

Russian soldiers accused of targeted anti-gay attacks in Ukraine

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Exclusive: Russian troops guilty of homophobic abuse including sexual violence and imprisonment, says LGBTIQ group

Invading Russian soldiers have been accused of targeted anti-gay attacks against Ukrainians, including sexual violence, rape, imprisonment, assault, theft and attempted murder, openDemocracy can reveal.

Since the war began, Ukrainian LGBT human rights organisation Nash Svit (Our World) has been speaking to victims to document these human rights violations by Russian occupiers.

Of the ten cases identified by Nash Svit, and exclusively shared with openDemocracy, eight are believed to have occurred in the Kherson region, which was the only regional capital captured by Russian forces. The other two are believed to have happened in Mariupol.

Alexander was detained at a Russian filtration checkpoint in March. The 31-year-old had been attempting to leave the city of Mariupol, in Ukraine's south-east, after it was almost completely destroyed by Russian bombs.

But when soldiers went through messages on Alexander's phone, they realised he was gay. He says this is the reason he was sent to the notorious prison in Olenivka, in the Donetsk region, on supposed terrorism charges. There, prison administrators told other prisoners about Alexander's sexual orientation, and he was subjected to repeated sexual violence on a daily basis from other inmates.

"The prisoners began to harass me," Alexander said. "For a while I resisted but after a few days, I was forced to do what they said. Almost every evening, 10 to 15 men raped me, until I was released by the representatives of the administration."

Volunteers Ilya and Mykola were also stopped at a Russian checkpoint in March. The friends, aged 23 and 50 respectively, were returning to Kherson from Mykolaiv with medicines and food for local people when they encountered a Russian military roadblock near the village of Posad-Pokrovske.

Three armed soldiers searched their car, taking Ilya and Mykola's mobile phones. After finding a gay porn video on Ilya's phone, the soldiers began punching both men, leaving visible bruises on their hands and shoulders. Homophobic insults were also levelled at the pair, with the soldiers asking: "Are you a couple? Gays or real men? Who is who, who is a girl, who can do a blow job?"

The soldiers took half the medicine and food, as well as around UAH1,000 (£23) in cash. In total, they unlawfully seized around UAH16,000 (around £375) worth of humanitarian aid and cash.

Ilya and Mykola were held at the checkpoint for around two hours, before the soldiers told them to “get the fuck out” when their attention turned to a minibus. As they drove away, the soldiers shot at them, with bullets being left in the car.

Mykola had not known Ilya was gay before the soldiers outed him, and he reacted badly. As they reached Kherson, Mykola dropped off Ilya saying: “I don’t want to see you anymore, because of you fucking bastard, we were almost killed, a lot of things are stolen, my car is damaged.”

Monitoring the violations

Nash Svit has a network of ‘monitors’ across Ukraine, who proactively look for reports of anti-LGBTIQ attacks – constantly checking social media networks to look for posts from victims. The monitors then reach out to the victims offering support, and asking for more information so they can send the details to the police.

Before the war, the monitors would also regularly hold small events in their cities to talk about why it is important to report cases of discrimination and hate crimes against LGBTIQ people. But monitors, especially those in occupied territories, can no longer run these events. Identifying LGBTIQ hate crimes is now done in a range of ways, including through word of mouth, says Alexandra Semenova, one of Nash Svit monitors.

“The monitors have been working in the network for quite a long time and LGBTIQ representatives know that there is a network of monitors, so if there is a case, they immediately contact a representative of the network,” says Semenova, who has been part of the network for around eight years.

There are nine monitors from different Ukrainian cities in Nash Svit’s network. Despite the massive impact the invasion has had on virtually all areas of life in the country, Semenova and other monitors remain ready to hear from victims across the country.

“Psychologically and morally it is hard for everyone and as all monitors of the network are open LGBTIQ people and of course can be attacked,” she adds.

While Semenova and her team continue to try and help victims both psychologically and legally, limited support can be offered to those who are attacked in occupied areas. Even when there may be potential avenues for redress available, many victims are hesitant to pursue them.

“One of the problems I encountered during the war, documenting cases, is that all the victims are afraid to report to the police, afraid that things will get worse,” explains Semenova.

‘People like you do not belong in Kherson’

At around 8am on a Tuesday morning in August, two Russian soldiers approached 52-year-old Valentyna’s market stall in Ukraine’s Korabelny district and asked her how much some vegetables and fruits cost.

Valentyna was wearing stereotypically men’s clothing and had short hair. As she began to answer, the soldiers realised she was a woman and started insulting her: “You are a fag woman, not a woman... we will cure you of this, people like you do not belong in Kherson.”

The military officers – who appeared to be former prisoners due to the tattoos on their fingers – threw produce from Valentyna’s stall on the ground. Scared the situation could escalate, Valentyna fled as the soldiers threw potatoes at her back, some of which hit her head. They shouted: “Go, go,

while we are kind enough to you. If we see you again, we will put your vegetables inside you, you are motherfucking faggot scum.”

The impact of the attack was devastating for Valentyna. She had a heart attack after the incident and was forced to abandon her livelihood, for fear of another attack, and left the city to live with her mother in a nearby village.

In Mariupol, Volodymyr, a 30-year-old LGBTIQ activist, was stopped by two Russian patrolmen wearing military uniforms he didn't recognise. When Volodymyr mispronounced the name of the street, the armed men began to suspect he was not a local and searched him.

One of the men noticed a ring earring in Volodymyr's ear, and said: “Why do you have an earring in your ear; are you a faggot?” The situation escalated quickly, with the military occupiers threatening to rape Volodymyr to teach him a lesson, as well as threatening to hand him over to the Chechens, an apparent reference to the anti-gay laws of the Chechen Republic.

The men began to forcibly undress Volodymyr, but another Russian patrol group passing by intervened. After checking his documents, they let Volodymyr go.

Russian war crimes

In June this year, Ukrainian human rights lawyer Oleksandra Matviichuk alleged that since the invasion began on 24 February, the Russian army had [committed almost 10,000 war crimes in Ukraine](#).

Matviichuk is part of an initiative known as ‘Tribunal for Putin’, which has documented countless examples of what they believe to be war crimes, from murdering civilians to rape. Dutch MPs have called for a special tribunal for Putin and his associates [in The Hague](#).

There have been previous allegations of the Russian state and its actors targeting people on the basis of their sexual orientation, such as the reported anti-gay purges in the Chechen Republic, a part of the Russian Federation, in 2017. A [Council of Europe report](#) into anti-LGBTIQ crimes described the state-sponsored attacks in the region as “the single most egregious example of violence against LGBTIQ people in Europe that has occurred in decades”.

The situation for members of the LGBTIQ community living in Russia shows little sign of improving, with a [so-called ban on “gay propaganda”](#) being extended to all adults, building on a 2013 law that makes sharing information about being LGBT to children a criminal offence.

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