

Poland A? Poland B? Poland LGBT!

Field study in
Southeastern
Poland

**report
summary**



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INTRODUCTION

The years 2019-2023 have redefined the approach to equality initiatives in Poland, empowering the agency of civil society and local communities. In the face of challenges such as unequal treatment, discrimination, verbal abuse, and a rise in incidents involving physical violence, the positive duty to combat discrimination fell upon non-profit organizations, communities, and local governments when the central administration proved unable to respond. Local authorities became increasingly invested in promoting equality and inclusion of minority groups in shaping local policies. What is even more important, civil society underwent a transformation as local communities actively engaged, reacted, learned from each other, and changed their circumstances.

The summer of 2020 marked a low point when the national TV station, TVP, broadcasted anti-LGBT propaganda daily in its main news program. I received numerous threats on Facebook during that time.

Homosexual male, 38 years old,
Podkarpackie voivodeship

The topic of equality policies is gaining prominence in local governments, especially in southern Poland, where so-called „LGBT-free zones” are prevalent. Officials have begun to show interest in equality and anti-discrimination issues, strengthening the inter-city and international networking among those who find this topic crucial.

Equality policies are also making their way into local media, generating increased interest within the communities that had previously sought solutions independently. The LGBTQIA community has become increasingly vocal about its needs, actively engaging, mobilizing, organizing, taking matters into its own hands, and transforming its local surroundings. Simultaneously, organizations, informal groups, and activists are showing growing interest in advocacy actions at the local government level, seeking best practices and ideas.

Therefore, we decided to conduct a study on the situation of LGBTQIA individuals in selected provinces in southern Poland. We explored the challenges faced by LGBTQIA individuals in Małopolska, Podkarpacie, Świętokrzyskie, and Silesia, as well as their expectations from public institutions.

What impact did the so-called „LGBT-free zones” have on the lives of the LGBTQIA community? What actions should our municipalities and counties take for equality? The results of our research and analysis will not only address these questions but, more importantly, support local organizations and governments in responding to the needs of the LGBTQIA community and implementing equality policies.

We present the research findings at a crucial political and social time in Poland, post-parliamentary elections and pre-local government elections. Aiming to encourage local politicians to listen to the stories, problems, and needs of local communities. It is time for designing cities that embrace diversity.

DISCRIMINATION. YESTERDAY. TODAY. TOMORROW?

Unfortunately, discrimination against the LGBTQIA community still prevails in Poland, as evidenced by all our studies from the past decade. In 2014, we asked the LGBTQIA community in several cities in Małopolska whether they felt discriminated against, their experiences living in their regions, and what they needed. The results were staggering, as 84% of respondents answered 'yes' to the first question. What else could we learn? Over half of those surveyed experienced discrimination in school (54%), with every third respondent indicating that the sources of discrimination were parents, religious groups, peer groups, and social circles. One in ten individuals mentioned the workplace (supervisors and colleagues) as a source of discrimination. Over a quarter of respondents experienced three or more forms of discrimination.

Six years later, in completely different political and social circumstances—after a wave of attacks on the LGBTQIA community in Poland and protests against the tightening of anti-abortion laws—we repeated the study in Kraków, expanding it to include questions linking the experience of discrimination with the desire to emigrate.

We then learned that over half of the respondents, 63.4%, experienced discrimination in Kraków. Verbal abuse constituted 61%, and one in five gay individuals in Kraków experienced physical violence. Those who experienced discrimination expected public institutions to respond. The most frequently mentioned institutions included schools and universities (84.6%), the Police (over 80%), local politicians (80.3%), and the City Hall (77.8%). This is crucial, as over 84% of recorded discrimination cases in Kraków occurred in public spaces.

After hanging the rainbow flag on our balcony, someone smeared feces on our building entrance and repeatedly vandalized the building with messages like „get out.”

Bisexual woman, 30 years old,
Małopolskie voivodeship

In 2023, we conducted a survey that was completed by over 1600 individuals in four provinces. We aimed to examine the challenges faced by LGBTQIA individuals locally and understand their needs and expectations from institutions.

We discovered that over 62.2% of the LGBTQIA community in Małopolska, Świętokrzyskie, Podkarpacie, and Śląska had experienced discrimination in recent years. The most common forms of discrimination reported were verbal taunts, insults, and humiliation (57.7%), aggressive gestures (25.3%), threats (19.1%), and physical violence (11.1%).

An attempt to attack me and my friends with a knife in the park by a stranger who shouted, „faggots.”

Homosexual man, 19 years old,
Podkarpackie voivodeship

Unfortunately, the survey results indicate a decline in trust and faith in the effectiveness of institutions. However, the community still desires effective punishment for discrimination and the implementation of anti-discrimination and equality policies.

The group most affected by discrimination appears to be transgender individuals (almost 85%), and we want to speak out about this loudly.

Perhaps what hurts the most is this helplessness. The feeling that I am someone worse. I go to school, hear how bad I am. I go to work, hear how hopeless I am. I walk down the street, and hear that I am a pedophile. I watch TV, hear that I am destroying Polish families. I go to church, hear that I am an aberration. I meet with relatives, hear how much I have harmed them. And it's all because of one small fact over which I had no control and which, in reality, harms no one: being trans.

Asexual woman, 22 years old,
Śląskie voivodeship

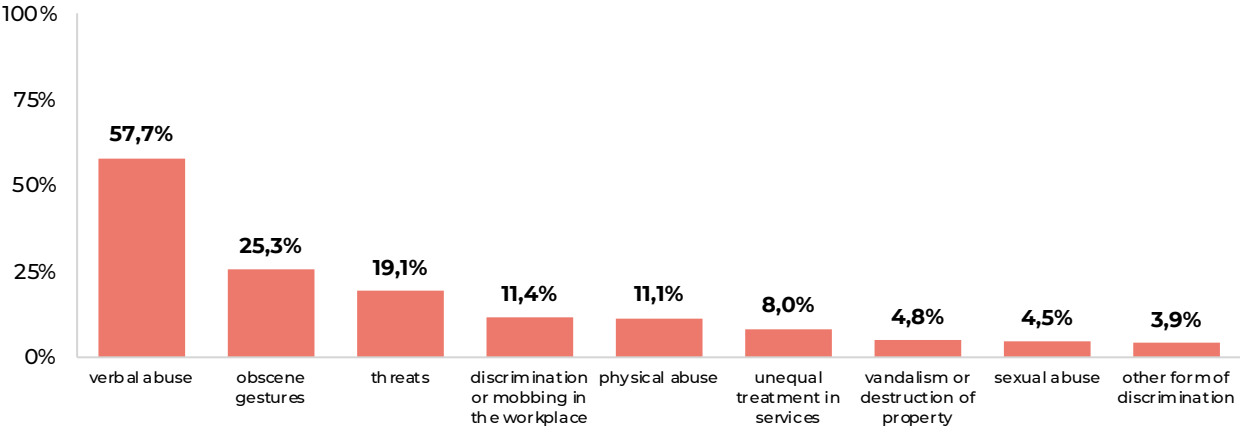


Figure 1. Experience of discrimination by LGBTQIA persons

ESCAPE FROM VIOLENCE

Just like in 2020, as part of the latest study, we examined the relationship between the experience of discrimination and the motivation to leave the country. It turns out that among LGBTQIA individuals considering emigration, over 64% have experienced discrimination.

They harassed my boyfriend at work; colleagues sent him malicious messages about us being together until he broke down and went home to Ukraine, knowing he would immediately be drafted into the military. He died.

Homosexual man, 31 years old,
Śląskie voivodeship

In recent years, we have heard from LGBTQIA individuals multiple times that they are considering emigration. These individuals often base their final decision on factors such as the outcome of parliamentary elections. They also highlight the very negative impact that hatred and systemic oppression have on their lives.

On the other hand, we have also encountered LGBTQIA individuals who openly express their desire to start a family and live peacefully and safely in their local communities, demanding respect and acceptance.

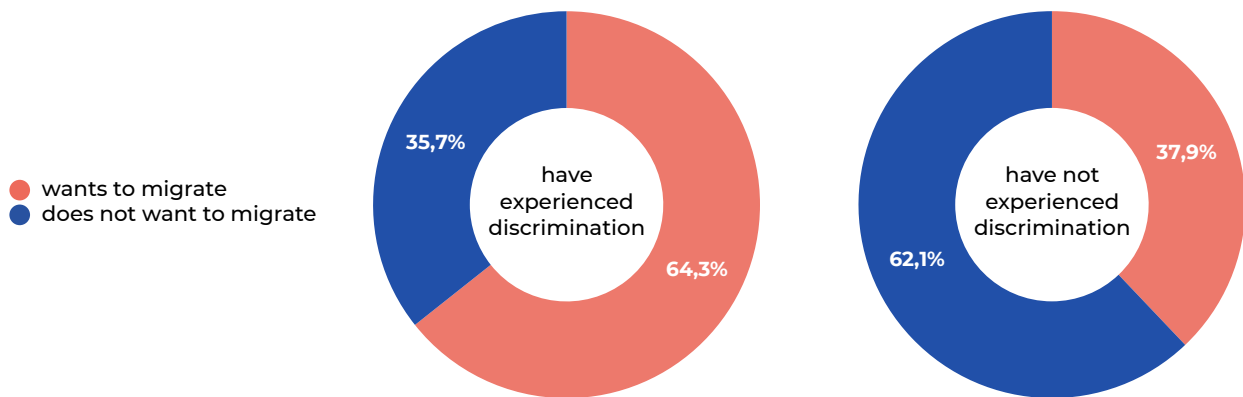


Figure 2. Experience of discrimination and willingness to migrate

NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE LGBTQIA COMMUNITY

The LGBTQIA community in Małopolska, Świętokrzyskie, Podkarpacie, and Śląsk primarily expects equality and anti-discrimination actions from schools and universities (over 85%), the Commissioner for Human Rights (78.5%), the media (75%), local politicians (75%), the Police (72.5%), and parliamentarians (almost 66%). Interestingly, there is a noticeable decrease in trust in institutions - in 2014, 85% of respondents in Małopolska expected the Police to respond to discrimination; in 2020, in Kraków, it was over 80% - currently, the Police rank fifth with 71.9%.

The city's mayor openly humiliates LGBTQIA individuals in public speeches. In a way, other residents feel justified in following in his footsteps.

homoseksualny mężczyzna, 27 lat
woj. śląskie

The LGBTQIA community would also like to see effective punishment for acts of discrimination (79.4%), the implementation of anti-discrimination policies and procedures (78.2%), and expects social campaigns on this topic (73.7%). There is also a desire for anti-discrimination training for employees (68%) and free psychological assistance (64.9%). The high ranking of policies and procedures reflects a growing awareness and a sense that agency is being reclaimed at the local level.

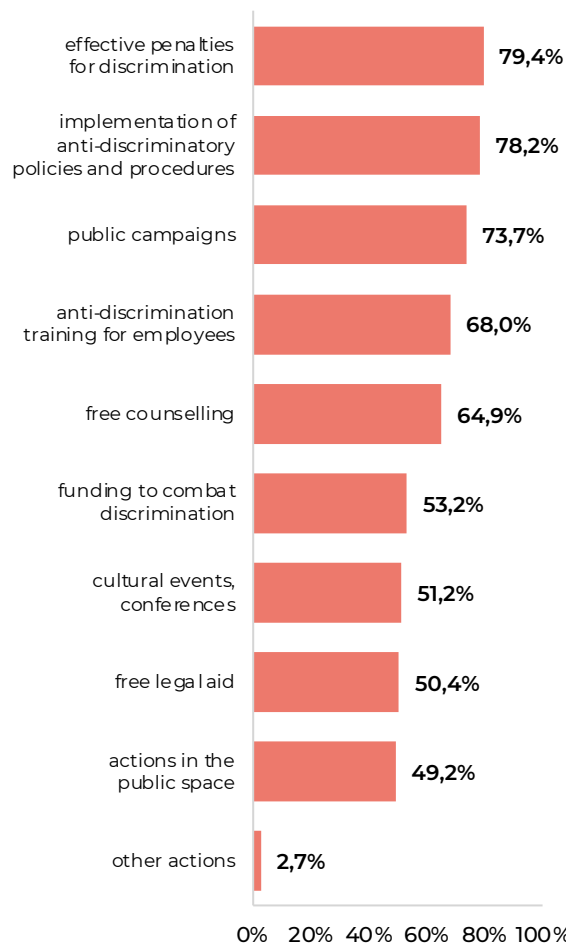


Figure 3. Actions expected by LGBTQIA persons from institutions



WHY ARE THERE NO RAINBOW CITIES IN POLAND?

Many cities around the world strive to become welcoming places for their residents and tourists. How do they achieve this? By locally combating discrimination and implementing relevant equality policies. Those cities that stand out for their openness to LGBTQIA individuals unite under the name Rainbow Cities Network. However, no Polish city is found within this network.

Such a situation may not be surprising when one examines the existing public policies and equality initiatives at the local level. We surveyed over 700 local governments about their experiences in ensuring equality and combating discrimination in their local communities. The results are not entirely optimistic, but there are also glimmers of hope. The bad news? A significant portion of local government units still does not undertake substantial equality actions.

Despite this, we observe an increasing number of them incorporating values such as openness and diversity into newly developed or emerging local development strategies. Simultaneously, due to legal obligations and project requirements, local governments are starting to consider gradually integrating certain non-discrimination aspects, such as disability or gender, into their local policies and actions.

Often, in response to our question about establishing a position dedicated to equal treatment, local governments boasted about the legally required position of accessibility coordinator. However, this individual is responsible for ensuring the accessibility of services, including digital and architectural accessibility for people with specific needs, which has little to do with our question. Nevertheless, the fact remains that an increasing number of cities, including not only provincial capitals, are appointing plenipotentiary for equal treatment.

„People in the office won't be able to work on equal treatment if they don't feel safe in their workplace due to discrimination,” said one commissioner for equal treatment in an interview. According to her, individuals in these positions must first confront internal challenges and politics. It is worth noting that a significant portion of local units focuses its current efforts on strengthening anti-bullying procedures or implementing ethical codes.

However, cities should act proactively and in line with established policies for us to see Polish cities on the list of LGBTQIA-friendly cities.



A BIT OF WARMTH FROM THE FROZEN NORTH

As part of the conducted study, our team had the opportunity to explore Icelandic and Norwegian best practices in city management, with a focus on an intersectional perspective.

It quickly became evident that for these two countries of the icy north, caring for the local community also involves inclusivity and addressing the needs of marginalized groups. Icelandic and Norwegian openness is based on addressing discriminatory factors, preventing discrimination, and integrating LGBTQIA individuals into community life.

One city that takes such actions is Reykjavik. Since the culture of enjoying warm baths is crucial for Icelanders, the city has a well-developed network of public pools. However, changing rooms and toilets, divided based on a binary concept of gender, did not consider the actual diversity of Iceland's community.

Therefore, the City Council made a decision to ensure equality in access to this important part of social life. Additional gender-neutral changing rooms were introduced at public pools, and the staff underwent training on diversity and responding to discriminatory behaviors. Thanks to these measures, all residents and visitors can enjoy the baths, and queer individuals joyfully organize inclusive events at these pools.

Another good example of city policies is the LGBTQIA Action Plans present in many cities in Norway. These plans were developed in collaboration with the community and address its key needs, providing institutional, substantive, and financial support for groups and NGOs working for equality.

The proposed actions cover various aspects of social life, from health and education to culture, social activities, and combating homelessness. The plans guarantee a minimum level of financial support from the city in a given area while ensuring budget flexibility and the adaptability of planned activities to best meet current needs. Simultaneously, the LGBTQIA community is invited to various consultative boards, influencing not only municipal policies but also evaluations of past initiatives.

Implementing good practices from Iceland and Norway is not beyond our reach. Similar actions are also taken here, albeit on an incomparably smaller scale. Perhaps soon, Polish local governments will also surround queer individuals with warmth?

The background image is a photograph of a large crowd of people marching in a city street. They are holding flags, including the Estonian flag. In the background, there is a large, ornate building with multiple towers and arched windows. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter.

WE WANT TO IMPROVE OUR CITIES

In recent years, due to the impasse in national LGBTQIA rights and anti-discrimination efforts, the actions of many individuals and groups have shifted towards our cities and towns. Over the course of several years, significant changes have been observed, especially in larger cities, thanks to the tireless efforts of activists. This has led to the availability of psychological or legal support programs and an increasing number of cultural initiatives. It also happens that selected actions are carried out in collaboration with or with the support of the city. An example of this is anti-discrimination education for office personnel and their subordinate units.

Individuals affiliated with non-governmental organizations explicitly state that they care about their cities and that LGBTQIA individuals can live happily and safely in them. Therefore, these individuals build relationships with officials and advocate to gradually implement equality solutions.

In many cities, in addition to existing Public Benefit Councils, Equal Treatment Councils have emerged as consultative bodies supporting the city in building local policies with the perspective of marginalized groups.

However, Equal Treatment Councils are often treated purely symbolically. „We've had enough of symbolic actions,” says one activist, after LGBTQIA individuals were not treated as partners in discussing the city's actions. The community understands that it should be treated with respect and has the right to express its needs to the city.

Additionally, a significant challenge for smaller organizations is maintaining support for the community. „We have to look for and figure out where we can get funding ourselves,” says another activist, describing the struggle to navigate city competitions in the absence of grant programmes dedicated to equality initiatives. „We often have to give up competitions to give a chance to other organizations,” says an activist from another city, highlighting the limited funding pool and sector solidarity. A good example is Kraków, which, as a city, provides a dedicated website with a description of all equality initiatives and small grants specifically allocated for this purpose.

All activists we spoke to emphasized two things: in working towards local equality, it is crucial to build relationships with people in authority and to be persistent because it is a long-term effort.



TALKING ABOUT EQUALITY

When thinking about conversations and communication around equality locally, it is important to answer a few questions. What do we want to communicate about our needs and why? Why is this change important for us and for others? Am I ready to listen to the other side - in this case, the bureaucratic or institutional side? It's worthwhile to look for examples of solutions, best practices, such as local social participation, from other cities, towns, regions, and even internationally. This makes it easier to implement what has already proven successful, while also establishing relationships with other organizations, including internationally.

Equality pays off. Communities that are noticed and included not only enrich towns and cities with their diversity but also minimize challenges. It is also essential to remember that equality means that local governments and institutions must be prepared for the emergence of groups that are unfriendly, spread hate, and attempt to antagonize.

Another important question is who we want to talk about equality and why? To decision-makers, officials, the public, or the community we want to engage? It is important to name the groups we surround ourselves with and categorize them based on their needs and expectations.

- ▶ individuals and organizations, initiatives from the LGBTQIA sector wanting to work towards local equality solutions,
- ▶ officials of local governments and employees responsible for local equality policies,
- ▶ creators of local government policies, with a special focus on equality, to expand and organize their knowledge and raise awareness of equality and anti-discrimination issues,
- ▶ civil society broadly defined,
- ▶ local media, as a significant communicative element influencing public opinion.

What else can you do? Encourage locally engaged individuals interested in equality issues to familiarize themselves with research results concerning the LGBTQIA community, statistics, and ready-made solutions from other cities and regions. Share local stories - there are plenty of brave and inspiring everyday heroes around us. Consider positive examples that can serve as reinforcement for others. Perhaps it's two lesbian neighbors creating a beautiful family, an openly gay teenager, a young transgender person embraced by the local community, or a bisexual activist organizing local communities? These are all real people and stories we have encountered in recent years.

Local media plays a particular role in the equality discourse: they inform, educate, change language, pressure local authorities, politicians, and shape public opinion. Don't forget about them; it is through them that we can have honest conversations about equality and communicate about it to local communities.



ACT EFFECTIVELY FOR EQUALITY POLICIES

Examining global, national, and local trends, we see an opportunity for local governments to become increasingly LGBTQIA-friendly each year.

Examples from Iceland and Norway, as well as some cities in Poland, prove to us that equal treatment at the local level is achievable. However, if we want to effectively work for equality, we must approach it strategically. As one activist told us: „Sure, we could achieve more, but we never approached it strategically, and we never thought about what more we could accomplish.”

Therefore, if you want to start initiatives in your community, we encourage you to consider these 5 questions:

1. Why do you want to do this?

Both our research and other analyses at the national and European levels clearly show that LGBTQIA individuals still face discrimination. At the same time, if you are reading this publication, it means that you care about your local community taking equality seriously.

As you already know, LGBTQIA individuals also want specific equality actions. So, think about what is most needed in your local context and move forward.

2. What is your goal?

Our research indicates that LGBTQIA individuals want effective measures against violence and the implementation of local equality policies or social campaigns. However, maybe something else is needed for a good start in your city or village? Think about what could be a realistic but locally appropriate goal for your efforts.

3. How do you want to do this?

Local activism involves a variety of tools. Sometimes you may want to attend a meeting with your council member, and sometimes you need to organize a protest in front of an educational authority. Some actions you may want to publicize in the media, while others you'll write in emails in the comfort of your own home. Consider which tools available to you will contribute to your cause.

4. Who are your allies?

There are more people willing to change their environment than you might think. Perhaps you already have such people around you, or maybe there is a non-governmental organization not far from your city that would gladly help you. Maybe there are supportive individuals in the city hall or well-known local figures. Gather your team because it's easier to work for equality together.

5. Who is your target audience?

Depending on the issue, you will have to address different decision-makers: for example, to obtain municipal space for your activities, you will turn to your city or municipality office, and to ensure inclusive healthcare in a hospital, you will talk to county or regional authorities. Look at your goal and check the competencies of the relevant unit.

Are you done answering these questions? Congratulations! You've just outlined your first advocacy strategy, which you can expand with friends and then use it as a basis for action. If you need any support, don't hesitate to write to us. We'll be happy to help!

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE AUTHORITIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS

- ▶ Provide anti-discrimination training as part of the implementation for all local government employees.
- ▶ Conduct diagnostics with a particular focus on the perspective of marginalized groups.
- ▶ Incorporate the issues of respecting diversity and combating discrimination into the Code of Ethics for officials.
- ▶ Appoint a person responsible for the city's equality policy in a cross-departmental impact position.
- ▶ Establish a civil dialogue body on combating discrimination and equal treatment with real influence on unit policies.
- ▶ Provide a dedicated budget for equality actions, including a budget for competitions dedicated to non-governmental organizations.
- ▶ Facilitate the development of civil society focused on equality topics and help it engage in unit activities.
- ▶ Cross-sectionally consider the needs of marginalized groups in taking actions.

- ▶ Include issues of combating discrimination and equality in unit development strategies and any other legal acts. Join networks and coalitions of cities creating equality policies.
- ▶ Ensure the accessibility of information regarding equality actions.
- ▶ Reach out to the LGBTQIA community and involve it in social participation.
- ▶ Develop local policies based on recommendations from the Rainbow Cities Network.

TO THE MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND ADMINISTRATION

- ▶ Support local government units in implementing adequate equality policies.
- ▶ Provide training for local government representatives in the field of combating discrimination at the local level.
- ▶ Introduce necessary legal changes to enact a law concerning the inclusion of marginalized groups in social life and ensure the appointment of an equal treatment plenipotentiary at every level of public administration, modeled after the Act on Ensuring Accessibility for Persons with Specific Needs.

TO LOCAL LGBTQIA ORGANISATIONS

- ▶ Listen to the needs of the local community and consult on the actions taken.
- ▶ Publicize the issues and needs of the local community.
- ▶ Build relationships with local authorities and collaborate on organized activities.
- ▶ Participate in consultative processes.
- ▶ Report cases of discrimination and human rights violations.
- ▶ Speak out in public debates, including engaging with the media.

TO THE COMMUNITY

- ▶ Actively participate in local social life.
- ▶ Engage with local organizations or groups, or establish your own.
- ▶ Expand your knowledge, including through participation in human rights workshops.
- ▶ Meet with local representatives of authority and address your needs.

Równość.org.pl Foundation was established in 2013 in Kraków, and we recently celebrated our 10th anniversary.

We support and empower local LGBTQIA communities throughout Poland by sharing knowledge, networking, assisting local groups and leaders, and encouraging advocacy and collaboration.

Do you want to get involved in promoting equality but don't know where to start? Do you influence equality policies and want to enhance your knowledge? Are you interested in becoming more involved in local government? Do you have an interest in rainbow activism?

Reach out to us at **info@rownosc.org.pl!**

Also, visit **milk.org.pl**, an activist-social portal where you can find interesting articles, interviews, as well as simple guides related to LGBTQIA activism.

SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Your financial support can help us reach an even larger audience and make their lives more equal.

Make a donation or set up a standing order.
Help us pave the way for equality

Address: *Fundacja Równość.org.pl
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Reference: *Donation for statutory purposes*
Account: *64 2130 0004 2001 0998 5254 0001*
Bank: *Volkswagen Bank GmbH Sp. z o.o.
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You can also donate via our website:
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Project is realised by:



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