

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Russia > LGBT+ (Russia) > **Russian LGBT+ groups declare solidarity with Ukraine and all its people**

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A message from a Russian LGBT+ activist

Monday 7 March 2022, by [GARSHINA Diane](#) (Date first published: 4 March 2022).

We can't stop this war, started by our own government, but we can express our solidarity and support for Ukraine and all its people

Working in human rights in Russia can give one a misleading sense of invincibility. Despite the dehumanising legislation and fact that the government sees enemies in its own citizens, human rights activists have learned to adapt and persevere. This is especially true for Russian LGBT+ activists, who grapple not only with legitimised state homophobia, but considerable social stigma. And yet nothing could have prepared us for what happened on the morning of 24 February, when our country invaded Ukraine.

Ironically, I had never felt more Russian than I did in that moment. The immediate reaction is to dissociate yourself from it. The government's actions are appalling, violence is never the answer, and we, as the Russian people, obviously did not choose this. This is not our war. Right?

But it is impossible to escape the thought that, somehow, you have let the unforgivable happen right under your nose; that right now, on the other side of the Ukrainian border, people are fleeing their homes and fearing for their lives because of troops carrying your flag. The helplessness that comes with that realisation is too overwhelming to bear.

Slogans, petitions and statements

I was not alone in feeling that way. On the very first day of the invasion – I am not going to call it a “special military operation”, as Russian law now demands, promising [up to 15 years in prison for spreading “fake news”](#) – many, it appears, were too shocked to find any words. Instead, a simple slogan, ‘no to war’, spread across the social media networks of LGBT+ organisations. They also started promoting a petition against the war, as did other human rights initiatives in Russia, which (so far) has gathered [more than one million signatures](#).

Some organisations made official statements. The Russian LGBT Network, which unites numerous LGBT+ initiatives and activists throughout the country, [expressed “solidarity with the society, LGBT+ and the human rights community of Ukraine”](#), and called on everyone to look for “reliable sources of information”. Charitable Foundation Sphere, the largest LGBT+ foundation in Russia, [declared](#) its clear stand against war, saying “the norms of international humanitarian law and international human rights law must be dutifully respected”.

The following day, Sphere [announced](#) it would provide emergency assistance to LGBT+ Ukrainians in difficulty while in Russia, as well as to LGBT+ refugees in the border territories.

Igor Kochetkov, founder of Sphere and co-founder of the Russian LGBT Network, has launched an [open letter](#) from Russian LGBT+ activists. The letter appeals to President Putin to implement a ceasefire. It says: “There are a lot of problems in our country, including the spread of anti-human ideas, which often come from high-ranking officials. Let’s start ‘denazification’ with them instead of the neighbouring state.”

It also addresses the Ukrainian people, saying: “This war is not fought on our behalf. It is with bitterness and pain that we are thinking of Russia bringing you so much suffering. We have you in our minds and will do everything that we can to stop this horror.” The letter has been signed by (among others) such well-known LGBT+ activists as Mikhail Tumasov, Evgeny Pisemsky (editor-in-chief of queer media outlet [Parni+](#)), Kirill Fedorov (Psychology for Human Rights Movement) and Zlata Semenovna (Alliance of Heterosexuals and LGBT People for Equality).

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Making proclamations might appear fruitless, because the Russian government has consistently been deaf and blind to the pleas of its people. However, it is also a way of uniting the community, of encouraging people to take a stand. The ultimate goal is to move each individual to believe that, if you yell loudly enough, if you do not let yourself stop, if you join in the chorus of other voices just like yours, eventually you will be heard.

‘Foreign agents’ and ‘treason’

Unfortunately, providing more direct help to Ukraine became impossible almost as soon as the war began. While LGBT+ activists in Russia were pondering how best to publicise ways to donate to LGBT+ initiatives in Ukraine, such as [Insight](#), which were helping people to leave the country, the Russian prosecutor general jumped in, stating that “provision of financial, logistical, consulting or other assistance to a foreign state” might be considered “treason”, punishable by up to 20 years in prison. According to independent media, a few people reported that their bank cards were blocked after they had transferred funds to Ukraine.

Another daily challenge, which seems especially acute at the moment, is being labelled a “foreign agent”. This is almost inescapable for independent media, but LGBT+ organisations face the same danger – Sphere was deemed a “foreign agent” by the Ministry of Justice as far back as 2016.

In my opinion, this happens because LGBT+ thinking does not fit the state rhetoric of ‘traditional values’, which are part of the Russian regime’s attempts to enforce an “un-Western” ideology – as if a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity could be flown in from abroad. Having “foreign agent” status in Russia doesn’t mean a human rights organisation is banned or can’t work, but it can damage its credibility (all content has to be labelled with a disclaimer) and thus decrease the effectiveness of its appeals to the public.

In other words, we can only do so much. I would love to say that we are strong, we are standing tall in the face of adversity, and we are doing everything in our power.

However, reality forces us to feel muzzled and straitjacketed. We are trying to break free from a tight grip that is suffocating not only us, but oh-so-many people on the other side of the iron curtain that is about to fall once again.

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Open Democracy

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