

# Russia's war on Ukraine: The situation of LGBTI people

More than two months into the Russian aggression against Ukraine, there is no sign of it ending – on the contrary, the news show the conflict and the atrocities committed on Ukrainian soil intensifying. The war has pushed millions of people to flee the country, or they have been displaced within Ukraine's borders, resulting in one of the largest European humanitarian crises in recent times. With each passing day, the chaos engendered by the war increases the risk of violence and exploitation exponentially, in particular for the most vulnerable, including women, children, Roma people, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual (LGBTI) community.

## Humanitarian situation of people fleeing Ukraine and being displaced

As of 2 May 2022, the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, [estimated](#) that over 5 million people have fled from Ukraine to neighbouring countries – mainly to Poland, which alone welcomed around 3 million people, but also to Hungary, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia. Moreover, 7.7 million people have been displaced within Ukraine's borders. Mostly women and children are seeking shelter and protection from Russia's war against the country. As the days go by, the conflict is generating ever more casualties, destruction and displacement inside and outside Ukraine, giving rise to one of the [greatest](#) humanitarian crises in Europe of recent times. The UNCHR [reports](#) that, as of 2 May 2022, the UN Human Rights Commissioner (OHCHR) had recorded as many as 6 469 civilian casualties in the country: 3 153 killed and 3 316 injured. However, the OHCHR considers that the actual figures might be higher, because information from areas experiencing ongoing hostilities is delayed, and the reports need corroboration. According to the Council on Foreign Relations think-tank, the Ukraine crisis has triggered the 'biggest show of [European mobilisation](#) in recent years'. The EU promptly activated, for the first time ever, the [Temporary Protection Directive](#), coordinated the largest operation of the [EU civil protection mechanism](#) to date, and stepped up [financial assistance](#) to Ukraine. (Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine, the EU and its Member States have disbursed a total of [€1.4 billion](#) in humanitarian aid to help affected civilians in Ukraine.) The EU also proposed to use [cohesion funds](#) to help Member States welcome people fleeing Ukraine. Nevertheless, the situation remained challenging, with the [human cost](#) far too high. Indeed, the mass displacement and the ensuing turmoil in Ukraine have raised serious concerns about human rights violations inside and outside the country, in particular of those belonging to vulnerable groups, including [women](#), [children](#), [unaccompanied minors](#), the [Roma](#), and also LGBTI people.

## Specific risks facing Ukrainian LGBTI people in times of conflict

In the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the [media](#) and non-governmental organisations have highlighted how a combination of xenophobia and anti-LGBTI positions may have particularly severe impacts on the LGBTI community during hostilities. [ILGA-Europe](#) stressed that **existing discrimination and violence against LGBTI people may be aggravated during armed conflicts**, and new challenges may arise. For instance, [trans](#) and intersex people in Ukraine do not have identification documents with gender markers matching their gender identity; and they may lose access to hormone replacement therapy or other [medical treatments](#). Some may be unable to leave the country, as trans women, non-binary people registered 'male' at birth, and trans men are considered 'men' and – being potential recruits – are [not allowed to leave Ukraine](#). If recruited, trans people face a higher risk of harassment and violence. The Equal Rights Coalition (ERC), an intergovernmental body of 42 member states committed to protecting the LGBTI community's rights, expressed its [concerns](#) about the 'additional dangers' faced by LGBTI people seeking protection from the conflict in Ukraine. ERC stressed that displaced LGBTI people are often marginalised, and may even be excluded from evacuation and emergency responses.



In 2021, a UNHCR [discussion paper](#) on 'LGBTIQ+ Persons in Forced Displacement and Statelessness' already highlighted some of the risks LGBTI people may face. These are, in particular, **discrimination, harassment, abuse, bullying, and physical, emotional and sexual violence**, including, but not limited to, **murder, rape, torture, and psychiatric and psychological 'so-called conversion therapies'**. As the discussion paper also mentioned, in some circumstances, frontline registration staff may not always be aware of an LGBTI person's particular circumstances, or an LGBTI person may refrain from sharing their personal situation for fear of violence and discrimination. Some of the challenges identified had already existed long before the conflict began. For instance, although [homosexuality](#) is legal in Ukraine (albeit neither same-sex partnerships nor adoptions by same-sex couples are legally possible), [research](#) from the Pew Research Centre revealed that, in 2019, 69 % of those surveyed in Ukraine said homosexuality should not be accepted. In April 2022, a UN expert [urged](#) all interested parties to pay particular attention to the needs of LGBTI and gender-diverse refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and undocumented people. He also recalled that the LGBTI community is most vulnerable to 'acts of stigmatisation, harassment and violence' during armed conflicts, and in particular at checkpoints, border crossings, reception centres and health facilities. At the same time, he welcomed civil society organisations' support for LGBTI and gender-diverse people. Along similar lines, Christophe Lacroix, the general rapporteur on the rights of LGBTI people within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), [observed](#) that human rights violations, including sexual violence, against LGBTI people already happen in times of peace, and all the more during war, often remaining unreported and unpunished. Trans and gender-diverse people face additional problems in **accessing appropriate medical care and crossing borders**, because of lack of appropriate identity documents. According to Lacroix, the conflict in Ukraine is particularly difficult for LGBTI people considering the geopolitical situation, suffice to recall Russia's repeated [breaches](#) of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), and [LGBTI rights](#) violations in [Chechnya](#) and Belarus.

### European Parliament position

In a [resolution](#) of 1 March 2022, the European Parliament strongly condemned 'the Russian Federation's illegal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against and invasion of Ukraine', and recalled that 'attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law and therefore constitute war crimes'. It also called on the Commission, the Member States and UN agencies to offer Ukraine's civilian population **humanitarian assistance**. Parliament stressed the need to **pay particular attention to vulnerable groups, minorities, and women and children**, because they are particularly affected in armed conflicts. In a 2021 [recommendation](#) to the Council, Commission and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission on the direction of EU–Russia political relations, Parliament stressed that the 'LGBTI+ community in various parts of the Russian Federation faces extensive discrimination, including harassment, torture, imprisonment and killings'. It also underlined that the situation was particularly worrying in Chechnya, 'which in 2017 started its purge of LGBTI+ people, detaining and torturing dozens and killing at least two, leading to many people seeking safe refuge abroad'.

That same year, Parliament's [resolution](#) on the implementation of the EU association agreement with Ukraine stressed that LGBTI people, feminist activists and Roma people were still faced with discrimination, and continuously subjected to hate speech and violent attacks. In a May 2017 [resolution](#), Parliament expressed its deep concern at the reports of arbitrary detention and torture of men 'perceived to be gay in the Republic of Chechnya in the Russian Federation'. In a recommendation of 16 September 2021, Parliament considered that the LGBTI+ community in various parts of the Russian Federation faces extensive discrimination, including harassment, torture, imprisonment and killings. Parliament stressed that the situation was particularly dangerous in Chechnya, which in 2017 started its purge of LGBTI+ people, detaining and torturing dozens and killing at least two, which led to many seeking safe refuge abroad. Back in 2014, the European Parliament's [LGBTI Intergroup](#) had issued a [statement](#) on the alarming situation of LGBTI people in Ukraine, in particular following the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Intergroup reported the LGBTI community as being subject to the Russian 'anti-propaganda' law.