#LesbianVisibilityWeek: The situation for lesbian women in and from Ukraine

Blog, Lesbian, Ukraine

> Like all members of the LGBTI community who have either remained in Ukraine, or are on the move to a safer place, lesbians are facing specific challenges and needs. This Lesbian Visibility Week, we're learning more.

"When something goes wrong, we roll up our sleeves and get things done," says Dragana Todorovic, board member of EL*C, otherwise known as Eurocentralasian Lesbian Community. Since the war in Ukraine erupted EL*C, have set up safe houses at the Polish border, relocated refugees across Europe and much more. But there is much more to be done, and as Dragana and her colleagues have identified, lesbians are facing very specific challenges as the conflict continues. Here Dragana tells us about work of EL*C activists on the frontlines in Ukraine, the needs that are arising as the war continues, and how you can support.

Dragana, can you tell us what the needs of lesbian communities still in Ukraine are?

In addition to the needs of the entire population within the country in terms of safety and essential goods, lesbian communities need spaces and routes that are inclusive and where they will not fear lesbophobic violence or discrimination, nor be compelled to re-closet themselves and their families.

In every conflict or humanitarian crisis, women, LGBT persons, and members of minority groups, find themselves in more precarious situations, as scapegoating and prejudice is often exacerbated. Our communities are also less likely to seek assistance from the mainstream providers due to lack of trust in the attitudes of authorities (and society at large) towards them and their families. We have indeed observed that LBTQI women and non-binary persons tend to rely on their own, community-based, support systems, which therefore need to be strengthened and sustained, so as to prevent isolation and scarcity for our communities.

This in turns underlines the paramount importance of supporting and protecting the activists themselves, who are leading such initiatives and have stayed in Ukraine, to help not just the LGBTIQ community, but the Ukrainian population as a whole, by delivering and dispatching goods across the country, towards the elderly, women and children, but also the military.

Despite this, lesbian activists remain highly exposed to lesbophobic violence, as we were unfortunately reminded recently, when Olena Shevchenko, the director of Insight and Board Member of EL*C, was tear-gassed in the street while unloading a truck of supplies.

Lastly, lesbian communities inside Ukraine need information — be it about where to find safe shelters inside the country or what their rights and options, should they need to leave the country. They need to be provided with easily accessible and up-to-date information to arrange safe routes for their travels — inside or outside Ukraine — and choose an adequate destination for their and their families' potential relocation. This includes being able to reach out to the lesbian and refugee networks that will support them along the way and facilitate their integration in the host country.

What work is EL*C doing on the frontline?

On the front line, we started by setting up several safe houses at the Polish border and opened an emergency helpline, through which we provide information, organise pick-ups at the border crossings, and transfer people to one of the safe houses. We currently operate three of those, which can accommodate up to 25 persons and their pets, and where they can rest, access medical care if needed, and are supported in finding a long-term suitable relocation plan. We also coordinate with our partner organisations in other neighbouring countries to make sure that we cover Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova, and have re-granted to our partners in Romania and Moldova to support their efforts.

Beyond the borders, we have been managing a 500 household-strong network of hosts all over Europe, where we find good matches to relocate refugees, whether they have come through the safe houses or not. We arrange their journey, support them with the administrative obstacles that may occur, such as lacking documents to travel with their pets, transporting medical treatments and so on, and assist them through the processes of obtaining protection and settling in the destination countries.

Lasty, we rapidly mobilised to collect supplies upon the request of our Ukrainian partners, and set up a system to deliver essential goods, medication, or anything else needed to the shelters in Lviv and Chernivtsi. The last delivery was a shipment of several hundreds of cat containers and pet food, donated by the Foundation Brigitte Bardot!

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It should be stressed that EL*C has been helping everyone coming its way, but we are naturally primarily contacted by lesbians* and their families, which extends also to parents and grand-parents, or in a very typical dyke-dramatic way, to exes and exes’ partners and their own parents and children. It is heart-warming and empowering to see how our community sticks together and how we construct our own support systems when we cannot rely on the traditional family and societal structures.

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Credit: EL*C

Have you identified specific needs of lesbians arriving from Ukraine to other countries?

Similarly to the lesbians internally displaced, lesbians arriving in other countries need to be protected while on the move and upon arrival, as they are often more isolated and therefore more exposed to abuse or trafficking for example. They also need to have effective access to their rights, free from lesbophobic discrimination and violence, and to be provided with safe and inclusive options, that recognise their specific needs.

Once in the country, one of the main difficulties that we have observed on numerous occasions, is the administrative and legal obstacles that couples and families may face, as they were not able to register in Ukraine and are therefore not legally recognised as such. This can create issues in terms of family reunification, and is especially of concern to the second parent, who doesn't have any parental rights over their child. This is made even harder in cases of bi-national couples, where one of the mothers may not automatically benefit from the same protection as her Ukrainian family, not be granted a visa, and be left with contemplating a lengthy and uncertain asylum process.

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Trans lesbians, alone or in a relationship face even more obstacles, from crossing the border — which they are most often denied, to obtaining temporary protection in the destination country with documents that do not match their gender identity, and ultimately to accessing legal gender recognition. We are in the process of supporting a trans woman in this regard, but it has required significant additional NGO mobilisation in the host country.

Another critical issue is to take specific measures to ensure an adapted and sensible integration of lesbians and their families in the destination country. Even in supposedly LGBTQ-friendly societies, if lesbians are just reintroduced to environments largely dominated by Ukrainian communities, they are again exposed to discrimination and violence from their peers.

LGBT-phobic incidents have unfortunately already been reported to us. For instance, the son of one of the families we helped, faced bullying in the school he was registered in in the Netherlands from other Ukrainian children. For a young uprooted child, already carrying the traumas of war and migration, it was especially violent to experience this new aggression. Authorities and educators should have taken into consideration the specific circumstances of this family and not expose them to this foreseeable, risk.

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What can allies do to support lesbian groups from Ukraine?

Allies can help with donating or re-granting to the lesbian organisations inside Ukraine that are directly providing support to the communities, but also to all NGOs active at the borders.

Allies can also be very helpful in collecting and procuring the needed supplies, such hygiene products, food, and especially medicine, and ensuring their shipping to the border, from where we can deliver them to the shelters.

Lastly, they can join the efforts to safely relocate lesbians from Ukraine by helping us identify hosts, especially in countries where there is a high demand, such as Germany.

How are EL*C responding to the needs of lesbians/activists who are vulnerable in Russia? Have you been asked to help?

We were contacted early on by lesbian Russian activists, asking for help to leave the country as the international sanctions started being enforced, and for information regarding their possibilities to seek asylum in Europe. They were especially worried as they were taking part in the violently suppressed anti-war protests. We put them in contact with specialised queer refugee NGOs in EU countries, but it has become rapidly very difficult to maintain communication with those still in Russia due to the social media clampdown imposed by Russia.

We continue supporting those in Russia who reach out and will, when needed, arrange their travels and hosting.

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Olena Shevchenko, Dragana Todorovic and Alice Coffin. Credit: EL*C

*ILGA-Europe is a member of the **Dignity for All** consortium, which provides emergency funds, advocacy support, and security assistance to human rights defenders and civil society organisations under threat or attack. To find out more please email us here.*