

# NELFA'S ANNUAL REPORT

MARCH 2020 - MARCH 2021

Written by NELFA Secretary Daniel Martinovic

## 1. Foreword

The Covid19 pandemic was surely the key point that marked the year 2020. It changed the way we live fundamentally and in ways we couldn't imagine at the start of last year. The response to the pandemic was uneven and it showed the fragility of our society - how both the first response and the health system is uneven in the European countries, and how now, even more than before, your social and economic status affects your day to day life.

Millions across Europe lost their jobs or had their work greatly affected by the pandemic. Various governments used the pandemic as an excuse to even further limit the human rights of minorities, including LGBTIQ+ people and rainbow families, while others continued their populist agendas spreading fear and disinformation on the waves of this uncertainty that wiped across the continent. And, many people lost their loved ones, friends or their family members in the fight against the coronavirus.

But nevertheless, NELFA continued its growth and work in increasing visibility even in 2020. One of the highlights of the year, due in no small amount to the efforts of all rainbow family associations across the continent, is the speech of the Commission President in Strasbourg and her clear support for the LGBTIQ\* community, especially in Poland: "The Commission will soon put forward a strategy to strengthen LGBTQI rights. As part of this, I will also push for mutual recognition of family relations in the EU. If you are a parent in one country, you are a parent in every country."

In 2020 hate speech against LGBTIQ\* people in Europe has reached a new high, especially in Hungary or Poland where President Duda has announced to reinforce the ban on same-sex adoptions and where protests ended up in police violence against LGBTIQ\* activists. But, in the meantime, our movement takes further steps towards equality: i.e. with progress for the recognition of co-motherhood in Denmark, Ireland, France and Germany; the Parliament finally approved the marriage equality bill in Switzerland; same-sex partnerships in Montenegro; the first (official) gay foster parents in Croatia and other victories across Europe.

## 2. Administration

NELFA currently represents 41 associations in 33 European countries with more than 20,000 members. A new full member of the network in 2020 is LGBT Komiteen (Denmark), while a new individual member is Elias Yiannatsis, a lawyer from Greece.

Current Board members are:

- **President:** Eleni Maravelia, FLG (Spain)
- **Vice-President:** Dominique Boren, APGL (France)
- **Treasurer:** Christoph R. Alms, LSVD (Germany)
- **Secretary:** Daniel Martinovic, Dugine obitelji (Croatia)
  
- **Board members:** Jesús Santos Homobono, Galehi (Spain), Denitsa Lyubenova, Deystvie (Bulgaria), Joanna Śmiecińska, Fundacja Tęczowe Rodziny (Poland), Björn Sieverding, LSVD (Germany), Giovanni Fantoni, Famiglie Arcobaleno (Italy)

Due to the global pandemic, Board meetings during the period of the annual report were held via ZOOM on these dates:

- |              |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| - 09/03/2020 | - 16/06/2020 | - 16/11/2020 |
| - 13/04/2020 | - 06/07/2020 | - 14/12/2020 |
| - 11/05/2020 | - 16/09/2020 | - 11/01/2021 |
| - 10/06/2020 | - 12/10/2020 | - 08/02/2021 |

**Finances** still continue to be one of the challenging aspects of the network, but because of the pandemic, lack of travel and fewer chances for conferences and meetings, there were fewer costs for the network overall. On a more positive note, project-based funding for NELFA continues to grow, with a new ERASMUS+ project (that unfortunately is halted due COVID19), and the EU financed project “Rainbow Shield” bringing a basic level of funding to the organisation. Individual donations and membership fees still continue to provide a small amount of funding too.

Most of the **administrative tasks** were undertaken by the Executive team of the Board, with the assistance of board members when it comes to public relations and communication with

huge thanks to Björn Sieverding. Board communication is handled via a WhatsApp group, with Bitrix24 for board polls and pcloud for data storage. Zoom is used for Board meetings, and a yahoo mailing list was used to communicate via e-mail, until yahoo! shut their groups down and the board switched to google groups.

As of February 2021, NELFA has 2940 followers on Facebook (200 increase in a year) and 1476 followers on Twitter (similar number as last year).

**Social media** content with the most engagement were the ones surrounding the State of the EU by Ursula von der Leyen and the quote “If you are a parent in one country, you are a parent in every country!”, with more than 10 thousand people reached on Facebook.

Also one of the more engaging social media activities was the drawing competition that NELFA launched for its membership, with children drawing their families. The prizes were Creatable World Dolls - donated by Mattel. The drawings were sent to Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission to thank her for her support for rainbow families in cross-border situations.

### 3. NELFA activities report for 2020

- **Due to the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing restrictions** across Europe, the NELFA Board decided to **cancel the rainbow families weekend** in Poznań, Poland (27-29 March 2020) that was supposed to host the annual general meeting. The seminar, film presentation, and the meeting with local rainbow families were postponed; firstly, to autumn, but since the COVID19 pandemic didn't calm down, the meeting will be held for another time.
- **The Annual General Meeting took place online**, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March. We approved the mandatory reports and documents, i.e. the new NELFA Guidelines on Sponsorship. Elenia Maravelia (FLG, Spain) remains President, Dominique Boren (apgl, France) was elected Vice President. Daniel Martinovic (Dugine obitelji, Croatia) will keep his Secretary duties and the new Treasurer is Christoph R. Alms (LSVD, Germany).
- We worked tirelessly for **rainbow families in cross-border struggles within the EU**. Political backing came from the European Parliament's Intergroup on LGBTI Rights and Children's Rights, where they issued a common letter to Equality Commissioner Helena Dalli. Unfortunately, legislative measures at EU level will

be difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, **NELFA and ILGA-Europe won't cease to convince the institutions to ensure the free movement of LGBTIQ\* people (with children)**. Currently, NELFA encourages rainbow families to start petitions to the EU Parliament (like FLG). We launched a **dedicated website** and organized a **corresponding webinar** in July 2020.

- In June 2020, NELFA has elaborated a **new overview about rainbow families in Europe** that can be viewed on our website. It's a summary of recent surveys and data collections - published by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), ILGA-Europe, Transgender Europe and the EU Commission. All findings are all related to rainbow families and their rights. It's about recent numbers, laws and many quotes from LGBTIQ\* people.
- NELFA has applied **successfully for a new Erasmus+ project**. It's entitled "Rainbow Families 2020 - Together for a Better Future". The project is dedicated to the empowerment of NELFA, to strengthen its educational activities for the well-being of rainbow families in a (possibly) non-welcoming environment. Partners of this project will be again the consultancy InDialogue and our Croatian full member Dugine obitelji. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the project is unfortunately delayed, hopefully it will start sometime later in 2021/early 2022.
- The coronavirus pandemic leaves (rainbow) families in dramatic cross-border situations. Dozens of singles and couples (with medical fertility treatment abroad or conducting surrogacy journeys out of Europe) experience critical times because of the restrictions. **NELFA issued a communiqué with details at the end of March 2020**. Afterwards, popular LGBTIQ+ websites such as gaystarnews and pinknews reported on the facts and the US organisation Men Having Babies (MHB) elaborated a new webpage with help. In April, **NELFA endorsed an MHB letter** to relevant Congress and Senate members to raise awareness of the difficult circumstances some families face.
- **NELFA's full member ERA** (the LGBTI Equal Rights Association) is an umbrella organisation for Western Balkans and Turkey, and in April 2020 they **highlighted the topic of rainbow families with a special edition of their newsletter concerning LGBTIQ\* parenting** that featured information about NELFA and its activities.

- At the end of April, a **webinar with ILGA-Europe and high-level legal experts**, i.e. from France, Romania, UK, and the EU Commission was held, covering the topics of “How to start a complaint for breach of EU law? **How to raise awareness about cross-border problems of a rainbow family?**”. NELFA took part with several Board members.
- The International Family Equality Day was celebrated in May 2020 in 62 countries and 152 towns. **NELFA members contributed with nice films, photos, drawings (especially family trees)**. The European Parliament’s Intergroup on LGBTI Rights issued a statement. This year’s motto was “Family Diversity in Education”. You can find a lot of input in social media (**#IFED2020**). Next year’s IFED will be entitled: “Families: being our authentic best”.
- In May 2020 Finland started preparing a new Parental law and the government could be a real trendsetter - with a comprehensive multi-parenting law. Together with ILGA-Europe, **NELFA wrote a letter to Prime Minister Sanna Marin to address the needs of rainbow families in the new law**. Our national member Sateenkaariperhe ry in Helsinki issued a corresponding press release. In the Netherlands, a promising bill was watered down last summer. Until May 2020, the government collected comments on a new proposal.
- Also in May, **NELFA Board members took part at a webinar of the European Network on Statelessness (ENS) and the EP’s Intergroup on Children’s Rights**. It was entitled “Birth registration and the prevention of statelessness in Europe”. Regularly, NELFA raises awareness of certain cases with stateless children because of the non-recognition of birth certificates stating two mothers. Find some shared documents during the webinar: A study of the Council on Refugees and Exiles, an ENS briefing paper and the statelessness index.
- In June **we summarised the major studies that were published** within the last 30 days - **by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), ILGA-Europe, Transgender Europe and the EU Commission**. They are all related to rainbow families and their rights, and our summary had the goal to give them some added value from our perspective.

- Also in June, we gave an interview to the Italian web page **Boundless Rainbow Love**, a thematic LGBTIQ\* page that addresses issues such as disability and gender equality. This time, writer Katya Parente interviewed **NELFA Board member Björn Sieverding** about the Network's advocacy efforts at EU level.
- Continuing June activities, **NELFA has published a new tool concerning the freedom of movement of LGBTIQ\* people (with children)** and the complaint procedure in the EU. Our main aim is to encourage rainbow families to bring their cross-border struggles to EU level, to raise awareness and to find solutions. NELFA currently asks its membership to petition the European Parliament.
- In July, **NELFA President Eleni Maravelia (FLG)** informed about the difficult **“freedom of movement”** for rainbow families within the EU and why NELFA is lobbying for solutions. The Catalan Pride Radio **“ORGULL”** broadcasted an interesting interview. It was entitled: **“Problemes per viatjar a Europa si ets família LGBT”**
- Continuing the June activities, in July **NELFA held a webinar to explain how EU citizens - respectively rainbow families and LGBTIQ\* organisations - can submit a petition to the European Parliament.** The webinar is part of a broader campaign to accompany a recent survey among EU Member States about freedom of movement struggles for LGBTIQ\* parents and their children. The aim is to push the EP's Committee on Petitions to take care of this topic.
- On the 28 September, **NELFA Board member Christoph R. Alms participated at COFACE's General Assembly in Berlin (online)**, where i.e. a new strategy was discussed. COFACE Families Europe issued its newsletter and this time, NELFA Board Member Björn Sieverding (LSVD) contributed with a commentary on the recognition of rainbow families in the EU.
- Twelve months after the first launch, **NELFA and the LGBTIQ\* petition platform All Out have finished the campaign “freedom of movement for rainbow families”.** It was updated in October 2020 and was also available in

new languages, German, Italian, French and Spanish. The campaign has reached its main aim: nearly **25.000 signatures** which will be delivered to Brussels to the EU Commission so they will hopefully take care of rainbow families in cross-border struggles within the current legislature.

- NELFA took part in the **13th European Forum on the Rights of the Child**, which was held online until 1st of October 2020. In panel debates and workshops on inclusive education or fundamental rights, also LGBTIQ\* issues were discussed. NELFA provided its expertise in the process of developing the EU #ChildGuarantee.
- In October we received an invitation to **NELFA to be a partner of World Pride and Euro Games 2021 in the capital of Denmark**. This will mean that rainbow families will be highlighted during the celebrations. The Board of NELFA is involved in the preparation of the programme.
- In November the German umbrella organisation for boys, male adults and fathers - Bundesforum Männer - just turned ten years old and published an anniversary brochure. **NELFA Board member Björn Sieverding (LSVD) was invited to write an article about the struggles of gay daddies**.
- Continuing the media appearances in November, the Spanish media platform “freeda” published a **nice interview with Gabriel who is a young man raised by two gay dads**. One of his fathers is **NELFA’s Board member Jesús Santos Homobono (Galehi)**. Gabriel was already several times a real ambassador for rainbow families.
- NELFA's tireless efforts bear fruit: Our demands play an important role in **the first-ever Commission's LGBTIQ Equality strategy, launched on 12th of November 2020**. It contains a range of proposals concerning rainbow families in cross-border situations, for example the review of the existing guidelines and a horizontal legislative initiative in 2022 for the mutual recognition of family relations within the EU. It follows the key words of Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen (“If you are a parent in one country, you are - of course - a parent in every country”); **NELFA issued a press release concerning this**

**huge moment!** NELFA President **Eleni Maravelia** took part at the official launch of the first-ever EU Commission's LGBTIQ Equality strategy.

- In November 2020 **NELFA was invited to a major digital conference of the German EU presidency - #lgbtconferenceberlin2020**. President Eleni Maravelia and Board member Björn Sieverding contributed to the panel “Challenges and Steps Ahead: Towards the full recognition of Rainbow Families Across the European Union?”. The other speakers came from the Council of Europe (Eleni Tsestekou), the EU Commission (Maria Vilar-Badia) and the EP's Intergroup on LGBTI Rights (Marc Angel). Moderator of the panel was Professor Alina Tryfonidou from Reading University. NELFA shared a new presentation.
- **NELFA Board member Björn Sieverding (LSVD) took part at a webinar, organised by the European Academy and the Foreign Ministry**. It was entitled: “Europarat mit Tat” and it was about perspectives of LGBTIQ\* families and their rights in the framework of the Council of Europe. NELFA offered a presentation (in German) about rainbow families in Europe.
- In December 2020 **the Hungarian Parliament has passed a law effectively banning same-sex couples from adopting children**. This was put forward by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's right-wing government says only married couples can adopt, with some exceptions for single relatives of the child. Same-sex marriage is illegal in Hungary, but adoption has been possible if one partner applies on their own. Read more. After the first announcement, **NELFA had released a press statement, together with the Hungarian member Háttér**.
- NELFA is looking forward to the development of a case before the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg - on **9th of February, the ECJ discussed the case of a lesbian couple (women from Bulgaria and Gibraltar) and their little daughter "Sara"**. The child is at risk to remain stateless because of the non-recognition of the familial ties to the mothers. NELFA's Board member Denitsa Lyubenova and her predecessor Veneta Limberova from Deystvie in Bulgaria take care of the case. We expect a highly important judgment for rainbow families within the EU. In December, a similar case reached the ECJ. It's about a (temporarily) stateless child of an Irish-Polish couple. The case is actually blocked in Luxembourg because of the similar Bulgarian hearing.



#### 4. Current projects

- **Erasmus+ (EU) 2020-2021**

**TITLE:** “Rainbow Families 2020 - Together for a Better Future”

**GOAL:** This project is dedicated to the empowerment of NELFA, to strengthen its educational activities for the well-being of rainbow families in a (possibly) non-welcoming environment. The project activities envelop a wide range of training on leadership skills, teaching and consulting skills, as well as guidance skills (main partner organisation “In Dialogue”), and job-shadowing comparable LGBTIQ\* organisations in other countries (focus on the ex-Yugoslavian region, with the main partner Dugine obitelji from Croatia).

**PARTICIPANTS:** Board members and active volunteers - especially from Eastern Europe and the Balkans

- **Rights Equality Citizenship (EU) 2019-2021**

**TITLE:** “Rainbow Shield: Enhancing the legal protection of LGBTI people in Bulgaria”

**GOAL:** The specific objectives of the two-year project are to expand the scope of legal practitioners prepared to deal with LGBTI cases and enhance their expertise in doing so, to raise awareness among the community about possibilities for legal protection and to disseminate best practices. NELFA’s task is a membership survey concerning legal needs and the preparation of a final international conference.

**PARTICIPANTS:** The leading organisation is Deystvie, partners are Bilitis (Rainbow Hub), Foundation GLAS, Asociatia Accept in Romania and NELFA.