

Why tracking anti-LGBT war crimes in Ukraine is so difficult

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Victims are reluctant to report sexual violence and fear homophobia from Ukrainian authorities

A Ukrainian human rights organisation that monitors anti-LGBT violence across the country has spoken out about the difficulties of tracking suspected war crimes committed by Russian militants.

More than 65,000 war crimes have been reported since Russia's full-scale invasion a year ago, [according](#) to Ukraine's prosecutor general Andriy Kostin, but victims face immense difficulties in obtaining justice.

Oleksandr Zinchenkov, who coordinates a countrywide network of hate crime monitors and provides legal assistance to clients on behalf of the rights organisation Nash Svit (Our World), told openDemocracy he believes anti-LGBT attacks include murders, sexual violence, kidnappings and torture.

"In cases where the sexual orientation of the victims becomes known to the occupiers, a discriminatory attitude always arises," he added. "This causes fear and serious concern among LGBT people in the occupied territories."

The support Nash Svit can provide to victims is limited because of the ongoing war, but the team is committed to gathering as much information about war crimes as possible and reporting this evidence to the authorities.

Nash Svit's monitors have built up a reputation in their local areas as independent individuals who will not judge victims or pressure them to provide details that could create further trauma. Recovering from physical wounds and mental distress takes time and support, so the group offers help from medical experts, including therapists.

"Investigating these crimes and bringing the perpetrators to justice is out of our control. But we will try to do the best we can," said Nash Svit co-founder Andrii Kravchuk.

"I think that it's only after the end of this war that the investigation of these crimes will be possible. Crimes that were committed during the Yugoslav Wars [in the 1990s] are still being investigated by international and national courts – it's not a short process."

The human rights organisation spends most of its time monitoring anti-LGBT attacks on others, but sometimes violence reaches its own doorstep. Days after Russia invaded Ukraine last year, armed militants broke into the group's Kyiv office, ransacked the premises and threatened staff.

"After that, we have to pay more attention to our safety," said Zinchenkov. More than a year later, staff have still not returned due to concerns over their safety.

Reluctance to report sexual violence

In recent months, the office of Ukraine's prosecutor general has been working with Nash Svit to get information on possible anti-LGBT war crimes to investigate. It's the first time they have reached out directly to the LGBT group.

"The head of the sexual war crimes department wrote to us via Facebook. They saw our annual report and offered to cooperate in cases of sexual violence by the Russian occupiers," explained Zinchenkov.

Experts from Nash Svit had a meeting with the department's staff in early March. They hope the partnership will improve the investigation of anti-LGBT war crimes – but are mindful that victims must be supported when it comes to officially reporting their experiences.

The sheer brutality of the attacks reported to the group, whose details have not been verified, affects both victims and monitors. "Sometimes it's hard for us to believe the horrors they tell us about," said Zinchenkov.

Many of the victims are deeply impacted by the attacks they have experienced and don't want to report what has happened to the authorities, according to Alexandra Semenova, one of Nash Svit's monitors, because of widespread homophobia within Ukrainian society.

"[The victims] just don't believe in our system, in our state, because they are convinced that no one in Ukraine wants to protect the rights of LGBTIQ people. It is easier for people to survive this situation on their own or to visit a psychologist," she said.

"Obviously, in a homophobic society, it is better to remain silent than to be known as a victim of such a crime. In one case, when the victim committed suicide, his relatives did not want to tell anyone that he committed suicide due to sexual violence, but said that he died from alcohol," adds Zinchenkov.

The practical difficulties of tracking suspected war crimes during an active war are immense. Connecting with victims in the occupied areas is impossible, but even those who manage to leave hold out little hope that their attacks will be taken seriously and sensitively.

"Victims who end up in Ukrainian-controlled territory are reluctant to report such cases, fearing [further] discrimination by Ukrainian police due to their sexual orientation," said Zinchenkov. "Also, they do not want to look like victims of sexual violence."

Prosecutor Oleksandr Kleshchenko told openDemocracy the office had received information about alleged war crimes against LGBT people during the occupation of Kherson by the Russian military, but that "the law enforcement agencies of Kherson have no reports of the offences described".

When the prosecutor general's office contacted Nash Svit to get additional information on the circumstances of the alleged crimes, "no additional information was received to confirm or deny the commission of the crime or information about the victims was not received. In view of the above, there are currently no grounds for taking any response measures."

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