TIME

After Fleeing Ukraine, LGBTQ Refugees Search for Safety in Countries Hostile to Their Rights

BY **MADELEINE CARLISLE**

MARCH 10, 2022 2:58 PM EST

For Vitaly and his wife, it was the bright light that woke them up at 4:30 am on Feb. 24. Then came the crashes of the explosions, four in a row, shaking their home in Odessa. They checked their phones and saw frantic texts from friends panicking that Russia had launched a war on Ukraine. They each grabbed a bag, got into their car, and drove west.

Navigating unfinished roads, endless gas lines, and bumper-to-bumper traffic amid blaring air raid sirens, they finally reached the Moldova-Ukraine border in the pitch black of the following night, Vitaly says.

Vitaly, who identifies as trans* masculine, is one of the few trans Ukrainians who has been able to have his gender markers changed on legal documents. (TIME has granted Vitaly's request to use a pseudonym because he fears persecution should he return to Ukraine.) After the Russian invasion, Ukrainian officials banned most men ages 18-60 from leaving the country. But Vitaly says he was issued a military ID when he transitioned more than a decade ago that declared him unfit for military service, because he had to receive a psychiatric diagnosis as part of the transition. Vitaly says he showed the document to border agents, and he and his wife were allowed to drive through the checkpoint.

But leaving Ukraine didn't assure his safety. Vitaly and hundreds of thousands of other Ukrainian refugees have fled into Eastern European countries such as Hungary or Poland, which have cracked down on LGBTQ rights in recent years. LGBTQ people face discrimination in Ukraine as well, but Vitaly knew how to navigate his own country. Once he left his home, he didn't know where he would be safe.

Read more: *The Untold Story of the Ukraine Crisis*

But a vast network of LGBTQ activists and organizations—which were already organized in response to their increasing repression in Eastern Europe—have sprung into action in recent weeks to support LGBTQ Ukrainian refugees, helping them navigate each country they pass through escaping the conflict back home. Vitaly isn't alone. On March 8, the United Nations estimated that more than two million people had fled Ukraine since Russia invaded on Feb. 24, with at least 1,412,503 refugees in Poland and 214,160 refugees in Hungary. Data isn't available on how many refugees are LGBTQ. But conscious of the right-wing stances of those governments, queer advocates have mobilized to support LGBTQ refugees coming in, facilitating access to safe housing, transportation, and medical care and teaching them how to operate in new social, political, and legal landscapes.

"That was our survival kit," Vitaly says. "Understanding that you are not alone, and that people understand your needs and want to provide you the best way to survive and be safe in their country when it comes to LGBTQI rights."

Already, advocates are gearing up for a longer fight. "We need to make sure that LGBT people fleeing Ukraine find themselves in a safe space," says

Vyacheslav Melnyk, the executive director of the Polish LGBTQ advocacy group Campaign Against Homophobia. "And we need to remember the situation is going to last for months—if not years. We must keep mobilizing."

A crackdown on LGBTQ rights in Eastern Europe

As populism has risen in Eastern Europe, so too have attacks on the rights of LGBTQ people.

In their ranking of LGBTQ rights in Europe, the advocacy group the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, or ILGA-Europe, ranks Hungary 28th and Poland 43rd out of 49 countries. "LGBTI activists and organizations in Hungary and Poland are remarkably courageous," says ILGA-Europe executive director Evelyne Paradis. "They've been enduring years of harsh opposition from political representatives and the consequences of anti-LGBTI measures. In the absence of state support and in the face of rising hate, they got organized and took the lead in helping their communities."

In Hungary over the past few years, lawmakers have legally defined marriage as a heterosexual union, effectively banned same-sex adoptions, and ended legal gender recognition for transgender and intersex people. In February, a Hungarian judge issued a consequential ruling that said an article likening a lesbian group to pedophiles did not injure its reputation, according to the advocacy group Human Rights Watch.

In Poland, same-sex marriage and adoption are also illegal, and in the past few years roughly 100 municipalities have enacted non-binding resolutions declaring the areas "LGBT-free zones," sparking protests and sharp criticism from the European Union.

"What we see in Hungary and Poland is somewhat of a reflection of a broader trend that is centered in Russia," says Amie Bishop, a senior research advisor for the global LGBTQ human rights group Outright Action International. LGBTQ people are being demonized by their governments, she argues, in the name of preserving so-called "traditional values" as a tactic to consolidate power and differentiate socially, politically, and culturally from the West.

After the Russian invasion, many LGBTQ advocates stayed in the country to fight the Russian forces and support their community on the ground, Bishop says, adding that Outright Action International is partnered with at least 16 groups in Ukraine right now.

Some LGBTQ people, particularly trans women, cannot leave even if they want to. Trans people in Ukraine can legally change their gender, but the process is complex and onerous, and people who had not yet completed it are now effectively trapped, activists say. Advocacy groups report that trans women are being turned away by border agents because their papers list them as men. And LGBTQ people already face persecution at home. ILGA-Europe ranks Ukraine as 39th in its ranking of LGBTQ rights in Europe, and reports that in 2021 Ukrainian LGBTQ groups faced repeated "attacks and intimidation" from far-right groups.

Read More: *How Volodymyr Zelensky Defended Ukraine and United the World*

Locating safe spaces

For the LGBTQ people who do make it into Poland or Hungary, an uncertain social and political landscape awaits them. Melnyk says advocates have walked from checkpoint to checkpoint at the Polish border for days, handing

out pamphlets with information on how LGBTQ Ukrainians can find safe refuge in the country.

First, people need shelter. Polish advocacy groups like the Campaign Against Homophobia and Lambda Warsaw have organized databases where refugees can be matched with LGBTQ-friendly homes. Both groups have also arranged community centers where refugees can meet other Ukrainians who fled the war or who were already living in Poland. And their efforts are ramping up—Lambda Warsaw has received a $30,000 grant from the global nonprofit All Out to rent a flat specifically for housing LGBTQ refugees.

Others are working on their own, like Polish activist Amanda Waliszewska. Despite currently living in Sweden, Waliszewska has been organizing accommodations and spreading awareness of resources in Poland for LGBTQ and BIPOC refugees via social media. She's even offered up her childhood home as a place for people to stay, Waliszewska tells TIME, since she knows her neighbors were tolerant of her own queer identity.

In Hungary, the advocacy group Transvanilla Transgender Association has been arranging accommodations, transportation, and food for trans and gender expansive people who make it into the country. It was Transvanilla that helped Vitaly and his wife when they arrived in Hungary on March 3, completely out of gas and money.

The group directed them to Karoly "Logor" Pluhar, who housed the couple in his Budapest flat. He fixed their car—which had taken a beating on mountain roads—and gave them cash. Pluhar tells TIME he wanted to "help the people who could be in trouble in Hungary if they go to a public shelter."

Vitaly and his wife stayed with Pluhar just one night, continuing the next day toward Western Europe. Many LGBTQ refugees have made the same decision,

advocates say, and chose to head to countries with more LGBTQ-friendly policies like Germany or Denmark.

"No one really wants to come to Hungary," Krisztina Kolos Orbán, Transvanilla's vice president, tells TIME about the LGBTQ Ukrainians the group has spoken with. "Those that come want to go through the country as quickly as possible."

Navigating Poland and Hungary

Not all refugees have the ability or means to travel further west. Eastern European activists like Orbán are working to make sure that the ones who stay in Poland and Hungary have access to the support systems they need.

"LGBT people in the Ukraine crisis, like in other humanitarian emergencies, face particular risks," Human Rights Watch says in a statement. This can include exclusion from aid programming because their family doesn't meet the definition of a household, or harboring a deep fear of formal systems "in particular if they have, as for many in Ukraine, lived under a discriminatory legal system and faced harassment or threats in public spaces in the past," Human Rights Watch says.

Julia Maciocha, the president of the Polish advocacy group Warsaw Pride, has tapped into a coalition of activists she's been organizing for years to meet the needs of the refugees flowing in. Together, the coalition has built a website detailing where LGBTQ people can find safe housing, medical treatment, and other crucial resources in at least 10 different Polish cities, she says.

Activists have also worked to support the mental health needs of LGBTQ refugees. The advocacy group Lambda Warsaw says it has hired psychologists

who speak Ukrainian or Russian to serve refugees who don't speak Polish or might not feel comfortable speaking about their identity out of fear of discrimination. They also have Ukrainian-speaking translators at their community center who can help advise LGBTQ Ukrainians on their rights in Poland. And as more refugees arrive, Maciocha says, they're learning more about the best ways to serve them. "We are getting insights on how we can actually help those that are coming to establish a new life," she says. "Even if it's temporary."

Vitaly and his wife made it to Berlin on March 6 after ten days of traveling. They are grateful to the advocates who helped them along the way, and they hope to pay it forward and support other trans Ukrainians—both those who remain in the war zone and those who are scattered across Europe. "We call and support each other," Vitaly says. "This is how our trans family is built through this war."

The couple is now staying with friends, reflecting on how their world was shattered two weeks ago. "Life was divided after these explosions and it will never be the same," Vitaly says. "We have lost something that cannot be restored."

WRITE TO MADELEINE CARLISLE AT MADELEINE.CARLISLE@TIME.COM**.**