

A portrait of Petra De Sutter, a woman with short, curly blonde hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark blue jacket over a light blue top and a gold chain necklace. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

PRIDE TALK'25

AMSTERDAM

Petra De Sutter
In ten years

DE NIEUWE KERK AMSTERDAM

19 JULY 2025

PRIDE TALK AMSTERDAM

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TEXT

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This speech was delivered by Petra De Sutter in Amsterdam on 19 July 2025. Her exact words may slightly differ from this text.

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PRIDE TALK'25



AMSTERDAM

DE NIEUWE KERK
AMSTERDAM
19 JULI 2025

INTRODUCTION

Paul Mosterd

Deputy Director De Nieuwe Kerk

SPEECH

Mariëlle Paul

*Demissionary Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and
Equal Opportunities (until 5 September, 2025, in the Schoof cabinet)*

RECITAL OF THE 'REGENBOOGGEDICHT'

Babeth Fonchie Fotchind

Poet, writer and lawyer

PRIDE TALK'25

Petra De Sutter

*Professor of gynecology, rector of Ghent University, and from 2020
to 2025, Deputy Prime Minister in the De Croo cabinet of the federal
Belgian government – making her the first transgender person to
hold such a position*

Dear friends,

What an honor it is to stand before you and give this *Pride Talk 2025*.

Like so many among us, I have walked a long and winding road — from doubt and defiance, through self-hatred (with stops in the darkest valleys), toward self-discovery, acceptance, and ultimately, pride.

And then, just when you think the hardest part is behind you, you suddenly become a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community. Hooray! Not just with applause, but also with the task of continuing our struggle visibly — an honor *and* a responsibility.

Throughout my academic and political career, the fight for LGBTQ+ rights has never been a footnote — it has been a central thread. As a specialist in reproductive medicine, that journey began some 25 years ago by advocating for the rights of lesbian couples wishing to have children. Then came gay couples and surrogacy. Then reproductive rights for trans people also came to the forefront.

That last issue, in particular, was sensitive. At the time, the attitude was: be grateful if you even get access to gender-affirming treatment. Having children? For many, that was a step too far. In 2001, I published an article advocating for the right of trans men and women to preserve their reproductive cells before starting hormonal or surgical treatment. Back then, it was a shock. Today, in Belgium and the Netherlands, it's considered common sense. Thankfully.

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When I entered politics in 2014, I became a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – the human rights watchdog of greater Europe (nowadays without Russia, for obvious reasons). There, I learned how human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are the invisible – yet absolutely essential – driving forces behind peace, stability, and equal rights for all.

The Council of Europe is the proud guardian of the European Convention on Human Rights and of the European Court in Strasbourg. And when it comes

to LGBTQ+ rights, the Council has not stood still. Since 2000, a total of eleven resolutions have been adopted to advance our rights – often a true feat of diplomacy in countries like Russia, Turkey, the Caucasus, and also parts of Eastern Europe.

The first Resolution (No. 1474, from the year 2000) brought attention to the situation of lesbians and gay men. Ten years later came Resolution No. 1728, which condemned discrimination based on both sexual orientation *and* gender identity. It called for equal treatment in schools, in the workplace, in the media, and in healthcare.

In 2013, Resolution No. 1948 followed, strongly criticizing homophobic ‘propaganda laws’ and the persecution of LGBTQ organizations – especially in Russia.

Between 2014 and 2019, I had the opportunity to witness three resolutions firsthand.

Resolution No. 2048 (2015) focused on transgender rights: legal recognition, combating discrimination, and access to healthcare. I still remember speaking in the Assembly with goosebumps on my arms — and receiving a long round of applause. A moment that still moves me today.

In 2017, Resolution No. 2191 on intersex persons was adopted. It called for the prohibition of medical interventions without consent and for compensation for victims. Based on this resolution, I spoke in 2018 at a conference of pediatric urologists about the ethical conflict between utilitarianism – the guiding principle in medical practice, aiming for the greatest good for the greatest number – and human rights, where even one violation is one too many. Since then, some countries have been considering legal changes, although progress has been slow.

That same year, Resolution No. 2230 called for the protection of LGBTQ+ individuals in Chechnya. In 2018, Resolution No. 2239 followed, emphasizing the right to family life – including legal recognition.

More recently, in 2022, Resolution No. 2417 condemned the rising hate speech – in particular the anti-gender and anti-trans rhetoric. Resolution No. 2418 pointed to violations in the South Caucasus.

And in 2024, Resolution No. 2543 followed (on freedom of expression and assembly), as well as Resolution No. 2576, which specifically focused on violence against and discrimination of LBQ women. Intersectionality, education, and political responsibility were central themes in that resolution.

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Let's return home for a moment. Belgium and the Netherlands have truly been proud pioneers of LGBTQ+ rights. The Netherlands was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001, with Belgium following in 2003. It was the early 21st century – a progressive wind was blowing through the Low Countries. Alongside same-sex marriage came advances in euthanasia legislation, anti-discrimination laws, and the principle of self-determination. It feels like yesterday, yet it's already been more than twenty years.

The past few decades felt like a steady march toward equality. Legislation was amended, discrimination was outlawed, and rainbow crosswalks and flags adorned city halls. But today, the key question is: is that hard-won sense of safety sustainable? Where will we stand ten years from now, in a world increasingly under pressure?

Belgium and the Netherlands still rank among the global leaders in LGBTQ+ legislation.

Think: marriage, adoption, parental rights, and legal gender recognition without mandatory medical procedures. And you can see that reflected in the data.

According to the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map 2025, Belgium ranks 2nd with a score of 85%. We perform well in areas such as anti-discrimination, marriage, adoption, and transgender rights — but intersex rights and recognition of non-binary persons remain areas for improvement.

The Netherlands, once ranked higher, now stands at 13th place with a score of 64%. Strong in marriage equality and trans rights, but lacking explicit protections for intersex people, clear rules for legal gender recognition, hate crime legislation, and the rights of LGBTQ refugees.

Countries can drop in ranking because others overtake them, but also due to actual decline. Take Hungary or the United Kingdom: the latter scored 86% in 2015, but now only 46%, mainly due to the erosion of trans rights.

Our strong position is no accident, but the result of decades of struggle by activists, legal experts, and political engagement – across party lines. There is also increasing attention to intersectionality and mental well-being. But we all know: the work is not finished. On the contrary, a counter-movement is rising that deliberately seeks to roll back LGBTQ+ rights.

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While laws are improving in Western Europe, we see something different worldwide: polarization, nationalism, and increasing pressure on LGBTQ+ rights.

In 2019, ‘LGBT-free zones’ were declared in Poland, supposedly to protect ‘traditional values.’ Pride events are banned or violently disrupted in countries such as Russia, Turkey, Serbia, and recently Hungary – although the recent Pride in Budapest drew 200,000 people despite the ban.

In many countries, activists face the risk of prosecution. Even in the United States – once a frontrunner – the tide has turned. Since Trump, we have seen a wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation, especially targeting trans people. This includes bans on gender-affirming care, restrictions on education (the notorious ‘Don’t Say Gay’ laws), and even attempts to criminalize drag shows.

The most well-known is the Parental Rights in Education Bill, better known as ‘Don’t Say Gay,’ enacted in Florida in 2022. This law prohibits teaching about sexual orientation or gender identity in elementary schools (for children aged 6 to 8). This is happening in a country that was once the symbol of freedom – oh, the irony.

Politically, the LGBTQ+ community today again serves as a scapegoat in a culture war primarily fueled by far-right forces. The core of their rhetoric? The so-called ‘natural order’ – an ideological IKEA kit where the traditional family turns out to be the only correct assembly manual.

According to recent research by sociologist David Paternotte and a report from the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights – an organization of parliamentarians which I chaired from 2018 to 2020 – there is a global effort to ideologically embed this ‘natural order.’ This worldview holds that only male-female relationships are legitimate, and that any other form – such as homosexuality or gender diversity – is not only deviant but outright dangerous.

Let me zoom in on the work of David Paternotte, affiliated with the Université libre de Bruxelles, and his colleague Roman Kuhar. They conducted extensive research into the phenomenon known as ‘gender ideology’ and the rise of anti-gender movements in Europe. They analyze not only where the term comes from, but also who uses it and how these groups collaborate internationally to obstruct LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality.

The term ‘gender ideology’ emerged in the 1990s when the Catholic Church began using it as a rallying cry. The trigger was UN conferences on women’s rights and sexual health – Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995 – which advocated for sexual and reproductive rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. Religious conservatives saw this as an attack on the traditional order and labeled this progress ‘gender ideology’: an ideological bogeyman, useful for those who prefer to sweep modernization under the rug. Essentially, it implies the existence of a movement aimed at erasing the differences between the sexes. Everything gender-neutral – not just the bathrooms... An absurd theory, but one that found fertile ground among reactionary conspiracy thinkers. However, it fuels the fight against gender equality and women’s rights, against LGB rights, and of course, trans rights.

Paternotte and Kuhar show that behind this term lies a complex network of conservative and right-wing groups. Not a monolithic block, but rather a diverse grouping with a shared mission: to halt progressive gender rights. And they operate on a large scale – not only nationally, but also transnationally. They share rhetoric, strategies, and contact information at conferences and through networks.

In Poland, Hungary, Russia, Italy, France, Slovakia, and Croatia – you could call it the ‘axis of anti-gender sentiment’ – these movements are particularly active.

Their actors are diverse:

- * Religious institutions, such as the Polish Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, provide ideological ammunition. The latter also receives generous financial support from Russian oligarchs.
- * Conservative NGOs like Ordo Iuris in Poland or the Hungarian Civil Society Forum for the Family use their legal expertise to promote anti-LGBTQ legislation.
- * Political parties such as PiS (Law and Justice) in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, Rassemblement National in France, the Lega in Italy, Vlaams Belang and the PVV in our regions, exchange strategic tips to organize the backlash.

And it doesn't stop at words. There are tangible consequences:

- * In Poland, 2019: more than 100 municipalities declared themselves 'LGBT-free zones.' Symbolic, but in practice fostering discrimination and rolling back rights. Ordo Iuris? They took center stage. And lessons on sexual diversity? Of course, they were scrapped.
- * In Hungary, 2020: the government banned the use of the word 'gender' in education, and legal gender changes were also prohibited. Not linguistic purism, but outright repression.
- * In Italy, Lega has campaigned for years against gender education in schools. And even though not all legislative proposals pass, the tone of the debate is shifting toward: 'The family consists of a father, a mother, and no gender diversity.'
- * And in France, Rassemblement National is attacking everything that smells of LGBTQ+ rights, with campaigns portraying 'gender ideology' as a sort of devilish concept threatening the sacred French family.

All these movements are, unsurprisingly, funded by conservative religious institutions and private foundations such as the American Bradley Foundation or the Charles Koch Foundation. Nationalist governments, especially in Poland and Hungary, also invest money and influence.

According to Paternotte and Kuhar, ‘gender ideology’ is not just a term, but a political toolkit. It is the glue that connects an international network of conservative actors – a network that, through ideology, lobbying, and legislation, seeks to roll back social progress on gender and sexuality. And unfortunately, with success, as evidenced by developments in countries such as Poland and Hungary.

This rhetoric has now also seeped into international institutions. At the United Nations and the Council of Europe, resistance to LGBTQ+ resolutions is growing, often under pressure from conservative governments and religious lobbyists. What once seemed self-evident – the right to simply exist – is once again up for debate.

I myself had the privilege of participating for several years in the annual UN summit on women’s rights: the Commission on the Status of Women, or CSW. This commission, active since 1946 within the UN Economic and Social Council, is the central platform where countries come together to shape women’s rights and gender equality internationally.

But don’t be mistaken: despite its progressive mission, the CSW is also a diplomatic minefield. Where more than 190 countries gather, more than 190 views come along. Especially countries from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe hold on to traditional gender roles and resist LGBTQ+ inclusion in official UN documents. The influence of organized anti-gender groups is growing, along with the taboo on terms like ‘sexual education,’ ‘gender diversity,’ and ‘sexual orientation and gender identity.’ Consensus is the magic word in UN texts, so if even one country objects, the inclusive wording is dropped. The result? LGBTQ+ rights are watered down or completely ignored, and intersectional issues – such as those affecting lesbian, bisexual, or transgender women – disappear entirely from view.

Now, although this falls outside today’s topic, I want to mention it nonetheless: the so-called ‘natural order of things’ goes beyond LGBTQ+ rights. It also targets gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, free access to contraception, and safe, legal abortion. We are talking about the pronatalist movement, which wants ‘our’ population to have more children as a counterbalance to migration. An ideology deeply rooted in the infamous ‘great replacement theory.’ Add to that the ‘tradwives’ – women longing for the 1950s – and the manosphere & MRAs (men’s rights activists),

men advocating for men's rights, and you get a cocktail of patriarchal nostalgia on steroids.

And then there are the TERFs: Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists. They believe that being a woman is purely biologically determined and consider transgender women not only as 'not women' but even as a threat. The United Kingdom is somewhat of a TERF epicenter. Groups like Woman's Place UK and the LGB Alliance, as well as figures such as J.K. Rowling, exert political pressure there to exclude gender identity from equality legislation. They delayed and weakened the reform of the Gender Recognition Act and caused fierce divisions within both the feminist and LGBTQ+ communities.

Elsewhere too – in the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe – TERF ideas are emerging. Their influence on transgender healthcare, education, sports, and legislation is growing. Notably, TERFs are increasingly aligning themselves with broader anti-gender networks, including populist and far-right parties. In a sense, you could say that the TERF movement has been hijacked by political forces with a very different agenda than women's emancipation.

This TERF feminism is miles away from the inclusive feminism of Simone de Beauvoir, who already stated in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Or Judith Butler, who took it a step further in *Gender Trouble*, arguing that gender is not a biological fact but a performative social construct. Their theories form the foundation of contemporary inclusive feminism, which makes room for gender diversity and fluidity.

TERFs reject these insights, as well as the feminist tradition they are built upon. They return to a biological essentialism, albeit under a progressive guise.

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Dear friends, history is a stubborn teacher. Whenever things go wrong in the world – economically, socially, or geopolitically – it is minorities who suffer first. We don't have to look far for examples: think of the Jewish community in the 1930s. Or more recently, migrants and Black or Latino communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. And now? Trump II is back. Need I say more?

Today we face a cocktail of problems that are hard to digest: the climate crisis, migration pressure, wars, rising living costs. Add a dash of frustration, and you get a classic recipe: people look for someone to blame. Preferably someone who looks different, speaks differently, or simply wants to be themselves.

In such times, hard-won rights don't disappear with a bang, but with a creeping sigh.

So let's dig a little deeper: why does this keep happening over and over again?

In times of crisis, people feel insecure. And when the world is shaky, we want clear answers. Preferably simple ones. Unfortunately, simple answers to complex questions are rarely the right ones. But they are convenient for pointing fingers. At those who are 'different': ethnic minorities, migrants, LGBTQ people, religious groups. A scapegoat gives the illusion of control. And illusions are stubborn things.

On top of that, there are always political players – let's call them populists with a knack for marketing – who cleverly ride that wave of frustration. They turn those 'others' into a problem and present themselves as the solution. Minorities thus become not only targets but also political instruments. The result? Rights we thought were secure suddenly come under scrutiny again. Equality, once more, proves not to be guaranteed.

Crisis situations also weaken social cohesion and the willingness to show solidarity. People focus more on their own survival and security, causing empathy and support for vulnerable groups to decline.

History shows time and again: when the system cracks, it's the vulnerable who end up under the rubble.

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And that brings me back to us. The LGBTQ community.

We have more than enough reason to remain vigilant. Because safety is not just a matter of laws. You can be protected on paper, yet still feel unsafe in the streets. Or online. Or at school, at work, in the media.

What we're seeing today is alarming: increasing hate speech, physical violence, and efforts to undermine diversity education – even in countries that proudly call themselves tolerant.

But – and here comes the good news – there is also reason for hope.

Because we are more *visible* than ever. In the media, in politics, in education, in business. Young people are coming out more often and at a younger age. And they're not staying quiet. They speak, write, post, and protest. And that's fantastic.

We're seeing a new generation rise up – one for whom diversity is the norm, not the exception.

International support is also growing: cities, universities, NGOs, activists, and yes – even companies – are standing up for LGBTQ rights. And even in countries where the climate is hostile, our community remains visible, organized, and determined.

That visibility is essential. Because what the world will look like in ten years for LGBTQ+ people doesn't depend only on election results or legislative changes. It depends on the choices we make *today*.

Tolerance is not a law of nature. It is a culture. And like any culture, it must be nurtured, protected, and renewed.

The backlash we're witnessing today is *not* the end. It's a wake-up call. A call for vigilance, solidarity, and creativity. A new beginning.

And yes, there is certainly reason for concern – but also for confidence. Because our community is seasoned. We have experience with resistance. We are resilient. And above all: we are not alone.

With the support of allies, with strong legislation, and by continuing to tell our stories, we can keep moving forward.

And yes – polarization is real. That's undeniable. In some countries, LGBTQ rights are progressing – think of marriage equality now being recognized in Cuba, Mexico, Taiwan, and Thailand. Elsewhere, they are regressing –

Russia, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom.

But when you look at the bigger picture, the net balance is positive.

And that, dear friends, is why I continue to hope. Not blindly, not naively – but consciously.

If we stay vigilant, if we keep fighting together, then ten years from now, the world will look better for our community. Not worse.

Thank you.

Professor **Petra De Sutter** (1963) is a medical doctor and gynecologist, former head of the Department of Reproductive Medicine at Ghent University Hospital, and currently serves as rector of Ghent University. From 2020 to 2025 she served as Deputy Prime Minister in the De Croo cabinet of the federal Belgian government – making her the first transgender person to hold such a position. In addition, she was a Senator for the Green party (Groen) and a member of the Council of Europe.

She wrote about her remarkable and activist career in an impressive book: *[Over]Leven*, published by Manteau in 2015. She also authored *Wie redt de toekomst? Op zoek naar hoop in verwarrende tijden* in 2023. Her most recent publication is *Dagboek van een politica*, also published by Manteau in May 2025.

Petra De Sutter, *Pride Talk '25* at De Nieuwe Kerk, 19 July 2025



PHOTO Isabell Janssen

The annual *Pride Talk* at De Nieuwe Kerk offers an international platform to a leading thinker, activist, or opinion leader to reflect – with a fresh and critical perspective – on the position of the queer community in the Netherlands and in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam was once allowed to call itself the Gay Capital of the world. Is that a position that still exists? If so, what does it entail? Do we still aspire to this position today? Does it fit the diversity of the multi-coloured LGBTQIA+ community? How do foreign countries see our community? And how do we in Amsterdam and the Netherlands relate to the international community and this global struggle of inequality, discrimination and violence? The annual *Pride Talk* puts this question on the agenda.

The first edition took place in 2023 and was delivered by legendary American activist David Mixner (1946–2024). He was a writer, fundraiser, and performer. In the early 1960s, he campaigned for the Kennedy brothers and for Martin Luther King. His *Pride Talk* was titled: *My concept of sin is not to care*. The second edition in 2024 featured Mpho Tutu van Furth (1963) from South Africa – an Anglican priest, author, and human rights activist, and the daughter of activist Nomalizo Leah Tutu and Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu. Her *Pride Talk* was titled: *God Unlimited*. Both talks are available to read online at nieuwekerk.nl.