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Identity

Trans People Leaving Ukraine Face Danger and Transphobia. This Organization Is a Safe Haven

BY **J. LESTER FEDER**

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Olha Poliakova first realized something was wrong at 5:20 a.m. when her cat leapt from his usual sleeping spot on her shoulder.

As **Poliakova** entered consciousness, she was vaguely aware of a loud boom outside. She thought a truck driver had taken a shortcut through her neighborhood. “What an asshole,” she thought. The sun wouldn’t rise for another hour, but her martial arts class started at 7:30, so she figured she might as well start her day. Before her coffee was ready, she heard another crash outside — and another, and another.



The image is a promotional banner for the Wisconsin School of Business. It features a large red background on the left with the school's logo (a 'W' in a crest) and the text 'WISCONSIN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON' and 'TRUSTED TO LEAD'. On the right, a man with a beard and a brown jacket is looking off to the side. A white button with the text 'Learn more' is overlaid on the man's jacket. Below the main banner is a horizontal strip with three smaller images: a man in a blue shirt with 'DRIVING INNOVATION', a woman in a grey blazer with 'LEADING DIGITAL MEDIA', and a book cover for 'AUDIES'.

There was no news online, but Poliakova didn't need the internet to tell her what she already knew: **The war had begun**. The bangs were the sound of Russian rockets slamming into targets around her hometown, Dnipro, Ukraine's fourth-largest city. She recognized the sound from when she'd supported **Ukrainian** soldiers on the front lines fighting Russian-backed

separatists in 2014. Though she considered it at the time, Poliakova stopped short of enlisting herself because of her lack of military experience. She eventually developed PTSD because of her work. She didn't want to be in a war zone again.

Poliakova, who now leads a feminist and **LGBTQ rights** organization called Gender Stream that focuses on promoting inclusivity and diversity in the police and military, wasted no time as soon as she realized missiles were **falling** that morning, February 24. Poliakova called other members of Gender Stream and told them to get to her place right away. For Poliakova, the rockets outside triggered more than her need to flee — she and fellow members of Gender Stream left their homes carrying the bare minimum and not knowing if they'd ever return. They piled into Poliakova's small Nissan Juke — four humans, Poliakova's cat, and a Russian toy terrier named Semion. So many Ukrainians were heading west that it took four days to drive hundreds of miles east from Dnipro to a region at Ukraine's western tip called Transcarpathia.

Some Gender Stream members went across the border to start shelters for LGBTQ **refugees** inside the European Union, but Poliakova stayed in Transcarpathia, running a shelter for LGBTQ people displaced by the war who did not want to leave the country — or were not allowed to.

“*I didn’t know that [this task was] impossible.*”

At the beginning of the war, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky **issued an order** forbidding men ages 18 to 60 from leaving Ukraine and ordering them to register for military service. (Women are not universally subject to conscription in Ukraine but they can join the military voluntarily.) While **many LGBTQ people did so enthusiastically**, some gay men and trans people don’t feel serving is an **option**. Like many straight people, those without military experience worry they will be forced to put their lives in danger without being able to contribute to the fight. Some queer people worry about **homophobia and transphobia** in the Ukrainian

military. Some said they were afraid of being singled out if captured, given President Vladimir Putin's **crusade** against LGBTQ rights.

Poliakova and her team arrived in Transcarpathia to find that an emergency LGBTQ shelter in the region was filling up with people who couldn't leave. The shelter's manager, a Ukrainian staffer with a European LGBTQ organization supporting Ukraine's queer movement, asked Poliakova if Gender Stream could take on the work of helping displaced people with male documents navigate the military bureaucracy and the border patrol.

"I didn't know that [this task was] impossible, and said ok," Poliakova told *Teen Vogue*. "If we need to do that, we will do that."

Olha Poliakova, director of the Ukrainian feminist and LGBTQ organization Gender Stream, prepares to bring humanitarian supplies to an LGBTQ shelter inside Ukraine.

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Poliakova arrived just as a crisis was building in the Transcarpathia shelter on February 28.

By the second week of the war, more than 20 people crammed into two small spaces — about half of them trans. Then, one of their spaces was discovered by police hunting for draft dodgers, so the whole group was forced to cram into a single building. Organizers urgently needed to help residents move on so they could make space for more people.

It wasn't technically impossible for those with male documents to leave the country, but it was challenging, and Gender Stream had to become quick experts. People with some medical or mental health conditions could get what's known as a “**white ticket**,” a document certifying they are unable to fight and allowing them to leave the country. And one clause in the health regulations meant that being trans alone could potentially exempt

someone from military service. The military codes classified “**transsexualism**” as a mental illness in the same broad category as schizophrenia, which **might get trans people a white ticket** — but only if a psychiatrist confirmed a “transsexualism” **diagnosis** and judged it was “severe” enough to make them ineligible to serve.

Ukraine is far from the only country that used the “transsexualism” diagnosis. It has been used throughout the world by countries that rely on the tenth edition of the International Catalog of Diseases (ICD), which was introduced by the World Health Organization in 1994. But the medical community has since rejected treating being trans as a mental illness, and removed the diagnosis in the eleventh edition of the ICD in a move supported by many trans activists worldwide. The ICD-11 only officially came into effect in January. Gender Stream — like other Ukrainian LGBTQ organizations helping trans people who are leaving Ukraine — has supported an end to treating being trans as a mental illness. They also support trans people being allowed to fight if they want to. Still, they

believe their clients would be vulnerable if they enlisted, and the “transsexualism” diagnosis is the tool they have to work with.

But you can't just walk into a military enlistment office, declare you are trans, and be granted a white ticket. Doctors at the draft board want to see medical records, especially a diagnosis from a psychiatrist of transsexualism, which is known by the code **F64.0**. But an F64.0 diagnosis was hard to get in Ukraine even before the war. Ukraine has a **long and complicated process** to medically and legally transition, and many psychiatrists are reluctant to give a diagnosis of transsexualism because they are unfamiliar or **biased** against trans people.

“It seemed like a general humiliation of LGBT people, all day, everyday.”

Yulia, a soft-spoken 22-year-old trans woman originally from Chernihiv, (a city near Ukraine's northern border that was one of the first places targeted by Russian forces), said she had already been forced into the military once

against her will. Even before the war, **Ukraine required** men ages 18 to 27 to do 18 months of military service if they were not full-time students or had some other exemption.

Yulia, referred to only by her first name for privacy, said much of her work in the military had been secret, so she could only divulge that she served as a guard along Ukraine's border with Russia. She lived as a man during her time in the service. Being trans, she said, "put my life in danger."

"It was a permanent state [of bullying] people who do not look 'military' enough," she said. "It seemed like a general humiliation of LGBT people, all day, everyday. And since we were close together all the time, you have to face it all the time, this homophobia thing."

Yulia said she tried to make an appointment to get a transexualism diagnosis when she was discharged last year, but was turned away. It was the middle of the coronavirus outbreak, and Ukraine's medical system was only allowing appointments in emergency situations. Without that "proof"

that she was trans, there was a high risk that doctors at the enlistment office would order her to report for duty — especially since she already had military experience. Gender Stream felt it had a clear strategy to get her a white ticket, but as she waited for that strategy to be sorted out, she was an informal manager of the shelter, keeping the keys to the building and sorting aid shipments brought in by volunteers.

“I have no plans and we are waiting here now for the arrangements,” she said. “It’s generally a tense situation.”

Poliakova (left) counsels a trans Ukrainian refugee at a Gender Stream shelter in the European Union.

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By March 17, the shelter was in crisis again.

Gender Stream had successfully helped several in the first group of refugees cross the border. Trans men who had legally changed the gender marker on their IDs also had medical records from the process to legally transition, so they were granted white tickets fairly quickly and allowed to cross. (Those with female documents had a clear legal right to leave the country, but even appearing male made it a risky process. One trans man said in an interview that border guards forced him to expose his chest to confirm he wasn't a cisgender man.) Some members of Gender Stream had gone on to Europe to open shelters for those who managed to cross.

But Gender Stream and its partners had once again lost one of their two shelter locations in Transcarpathia, this time in a disagreement with the landlord. With all residents packed into one small building, everyone appeared on edge. Some had been there for two weeks or more, and they

were losing patience as Gender Stream tried to fine-tune their approach by opening dialogues with the local enlistment office and police. Resentment grew as longtimers watched new arrivals with simple cases arrive and quickly move on.

One afternoon, Poliakova gathered the residents to explain the complicated process each resident must go through: waiting in long lines at the enlistment office, examination by military doctors, and, if they were fortunate to be granted a white ticket, a final meeting with the military lawyer. They needed to bring all their medical records if they had them, though many people were lacking basic documents as they fled the Russian onslaught. The enlistment office's primary job was to process soldiers to go to war so they would be taking a close look at any medical claims to make sure someone wasn't inventing an excuse to avoid joining the fight.

Trans people's experiences with the military bureaucracy depended a lot on the attitudes of the officials they met with — and the rules seem to keep changing.

“You’re treating some of our people as not-people — it’s a terrible thing to do.”

Nastya, a trans woman at the shelter, went with another trans friend to the enlistment office in hopes of a white ticket. Nastya didn’t have an F64.0 diagnosis from a psychiatrist and her passport still listed her gender as male, but her case otherwise looked strong on paper. She’d legally changed her first name to a female name, and she had paperwork from an endocrinologist stating she’d been taking female hormones for two years. Where the form said “diagnosis,” the endocrinologist had written “F64(?)” presumably because only psychiatrists can confirm an F64.0 diagnosis in Ukraine.

The doctors at the military enlistment office ordered Nastya and her friend to go to a military mental hospital for evaluation. Several days passed before they met with a psychiatrist, and the meeting did not go well. She said he refused to call her by her female name, even after she corrected him

at least five times. He said he “did not have a great opinion about people like her,” and asked if she believed in god and sin. When she was discharged with her friend the next morning, the women discovered the doctor had refused to give them an F64.0 diagnosis. He gave them a different “personality disorder” diagnosis instead — one that would not get them a white ticket.

Yana, another trans woman who stayed at the shelter, was sent to the same mental hospital after a long ordeal involving multiple visits to the enlistment office and a terrifying moment when she was sent to a military post for intake. She said she also encountered the same psychiatrist who interviewed Nastya — and he also asked her if she believed in god — but he was not ultimately the doctor in charge of her case. She was evaluated by several doctors before being discharged, and told she was getting an F64.0 diagnosis along with diagnoses of anxiety and depression. Even then she had to go to two more enlistment offices before she could get the draft

board to accept the diagnosis and give her a white ticket. She has since left Ukraine for another European country.

“One of my fears was that I would get in the bureaucratic system and it would chew me up,” Yana said. “You're treating some of our people as not-people — it's a terrible thing to do.”

Nastya, meanwhile, decided to go back to Kyiv to find a doctor to give her the correct diagnosis. In the end she succeeded — with Gender Stream’s help — but she still doesn’t have the paperwork to leave the country because she can’t get an appointment at the enlistment office. It’s not clear if this diagnosis will work once she does. Gender Stream had recently been informed by the local enlistment office that it would no longer recognize F64.0 diagnoses issued after the war began.

Semione, a Russian toy terrier, arrived with Poliakova's team in Transcarpathia, and has become a mascot for shelter residents.

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Since the war began, Gender Stream has helped 129 LGBTQ people leave the country, including 29 trans men and 26 trans women. But they are preparing to house some people who have no path out of the country for the duration of the conflict. Of the roughly 20 people living in the shelter six weeks ago, about seven are still there.

Gender Stream is campaigning for LGBTQ people to be able to use a “green corridor,” a humanitarian zone that would allow people needing refuge to leave Ukraine, but that idea is controversial even among Ukrainian queer activists. While many groups are helping LGBTQ people leave the country, some other LGBTQ activists are concerned about creating impression that the queer community is deserting Ukraine. Most LGBTQ Ukrainians — like most other Ukrainians — are staying in Ukraine, and many are actively fighting or supporting the war effort. And many queer activists who have left for the EU are actively supporting the

Ukrainian cause, helping run shelters for the displaced and organizing shipments of supplies into the country. Some Ukrainian LGBTQ organizations **question** the draft policy more broadly, believing there are enough volunteers that people who feel they cannot fight shouldn't be pressed into service.

“We don't want people with no military experience — whether they're queer or straight — being turned into cannon fodder,” Poliakova said.

Recently, Gender Stream purchased a house. It needs a new roof and other repairs, but when it's ready it will be able to house as many as 20 people comfortably, with five separate rooms and two full bathrooms. “Luxury!” Poliakova joked. It's on enough land to be far from suspicious neighbors and with room to build more buildings to house more people.

They're making plans for the long-term — including decorating the house and planting a garden. “We understand that it will be until the end of the

full scale invasion and occupation," Poliakova said, "and we understand that it may not be ending soon."

Editor's Note: The LGBTQ rights organization OutRight Action International, where the reporter of this story is a senior research fellow, is supporting Gender Stream and other Ukrainian LGBTQ organizations.

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