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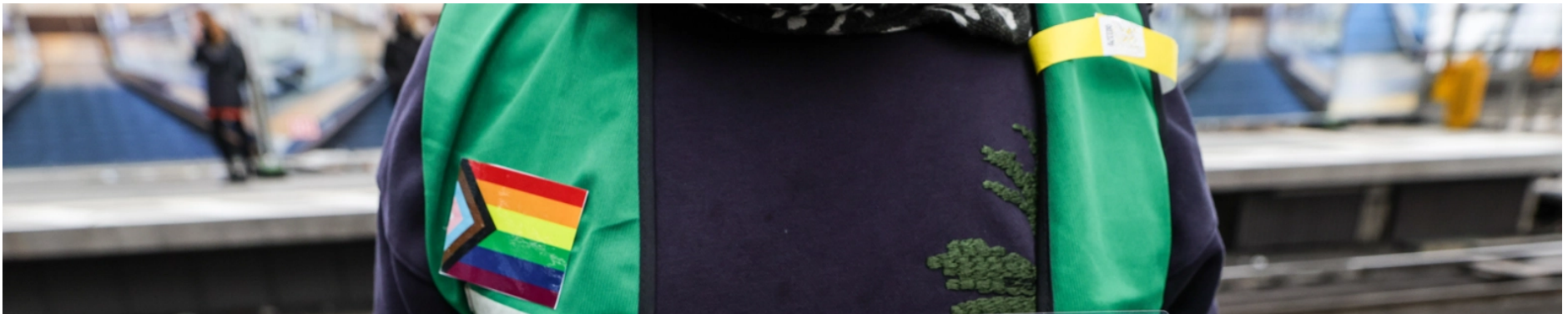
**(SUB)CULTURE**

# Gay Couple Struggles to Stay Together as War in Ukraine Rages On

How Putin's war on Ukraine and crusade against LGBTQ rights upended the lives of a gay couple from Donbas

BY J. LESTER FEDER

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“Instead of sex, we decided to love each other,” Stepan says.

Maxim tried to call things off when the time came for his family to go home. But their feelings were more powerful than logistics. For three months, they would both spend half an hour on the bus to reach a town equidistant from their homes, constantly worried about making it somewhere safe before curfew. When a friend in that town told Stepan she wanted to sublet her apartment, the men leapt at the chance to move in together. They've been a couple ever since.

“Without the war, without the situation, we probably [would] never meet each other,” Stepan says. The relationship “is one thing that Putin gifted to me.”

But the specter of Putin has haunted their relationship. Russia has been stoking homophobia in the region ever since Russia enacted its so-called “gay propaganda ban” nine years ago. Stepan and Maxim knew the dangers firsthand: They'd narrowly escaped a run-in with Russian agents in the Donbas after separatists took control of their region, and left to build a new life in a town inside the Ukrainian territory called Kramatorsk.

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That life was shattered this February, when bombs fell on the city in the first barrage of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine. They would be safest from Russian bombs — and from Ukraine's draft — if they left Ukraine. They even had a free place to stay in an EU country, offered by one of Stepan's programming clients.

They drove to Ukraine's far-western border with the EU, but they couldn't simply cross the border. One of Ukraine's first acts when the war began was to bar men of fighting age from leaving the country. There was an exception to this rule, however: People with serious health conditions could get what's known as a "white ticket," a document declaring them "unfit for military service" and allowing them to cross the border. Stepan qualified for a white ticket based solely on his HIV status. But Maxim, who is HIV-negative and has no other major health issues, did not.

Stepan could leave, but Maxim would have to stay.

Before Putin blew up their life together, the couple were allowed a few years to enjoy life together.

After fighting in 2014, their town was under control of one of the "people's republics" declared by the separatists, who set up Kremlin-backed governments and engaged in a long standoff with Ukrainian forces. Stepan wanted to leave, perhaps to move to Kyiv. But Maxim didn't want to be so far from his family and friends. So they lived quietly, always careful about who knew they were gay. Many queer people fled the new regime, and the fear that queer people might be targeted seemed to come true in 2015, when the one gay club in the region was raided by separatists, who beat and robbed the patrons.

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Stepan and Maxim had no problems for nearly two years. Trouble arrived on a perfectly ordinary morning in December 2016. A taxi was waiting downstairs to take Maxim to visit his parents, he kissed Stepan goodbye as he opened the apartment door. In the hallway stood four men with guns already drawn. They wore no badges nor did they identify themselves as they barged into the apartment. The whole situation was so surreal they didn't immediately understand the danger — Stepan remembers asking the men to take off their muddy shoes so he wouldn't have to clean up after them.

They told him to shut up and began searching the apartment. Two men opened wardrobes and scrolled through their computers. Another man inexplicably busied himself rifling through trinkets on a shelf. The fourth, the unit's apparent leader, told them they were investigating a tip that someone in the building was selling information to the Ukrainian government. They were suspected because he couldn't understand why two men from different cities were living together without their families.

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He finally got the picture when they found text messages on Stepan and Maxim's phones filled with heart emojis and "I love you's".

"Oh, they're faggots," Maxim remembers one of the soldiers saying.

Stepan doesn't remember them speaking quite so harshly. He remembers one of them said mockingly, "They love each other!" But the leader came to their defense. "Don't touch them. This isn't our problem."

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The men were gone as suddenly as they arrived. All Stepan and Maxim's experience told them the encounter should have ended very differently, and there was no reason to believe they would ever get so lucky again. Now there were at least four men who could come back and blackmail them at any time. They started packing their things immediately, and left the separatist-controlled part of the Donbas within a few days.

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They settled in Kramatorsk, a small city a few hours away under the control of the Ukrainian government. They believed they were safer there — “In Ukraine, for sure I have rights,” Stepan says. Ukraine had indeed taken some steps to protect LGBTQ rights — including adopting a rule banning employment discrimination as part of a suite of human-rights protections required for a closer relationship with the EU. But it took a long time to shake the feeling that danger could be waiting just outside their apartment.

“It made me crazy,” Stepan tells me. For a year, he compulsively checked the peephole before opening his front door to make sure no one was waiting to ambush them. But eventually that subsided. Stepan worked as a freelance programmer for clients abroad, while Maxim had a job in IT. They were still careful about who they told they were gay — Stepan didn't even feel comfortable telling the doctor at the clinic where he got his HIV treatment. (The doctor teased him knowingly when he said Maxim was his brother.) But they had a close circle of friends.

“It was a happy life,” Maxim says, adding they were even talking about buying an apartment this past winter. “Good thing we didn't.”

The first blasts were felt in Kramatorsk around 5 a.m. on Feb. 24, the first moments of the war. Putin gave a speech that night justifying the war as necessary, in part to protect Russia from LGBTQ rights. He was fighting to defend Russia's “traditional values” against attitudes “contrary to human nature” pushed by the West, he said.

Stepan again wanted to leave right away, but Maxim dragged his feet. First, the trip to western Ukraine seemed too long, then he worried it wouldn't be safe for two men to travel alone. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had ordered all men ages 18 to 60 to register for military duty, and they were worried they could be stopped at a military checkpoint and mobilized for duty. While many LGBTQ people enthusiastically enlisted, many other queer people, like Stepan and Maxim, didn't believe the military would be a safe place for them because of widespread homophobia. They were afraid they would be targeted as gays if Russian-aligned troops captured their town. Stepan and Maxim also didn't want to take up arms for another reason: Maxim's parents supported the Russian side, so did Stepan's brother. Facing their loved ones across the front lines seemed unbearable.

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Their ticket out came on March 5, when they learned a caravan was leaving from eastern Ukraine to the safer regions in the west. They volunteered to drive a mother and daughter, making it far less likely their car would be stopped at a checkpoint. They traveled for four days until they made it to a city on Ukraine's western border with the EU.

That's when I meet them, at a shelter for displaced LGBTQ people when I visited in mid-March, where they were wrestling with an impossible decision: stay together in precarious hiding, or separate so Stepan, at least, could have some stability and continue to earn a living.

They shared a small room with seven other gay men — and five cats — everyone sleeping side by side on mattresses on the floor. The building was never intended for people to live in, and now there were more than 20 people staying there with just a single shower and toilet among them; the unfinished basement pulled double-duty as a kitchen and bomb shelter. All the residents were gay men or trans women with male documents, and the whole building was on edge as they strategized with volunteer case workers about how to get white tickets and leave the country. Residents couldn't even go for a walk to clear their heads or get some privacy. Police were on the lookout for draft dodgers.

(Full disclosure: The international LGBTIQ rights group OutRight Action International, where I'm a senior research fellow, is providing support for this shelter.)



Stepan was struggling to keep up with his work, which gave him some sense of normalcy along with critical income. One night, as his roommates turn their room into a makeshift hair salon, I watch Stepan huddle in the corner over his laptop. The chaos around him made it impossible to do his job. And he couldn't figure out a way to explain to his client why he couldn't just come to the apartment he'd offered in Europe.

“I don't know how to say that I can't go without Maxim,” Stepan says. “If I said something [like], ‘I can't go without [my] wife,’ he [would] say, ‘It's OK, Stepan. Let's stay [in Ukraine].’” But Stepan doesn't want to tell his client that he's gay, or HIV-positive, or get into any of the other personal details such a conversation would require.

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The decision felt so impossible that Stepan and Maxim couldn't even discuss it when I met them. I thought they would be wrestling with the question for weeks or even months. But Stepan tells me later that they reached a decision a few nights after I left when he broke down crying uncontrollably.

“I didn't know what to do. I want to be with Maxim; I wanted to leave this stupid shelter,” Stepan says. “I have to save my work.”

So Maxim told him to go. “There is no reason to stay in the shelter because of me,” he said.

Stepan took their two cats and went.

Maxim stayed in the shelter as long as he could, one of a handful of people who have been stuck there for several months. Some who had no way to cross gave up and went home to places like Kyiv, where the fighting had subsided for a time. But that’s not an option for Maxim. Russia bombed the main train station in Kramatorsk when it began a new campaign focused on eastern Ukraine in April, and the region is too dangerous to return to. He’s rented an apartment and dreams of crossing the border.

“I’m holding on,” he says.

In a way, Stepan envies Maxim, who at least has had other people around him to occupy his time.

“I am alone, here — I’m totally alone,” Stepan says during one of our Zooms. He is safe in the EU, but he has basically no human contact except with clerks at the store. He’s in a small city where he doesn’t speak the language, so making local friends is hard. He avoids other Ukrainian refugees because he doesn’t want to explain that he is HIV-positive and that’s why he isn’t in the army. He has no direct contact even with the client who gave him the apartment — they communicate only online.

He is filling up the table in the apartment with gifts he buys for Maxim — a *Harry Potter* bag, a *Friends* mug — and imagines that “one day [Maxim] writes me that he crossed the border and I [can] give him these things.” They’re making plans to get married; Stepan learned of a Utah county that will perform weddings via Zoom. They are making plans to have a proper wedding in Denmark, like another couple they met at the shelter — some day.

Stepan says he’s under no illusion that it will be soon.

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“I hope that one day Maxim will come here. Of course, I’m waiting for him,” Stepan says. “But ... now I understand that it’s possible that he [will] never come here, and probably this war will [last] some time, and after that I will come to Ukraine to him.”

For now, Stepan says, “I really miss him every day, every hour — every moment.”

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**IN THIS ARTICLE: LGBTQ, Pride 2022, Putin, Russia, Ukraine**

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