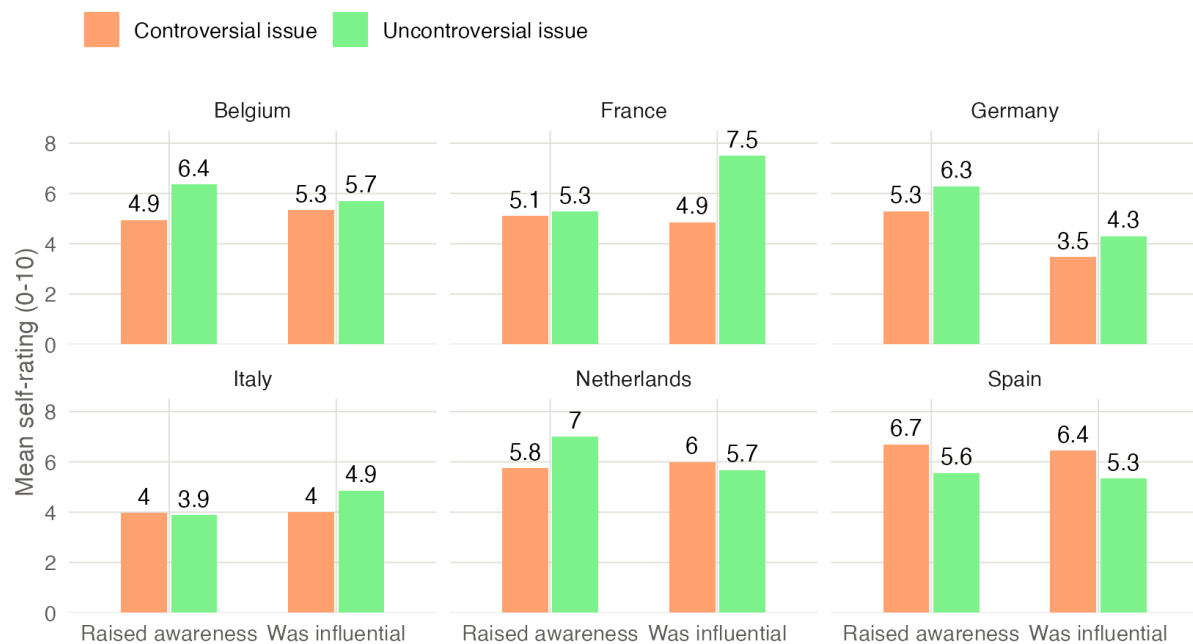


Figure 3.11b

3.5. Advocacy under pressure

Next to contestation related to the issues that LGBTQ+ organizations advocate for, they are also faced with various forms of repression, attacks or hostility. Figure 3.12 highlights the various types of repression that organizations had experienced at least once in the past 12 months. We see a shocking image. Most organizations report to have experienced social opposition (72.7%). Out of the surveyed organizations more than half have experienced some form of threats and violence (53%), such as intimidation, harassment of employees or volunteers. This highlights the extremely hostile context most of the organizations have to work in. Repression is not limited to social hostility. Also government, political parties or other NGOs pose threats for LGBTQ+ organizations. Almost half of organizations report to have experienced bureaucratic or administrative hurdles (47%), followed by legal restrictions (36.4%) and political exclusion (25.6%).

Types of repression faced

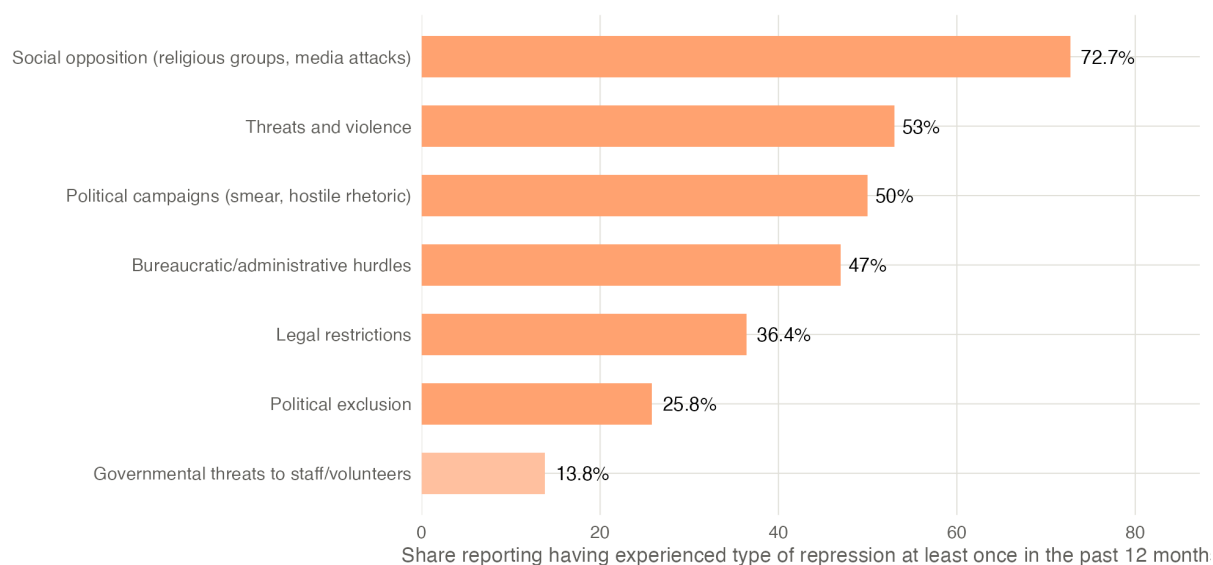


Figure 3.12

These multiple types and sources of hostility put considerable pressure on organizations and may turn into threats that jeopardize the survival of the organization (see Figure 3.13). Almost half of the organizations indicate that it is somewhat likely that their organization will face such a threat in the next 5 years, and 5 organizations indicate it is extremely likely. That said, a large portion of organizations indicate some level of resilience towards repression, deeming existential threats unlikely or being neutral.

Will your organization face a serious challenge to its existence within 5 years?

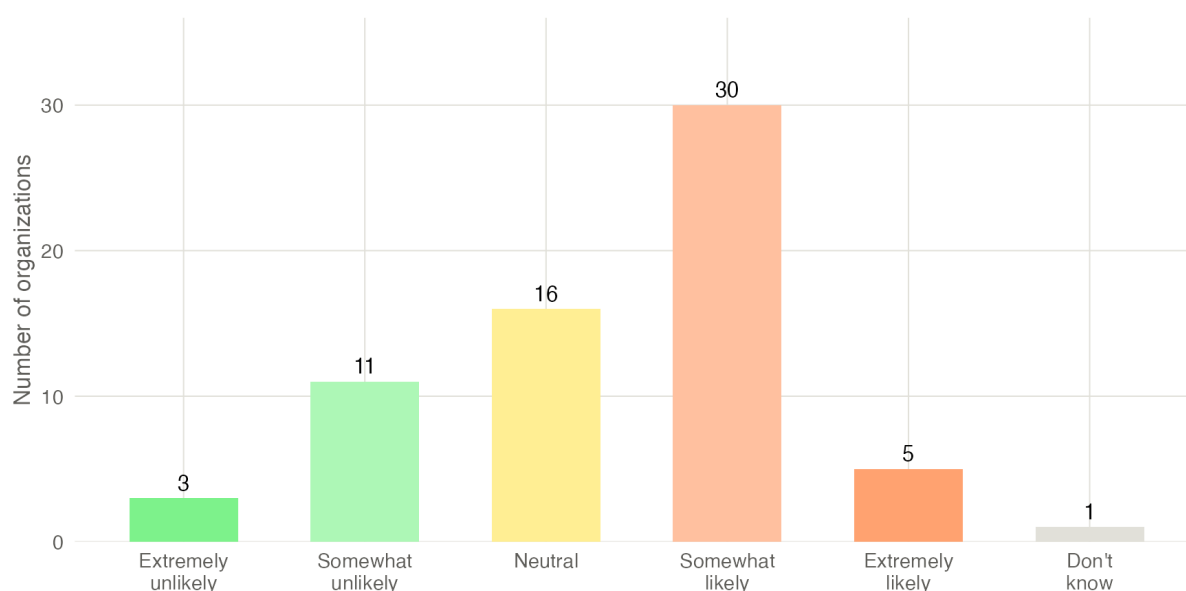


Figure 3.13

4. Conclusion: LGBTQ+ advocacy under pressure

LGBTQ+ equality is scrutinized and contested across European countries. This research project sets out to understand whether and how contestation affects those organizations that promote and defend for LGBTQ+ rights. The first results of the research project as presented in this report demonstrate that though organizations experience strong contestation and sometimes even severe hostility, they remain highly active. The surveyed organizations as included in this research report indicate that across issues they still seek to raise awareness for issues and to influence public policy. Yet, the results also warrant attention and necessitate further research.

First, organizations predominantly use outside strategies, especially social media, while maintaining insider contacts and using litigation selectively. Social media strategies are a relatively cost-effective way to communicate viewpoints and stances of the organization to various audiences. Insider strategies, on the other hand, require more effort and resources. Combining that with the finding that LGBTQ+ organizations predominantly have contacts with supportive parties, we can ask ourselves how effective their policy influence strategies are. Given the current political climate, characterized by increased power of right-wing populist parties, new conservatism and anti-gender rhetoric, we may ask ourselves how effective the predominant focus on outside strategies is.

Second, the results indicate that most organizations do not differentiate their strategies across issues. In other words, organizations use similar strategies when dealing with a controversial or an uncontroversial issue. This is surprising as organizations have a thorough understanding of what makes issues controversial, e.g. in terms of media bias, disinformation and polarization. Moreover, they are able to identify which actors politicize and contest LGBTQ+ issues. Logically, some strategies require investment of resources and time, thus limiting organizations to effectively differentiate their advocacy across issues. That said, further research should give insight to what extent and under what conditions LGBTQ+ organizations are able to adapt their strategies to better fit the issue context.

Third, and lastly, collaboration between national LGBTQ+ organizations was found to be an essential strategy across all countries and issues. Yet, collaboration is predominantly political rather than organizational, meaning organizations coordinate advocacy without necessarily pooling resources extensively. Given increased repression and hostility, pooling of resources, both in knowledge as well as staff, might be an interesting avenue to increase organizational resilience.

Lastly, organizations demonstrate resilience, but this resilience comes at a cost. Across the surveyed organizations, there is a prevalence of experienced social opposition, threats, violence, administrative hurdles, and political exclusion. Most organizations experience social opposition. This is perhaps to be expected, considering that LGBTQ+ issues have, throughout history, always sparked contestation. More shockingly, however, is that more than half of the organizations have experienced direct threats and violence, such as intimidation and harassment in the past 12 months. Also threats and repression from governments are commonly experienced. It is essential to understand how organizations deal with such direct threats and how it affects their daily work.

The avenues for further research as mentioned above set out the next goals of the research project. Whereas this report reported the descriptive data, the larger project will examine why organizations respond differently to hostile contexts and whether particular strategies or collaborations improve resilience and influence. Also, a central next step is to understand whether and how organizations adapt themselves and their strategies to be able to remain active in a highly contested and hostile environment.

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