

“It feels as if we’re trapped with our abusers.” Ukrainian activist Anna Sharyhina tells the story of unhindered anti-LGBTI abuse in Kharkiv

[Blog](#), [Safety](#), [Bias-motivated Speech](#), [Bias-motivated Violence](#), [Human Rights Defenders](#), [Ukraine](#)

Throughout 2020, LGBTI activists have been harassed, intimidated and threatened by well-known far right groups in Ukraine, while police and local authorities turn a blind eye. Here is activist Anna Sharyhina’s alarming story, and how you can lend her and other LGBTI Ukrainian activists your support.

Two years ago, on New Year’s Eve, Anna Sharyhina gathered with friends and activists at the headquarters of [Sphere](#), the LGBT organisation she cofounded and leads in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. At one point during the celebration Anna realised they were trapped. Thugs had padlocked the gate from outside. The group of friends feared the attackers would hurl smoke grenades in, as had occurred at [PrideHub](#), Kharkiv’s LGBT+ friendly community centre. Little did Anna know that this would be the first of over 20 attacks she would both witness and suffer personally over the next two years.

Anna Sharyhina has been involved in LGBTI activism for over ten years and she is well-known in the community. This year she was part of organising the first ‘Pride on Wheels’ in Ukraine, a creative celebration of amid COVID-19 restrictions. Her active role in Kharkiv’s political, social and cultural life and her visibility in events and media, however, have come at a cost.

The police just stand by and watch

The façade of PrideHub, which is run by Anna and Sphere, has been covered with graffiti, featuring death threats and abusive language, and its windows have been shattered. Urine, feces, and blood have been smeared on its front door. At some events, groups of men have blocked the entrance locking their arms in a human chain. Activists and guests at the centre have been filmed and mocked online. Recently, a man handcuffed himself at the entrance, disrupting an activist event and barring participants from entering.

On this, as on other occasions, police officers passively stood by and watched. None of the complaints filed by LGBTI activists in Kharkiv have been followed up. Despite the evidence from the video surveillance system installed at PrideHub, no investigation has been carried out. By taking no action, police and local authorities are failing to protect citizens and their rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression, as well as ignoring Ukraine’s criminal code. Only at Pride celebrations, when the international community is watching, do the authorities provide actual protection.

Threats on her phone

The group behind the attacks is the far-right Tradition and Order. It has been active in different cities in Ukraine and is known for its use of violence and intimidation against those fighting for equality, gender diversity and women’s rights.

LGBTI organisations [have been documenting](#) the rise of organised violence against LGBTI activists, organisations and events for several years, calling for LGBTI-inclusive hate crime legislation. Ukraine has an obligation under the [EU-Ukraine Association Agreement](#) to introduce hate crime legislation that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as protected grounds.



The Sphere team. Credit: [Sphere](#)

Anna says she feels as if they are trapped in a locked room with their abusers, and everyone is looking away. Along with the attacks on Sphere, she receives threats on her phone on a regular basis. Allies and partner organisations who have been involved in projects with her, have also been intimidated. For example, a long-time partner organisation, an educational centre that's openly LGBTI-friendly, received a group of visitors who threatened them with violence unless they stop their cooperation with Sphere.

Much of the harassment and intimidation seems to be centered on Anna, and follows the path of the projects and collaborations that feature her. The pressure intensified after a course that she taught on the prevention of bullying in schools. Violent opponents come to her lectures and discussions, disrupting them. This is especially threatening for people who are new to activism or to the topics at hand.

Dealing with this situation and reacting to attacks in an atmosphere of impunity is taking a great personal toll on Anna, on her colleagues and on Sphere's work. They see themselves in a swim or sink situation, where swimming is getting harder and harder.

Here is what you can do to support Anna and the LGBTI community in Kharkiv, Ukraine

In this worrying scenario, Anna and her team continue to believe in their mission and commitment to the LGBTI community in Kharkiv and elsewhere. But dealing with security in the absence of any law enforcement takes more and more resources. Activists should not have to do this alone. You can help them by:

Spreading the word. Share Anna's and Sphere's story and help them stay in the spotlight until the Ukrainian authorities take action to prevent harassment and violence. Visibility helps!

Speaking up. Are you part of a human rights organisation or an activist initiative? Issue a statement or write an article about Anna's and Sphere's case. Tell Ukrainian and international political representatives that the violence and harassment against Anna Sharyhina, other LGBTI activists and their allies in Kharkiv must stop.

The following contacts in Ukraine can make a difference. They can make sure that the threats and attacks against Anna and Sphere are properly addressed by the police. They can prevent further threats and violence by publicly condemning violence against LGBTI and other human rights defenders and sending a clear signal that it will not be tolerated.

Contact them with your statements, tag them in your posts, and tell them that it is time to take action:

- Liudmila Denisova, Human Rights Ombudsperson: <https://www.facebook.com/denisovaombudsman/>
- Igor Terekhov, Acting Mayor of Kharkiv: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.terehov.kh>
- Alyona Stryzhak, Head of the Kharkiv Patrol Police
Department: <https://www.facebook.com/alyona.stryzhak.9>
- Andriy Rubel, Chief of the Main Directorate of the National
Police:
<https://www.facebook.com/people/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%96%D0%B9-%D0%A0%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8C/100059591866063>
- Serhiy Knyazev, Adviser to the Minister of Interior: <https://www.facebook.com/sergii.knyazev>
- Arsen Avakov, Minister of the Interior: <https://www.facebook.com/arsen.avakov.1>