

Inside SPHERE+

Edition 1: January 2026



Welcome to our project

Welcome to the first issue of Inside SPHERE+. SPHERE+ is a European project, funded under the CERV programme, working to counter hate speech targeting LGBTIQ+ people in political and public life.

Bringing together seven organisations from six countries, the project builds the knowledge, language, and leadership skills of civil society organisations, politicians, and public officials, equipping them to recognise, challenge, and respond to anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech in parliaments, council chambers, and public debate shape.

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01 A few words from Isuf Halimi

SPHERE+ Project Coordinator, European Centre for Human Rights

When I look back at the journey that brought SPHERE+ to where it is today, I am struck by how much work and how much belief went into making it happen. Receiving confirmation that our project had been funded was a moment of genuine pride, not just for ECHR, but for every organisation in this consortium.

The CERV-2024 SPEECH call was exceptionally competitive. Of 222 eligible applications, only 12 were selected for funding. To be among them is a real achievement, and a strong validation of the case we made for this work.



That case was built collectively. Every partner organisation contributed to the proposal development process engaging in research and discussions with their local and European elected officials, gathering evidence from their own national contexts, and helping to confirm both the need for SPHERE+ and the appetite for the work we are proposing. That grounding in real experience, across six countries and multiple political environments, is what gave the application its strength. I want to thank all of our partners sincerely for the time, energy, and expertise they brought to that process.

The idea for SPHERE+ grew, in part, from conversations and connections built through my work as a member of the Congress of INGOs at the Council of Europe, where ECHR along with one of our SPHERE+ partners VolontEurope has long been an active and respected presence. Those spaces, where civil society organisations from across Europe come together to share experience, build relationships, and advocate for democratic values, are precisely the kind of spaces SPHERE+ wants to strengthen. The project is, in many ways, a product of the networks and partnerships that European civil society has worked hard to build.

What lies ahead is ambitious. We are working across six countries, with seven organisations, targeting the people and institutions that shape public discourse at the highest levels. We want to change how politicians and public officials speak about LGBTIQ+ people and through that, to change what LGBTIQ+ communities experience in public and political life. That is a significant goal. But the evidence base we have built, the partners we have around the table, and the energy with which everyone has approached the first phase of this project give me every confidence that we are equal to it.

I am proud of what this consortium has already achieved, and I am excited for what comes next.

Isuf Halimi

Isuf Halimi,
Director
ECHR EU Office, Strasbourg, FR

02 Project Kick-off in Brussels

26 SEPTEMBER 2025 · BRUSSELS

On 26 September 2025, the full SPHERE+ consortium gathered in Brussels for the project's inaugural face-to-face meeting, the formal start of a two-year programme working to counter anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech in political and public life across six European countries.

The meeting was preceded by a partner dinner on the evening of 25 September, giving colleagues from across Europe the chance to meet informally before the formal programme began. On the day itself, partners reviewed the Grant Agreement, aligned on project management procedures, and mapped out the work plan for the first phase of activities.

The seven organisations in the room were: ECHR (France, coordinator), Political Capital (Hungary), LGBTI Deystvie (Bulgaria), VolontEurope (Belgium), Momentum (Ireland), EUEI (Denmark), and RLP (Ireland).



The day also brought an important opportunity to engage the project's wider network. External guests joined online, including MEP Marc Angel (S&D), co-President of the European Parliament's LGBTI Intergroup; IGLYO Executive Director Bella FitzPatrick and Senior Policy Officers; and ILGA-Europe Senior Policy Officer Ciánan Russell. Civil society organisations from Serbia, Luxembourg, and Spain also joined, grounding the meeting in the lived realities facing LGBTIQ+ communities across Europe.

By close of day, the consortium had a shared understanding of project objectives, governance arrangements, and immediate next steps. The kick-off set the collaborative tone for everything that has followed in the project.

03 Building the SPHERE+ Evidence Base

Building a SPHERE+ Evidence Base has been running from the summer of 2025, right through to today, January 2026. Work Package 2 in the project is led by Political Capital (Hungary). A political research institute specialising in political attitudes, extremism, and public discourse, Political Capital was the natural lead for this work package bringing precisely the research expertise and analytical frameworks needed to examine how anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech operates in political and institutional environments across Europe. All consortium partners contributed, supporting survey design, participant recruitment, and data collection across their respective national contexts.

Before any training could be designed, any campaign content drafted, or any engagement with politicians and officials planned, SPHERE+ needed to understand the landscape it was working in.

WP2 was built on the conviction that effective capacity building has to be grounded in evidence, in what people actually know, what they believe, what they have experienced, and what they need. Without that foundation, training risks missing its target entirely.

The work package set out to map the landscape of anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech in political and public life across six partner countries, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, and Ireland, and to identify the knowledge gaps, training needs, and advocacy challenges that SPHERE+'s capacity-building programme would need to address. It was structured around three distinct research tasks, each targeting a different part of the picture.

The first (T2.1) was a survey of politicians and public officials across all six countries, examining their awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues, their attitudes, their prior training, and their sense of preparedness to respond



Zsuzsa Kelen and Bulcsú Hunyadi of Political Capital pictured in Brussels at the project kick off meeting

to anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination or hostile language in professional settings.

The second (T2.2) focused on civil society organisations, a survey and in-depth interviews exploring how CSOs currently engage with politicians and officials, what barriers they face, and what training and resources would best support them. The third (T2.3) was a systematic desk review of anti-LGBTIQ+ political actors, harmful narratives, and documented cases of hate speech in public and political discourse across all six countries, providing the contextual backdrop against which the survey findings could be read and understood.

The SPHERE+ Evidence Base Report (D2.1) is being finalised by Political Capital, with submission due at the end of January 2026. Its findings will provide the evidence foundation on which the full WP3 training programme is built.

04 Key Findings from the Research

The SPHERE+ Evidence Base Report presents a detailed picture of the current landscape across six countries. The findings confirm both the scale of the challenge SPHERE+ is addressing and the genuine appetite for change among many of those within political and public institutions.

WHAT'S EMERGING?

Politicians and Public Officials

The WP2 research gathered 154 responses from politicians and public officials across the six partner countries. The emerging findings identify significant gaps in knowledge and preparedness. Across almost all countries, the majority of respondents reported that LGBTIQ+ issues are discussed only rarely or occasionally in their professional environments, with Bulgaria standing out at 92–100% reporting rare or no discussion at all.

Most responding politicians had received no training on either LGBTIQ+ issues or anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech, a pattern consistent across Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary, and Ireland. The picture for public officials was similar, with a majority reporting no training on LGBTIQ+ issues in Denmark, Hungary, and Ireland, and no training on hate speech in Belgium, Denmark, France, Hungary, and Ireland. Online environments were identified as the primary site of anti-LGBTIQ+ hostility, with up to 100% of responding politicians and public officials identifying online hate speech as a very great or considerable challenge. Encounter rates were highest, above 70%, in Bulgaria, France, Hungary, and Ireland. Attitudes were mixed, but a significant number of respondents expressed genuine openness to learning and to greater engagement with civil society, representing a concrete opportunity for the WP3 training programme ahead.

Civil Society Organisations

Over 70 civil society organisations participated in the research. Early findings confirm that CSOs are highly exposed to anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech, 90% of responding CSOs in France, Hungary, and Ireland reported encountering it

organisations, but connections to political decision-making remained weak in most countries, with France and Ireland the exceptions, where 50% or more of responding CSOs reported some cooperation with policymakers.

The SPHERE+ Evidence Base Report

The report's results reflect only the views of participating politicians, public officials, and CSO representatives and are not representative of the broader populations in the project countries.

Investigating knowledge gaps, hate speech, and institutional cooperation across countries on LGBTIQ+ issues:

154 * from **politicians and public officials** across **6 European countries**

Responses

*Number of respondents per country: - politicians: BE: 17, BU: 13, DK: 1, FR: 17, HU: 44, IE: 17; - public officials: BE: 5, BU: 9, DK: 9, FR: 11, HU: 2, IE: 9.

+70
Civil Society Organisations Engaged

SPHERE+ Evidence Report

Research on the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of politicians, public officials and civil society organisations
Public deliverable | 2026

Clear capacity needs emerged: legal knowledge, skills for direct and effective engagement with politicians and officials, and tools for responding to harmful rhetoric without escalating conflict. These findings are directly shaping the design of the WP3 curriculum, with the full Evidence Base Report due for publication on the project website in early February 2026. Stay tuned to our project website – www.sphereproject.eu

05 The Awareness Campaign Launches

This week, on the 26 January 2026, SPHERE+ launched its public Awareness Raising Campaign on LinkedIn with a post titled "[A SPHERE+ campaign but not a smear campaign.](#)"

The campaign examines how language used in political and public life shapes the safety, dignity, and participation of LGBTIQ+ people across Europe.

It focuses on language itself, how it is used, framed, and normalised in public contexts, and how it can either reinforce harm and exclusion or promote inclusion and democratic responsibility. It is deliberately not a campaign about individuals or political positions. It is a campaign about standards of public communication.

Each post situates a specific example of language from a real parliamentary debate, public statement, or institutional communication within its national context. The example is then examined for its consequences, how it affects the dignity, visibility, safety, and democratic participation of LGBTIQ+ people, and what it signals about the standards and responsibilities of those who speak from positions of public influence. The campaign includes both positive and negative examples.

Positive examples highlight language that affirms belonging, centres lived experience, uses evidence-based framing, and demonstrates respectful and responsible public discourse. The first such example was drawn from a 2024 Irish Seanad debate on hate crime legislation, in which speakers explicitly recognised LGBTIQ+ people as

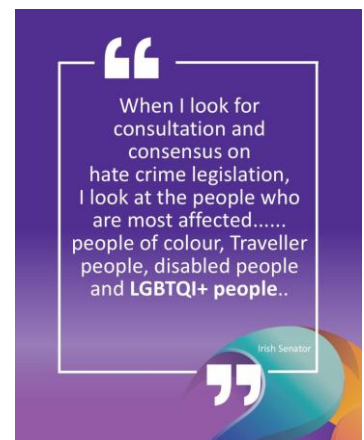


rights-holders and communities disproportionately affected by hate and intimidation.

The language used centred lived experience rather than fear or moral panic.

Negative examples examine language that dehumanises or ridicules, erases or denies identity, frames inclusion as a threat, or delegitimises the equality and participation of LGBTIQ+ people. The first negative example was drawn from a Danish parliamentary debate, where a politician's statements were found to exclude and delegitimise trans and gender-diverse people. These examples are presented with an explanation of why the language is harmful and how it affects public life, without naming or targeting individuals.

The campaign is coordinated by SPHERE+ Momentum and runs on LinkedIn and Instagram with posts also shared through partner networks and the SPHERE+ website. It will continue to build its content bank across all six partner countries over the course of the project. Follow the project [Linkedin page](#) to engage with the campaign.





SPHERE+ promotes
political debate
grounded in dignity,
equality and respect for
fundamental rights.

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