

## *Ukraine independence fighting and the LGBT+ community 'double' patriotism*

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### **1. Introduction: LGBT+ rights situation in the Europe Union and in Ukraine**

The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people vary worldwide. If LGBT+ people have seen growing recognition and acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender identity, these achievements are far from universal and far from complete.

Article 1 of the "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union" states that human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected. Article 21 guarantees the right to non-discrimination including on the ground of sexual orientation. But human rights organizations have expressed concern over worsening climate for LGBT+ people in some EU countries as well.

Since 2020, the Hungarian government has ended legal recognition for transgender people, restricted adoption to married (heterosexual) couples only, and introduced a "protection of minors" law that prohibits sharing information about homosexuality or on gender changes with minors.

In Poland, around 100 municipalities declared themselves LGBT-free zones from 2019 to 2021, although many withdrew these declarations in 2021, amid the loss of EU funding.

LGBT+ rights are human and civil rights and therefore the European Commission launched legal action against Poland and Hungary in 2021, with reference to the LGBT-free zones in Poland and the "protection of minors" law in Hungary.

Ukrainian situation is complex; former Soviet republic, Ukraine has progressively distanced itself from Putin's Russia starting a path towards European values. This process also involved an anti-discrimination legislation including sexual orientation.

Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has begun, with the repeal of criminal liability for homosexuality, a progressive recognition of the rights of LGBT+ people. During the Soviet era, non-heterosexual relationships were labelled as not "normal" and prohibited. A real turning point, however, was in 2014 with the signing of the "Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine"<sup>1</sup>, when Ukrainian society and state have started a process of adhering to the standards of European values and principles. Ukraine's wish to join the European Union has also strongly influenced its approach to LGBT+ rights.

Albeit belatedly and with difficulty, the Ukrainian government is implementing the LGBT+

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<sup>1</sup> "[Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part](#)", in *Official Journal of the European Union*, May 29, 2014.

components of its “Human Rights Action Plan”<sup>2</sup>. Despite being Ukraine a secular state, a major obstacle to achieving these goals is the lobbying activities of the Ukrainian churches, of different denominations, which spread throughout public discourse appeals to so-called “traditional values” (meaning heterosexual) and oppose all steps to combat homophobia, hate speech and their consequences, claiming that it violates freedoms of conscience and speech. Ultimately, such activities, along with loopholes in the law and widespread impunity for violators of LGBT+ rights, ended up hindering any progress in order to protect LGBT+ people who still face legal and societal hardships.

However, the situation is not blocked: on the contrary it is developing both at the regulatory level and in public opinion where, nevertheless, large segments of Ukrainian citizens have been inclined to retain social attitudes – in part also a remnant of the Soviet mentality – which look at sexual issues as taboo, even denying their existence and often becoming intolerant towards LGBT+ people<sup>3</sup>.

Homosexuality is currently legal, but, same-sex partnerships are not recognized by law and there is no kind of limited recognition for them: homosexual couples are not eligible for any of the same legal protections and recognition available to heterosexual couples. Furthermore, while single people, regardless of sexual orientation, can adopt, same-sex couples are explicitly banned from adoption.

In 2015, Ukraine’s labour laws were amended to ban discrimination of LGBT+ people in the workplace. Sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination at work are banned by law and employers are prohibited from rejecting workers on the basis of their sexual orientation. Military service for men is compulsory and homosexuality is not a reason for exemption from the army. However, many of gay men tried to avoid being called to military service, as they were afraid to face difficulties related to their sexual orientation.

Albeit with difficulty, the LGBT+ community has gradually become more visible and more organized. In the last few years several LGBT+ events took place in important Ukrainian cities like Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv. In September 2021 some 7,000 people have gathered in Ukrainian capital for the annual “March for Equality” in support of the rights of the country’s LGBT+ community. Participants made eight requests to the Ukrainian authorities, including legalizing civil unions for LGBT+ people and creating laws against LGBT+ hate crimes<sup>4</sup>.

Although these events have occasionally been subject to violent attacks by far-right groupings, the situation has progressively and positively evolved. As a result of the change in the tactics of protecting LGBT+ events by the police, in 2021 the majority of these took place without significant incidents.

According to NASH SVIT Center Report on “LGBT+ situation in Ukraine 2021”, far-right groups continue to monitor and attack LGBT+ events, organizations and individual activists<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the LGBT+ movement has not reduced its activity, focusing during 2021 on security issues and the fight against hate crimes.

A group of LGBT+ military and volunteers led by Viktor Pylypenko established in 2018 a new association called “Ukrainian LGBT+ Military for Equal Rights” that attracted a lot of public attention<sup>6</sup>.

Viktor Pylypenko, who was the first Ukrainian soldier to come out in 2018, during Anton Shebetko’s exhibition “We Were Here” at Kyiv’s IZONE art gallery, is a leading defender of the LGBT+ cause within the military. As a veteran of the Donbas Volunteer Battalion, from 2014 to 2016, he fought on against pro-Russian separatists.

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<sup>2</sup> The Ukrainian government adopted the first “National Human Rights Strategy” and the five-year “Action Plan” in 2015. On 23 June 2021, an “[Action Plan](#)” updated the national human rights strategy, which includes around 100 actions to be implemented over three years.

<sup>3</sup> The Pew Research Center’s “[2019 Global Attitudes Survey](#)” found that 69 percent of Ukrainians say homosexuality should not be accepted.

<sup>4</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/thousands-march-ukraine-LGBT+-rights-safety-80107859> .

<sup>5</sup> NASH SVIT Center, “LGBT+ Human Rights NASH SVIT Center, United against Violence. LGBT+ Situation in Ukraine in 2021”, 10 February 2022 (<https://gay.org.ua/publications/Situation-of-LGBT+-in-Ukraine-2021-ENG.pdf>; [Freedom House Report on Hate Crime in Ukraine, Annual Report 2021](#); [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/FH-Annual-Report2021-EN\\_v01.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/FH-Annual-Report2021-EN_v01.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> <https://lgbtmilitary.org.ua/eng>.

For him, declaring his homosexuality and becoming an activist was like continuing the war: a battle for freedom against all oppression. Viktor Pylypenko has become a role model for many of Ukrainian LGBT+ war veterans since he led the column of troops and veterans in 2019 Kyiv's gay pride march. Currently Viktor Pylypenko is back to war to defend Ukraine.

## 2. The 2022 war with Russia: A turning point?

Between Russia and Ukraine is going on a political, diplomatic and military confrontation started in February 2014, following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, and initially concerned exclusively the status of Crimea and Donbas, internationally recognized as part of Ukraine. In Crimea following pro-Russian demonstrations and protests, Russian soldiers without insignia took control of strategic positions and infrastructure and occupied the Crimean parliament. These events were followed by the official dispatch of the Russian armed forces. Shortly after, Russia organized a controversial referendum, the outcome of which led to the annexation of Crimea peninsula to the Russian Federation on March 16, 2014. In April 2014, protests by pro-Russian groups in the Donbas escalated into a war between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists of the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

An undeclared war began between Ukrainian armed forces on one side, and separatists with Russian troops on the other, although Russia attempted to hide its involvement. The war settled into low intensity conflict with repeated failed attempts at a ceasefire. Two international agreements were signed by Russia and Ukraine (Minsk Protocol in 2014 and Minsk II in 2015) but a number of disputes prevented them being fully implemented.

On 21 February 2022, Russia officially recognised the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and openly sent troops into the territories. Three days later, Putin announced a "special military operation" to "demilitarise and denazify" Ukrainian society. Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine with a large ground forces deployment from multiple direction and with missiles and airstrikes that hit across Ukraine, including the capital Kyiv. The invasion caused Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II, with more than 8 million Ukrainians fleeing the country and a third of the population displaced. President Zelensky enacted martial law and a general mobilization of all male Ukrainian citizens between 18 and 60, who were banned from leaving the country.

War radically affects a society, transforming the functioning of social institutions and influencing social relations. According to sociological theory (e.g. Simmel, Coser) the conflict establishes the boundaries between groups by strengthening the conscience and belonging to one's own group and the awareness of the clear separation from the antagonist group<sup>7</sup>. Under war conditions, in a country suffering invasion and destruction, the social cohesion is strengthened.

According to the survey conducted by the sociological group "Rating" on March 8-9, 2022, more than 80% of the respondents replied that they are participating in the defense of Ukraine: in particular, 39% participate as volunteers and 37% help financially. Furthermore, 18% participate in the informational resistance, and 12% continue to work in the critical infrastructure. 10% of the respondents said they contribute to territorial defense. Only 19% said they are not able to help the country. Very often, they are elderly people. However, even among the elderly people, most are involved in the resistance<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, from the beginning of Russia's invasion, all of Ukraine's ethnic, political, cultural, and religious divisions have been downplayed as the people have united in defense of their country. The need for cohesion and participation has also affected LGBT+ people in both directions. A significant

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<sup>7</sup> G. Simmel, *Soziologie*, Leipzig, 1908; L. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, New York, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/ocenka\\_situacii\\_v\\_ukraine\\_8-9\\_marta\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/ocenka_situacii_v_ukraine_8-9_marta_2022.html): Sociological Group "Rating" (Rating Group Ukraine) is a non-governmental, independent research organization, permanent member of the Sociological Association of Ukraine. specializing in all types of sociological researches (<https://ratinggroup.ua/en/about.html>).

part of the LGBT+ community mobilized, in the army, in the territorial defense, as civil volunteers, to resist the Russian invasion: An unexpected choice, which contrasts with the movement's ideals of inclusion and pacifism, but which seemed to have no alternatives. At the same time, the number of those in Ukrainian society who have a negative attitude towards LGBT+ people has significantly decreased. In May 2022, the NASH SVIT Center decided to repeat the survey on attitudes towards LGBT+ people, conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in 2016<sup>9</sup>. Of course, fearing the distorting effects of the war situation, KIIS sociologists paid a lot of attention the representativeness and accuracy of the survey obtaining results considered highly representative of public attitudes.

The results are amazing: in six years since the previous survey, the number of LGBT+-friendly responses has incisively increased. More precisely, the number of those in Ukrainian society who have a negative attitude towards LGBT+ people has decreased from 60.4% to 38.2%, the number of those who have a positive attitude towards LGBT+ people has quadrupled from 3.3 % to 12.8%, and of those who are indifferent to them increased from 30.7% to 44.8%.

The social perception of LGBT+ people has progressively improved along with their political and legal situation; perhaps, for this latest survey, it must be considered the influence of Russian invasion, carried out under the slogans of defending "traditional values", fighting the "gay parades" and the European choice of Ukraine.

Anyway also on more sensitive issues concerning family life such as same-sex marriages and adoptions of children by same-sex couples Ukrainians have demonstrated a global trend toward increasing acceptance of full legal equality for LGBT+ fellow citizens.

### 3. The Russian gendered geopolitics

According to Emil Edenborg, the Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and Russian security policies more broadly – cannot be understood separately from gender and sexuality policies based on so called "traditional values" that include spirituality, respect for authority, patriotism, grounding in history, and adherence to heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of family and gender.

The Putin regime exploited an authoritarian form of gender conservatism that had gradually developed in Russian political life since the late 1990s, due to the action of the Russian Orthodox Church, of establishment politicians and intellectuals such as Natalia Narochnitskaya and Aleksandr Dugin. "Traditional values" and sexual politics become linked to the progressing ideologization of the Kremlin regime. In the Russian rhetoric, LGBT+ rights and feminism are identified not only as foreign to Russia's values, but as existential threats to the nation. Therefore, national security is also a question of gender and sexuality.

The idea of "traditional values" was crystallized in a document of the Ministry of Culture published in April 2014. In this document the Russian government for the first time openly stated that Russia should cease naming itself a European country and rejected the European principles of multiculturalism and tolerance as harmful to Russian identity. On December 24, 2014 President Vladimir Putin signed a decree approving the foundations of a state cultural policy in Russia. The decree details Russia's rejection of the European principles of tolerance and multiculturalism, while underlining the importance of Russia's "traditional values". According to kremlin.ru, the decree comes into effect on the day of its signing<sup>10</sup>.

The rhetoric of traditional values actually spurred the momentum of some rather dangerous tendencies of radicalization in Russian society; the numerous calls for the protection of traditional values without any real content or specific definitions for those values have become an explosive mix.

<sup>9</sup> <https://gay.org.ua/en/blog/2022/06/01/ukrainians-have-dramatically-improved-their-attitude-towards-LGBT+-people>.

<sup>10</sup> N. Beard, [Putin signs decree approving Russia's state cultural policy](#), in "The Calvert Journal", December 24, 2014.

Russia has increasingly distanced itself from the West since the start of the Ukraine crisis which began in February 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity. The conservative ideology behind this distancing is based on three key concepts of sovereignty, unity and normality with a variety of discourses fastened on nodal points such as “national idea”, “Russia’s mission in the world”, “protection of Russian speakers abroad”, “civilizational identity”, “moral principles”.

Putin’s extended interpretation of sovereignty is not only a political category, it is also a spiritual and ideological concept and constitutes an integral part of the so-called “Russian national character”.

The idea of normality has a solid biopolitical dimension that promotes conservative family values and traditional attitudes towards the marriage, sexual practices, reproductive behaviour and the education of children. The Kremlin explicitly defines national security also in gendered terms. Since the “traditional values” of family and gender were framed as questions of national survival, the observance of cisnormativity has become a qualifying condition not only for the social respectability but also for national belonging. Consequently, the Europeanization of Ukraine has been negatively marked not only as incompatible with the Russian conception of statehood and sovereignty, but also as a legitimization process of non-traditional sexual behaviour (same-sex marriages, gay rights, pride parades, sexual perversions, etc.).

Sexuality politics become linked to geopolitics and the narrative that LGBT+ rights are a means to undermine and destabilize Russia has been recurring. Moreover, homophobia and gender conservatism contribute to better define the geopolitical role of Russia in the world order. Putin frequently positioned Russia as an international leader to defend “traditional values”.

Understanding the strong link between sexuality, gender and geopolitical challenges is crucial to make sense of the Patriarch Kirill statements in support of the war in Ukraine. The Patriarch of Moscow has endorsed Russian military actions as a bulwark against a Western liberal culture that he considers decadent, particularly over the acceptance of homosexuality. He has accused West of organizing genocides against Donbas people who do not support gay rights and he has described those opposing the invasion as the “forces of evil”<sup>11</sup>.

The position of LGBT+ people in Russia was very bad before the start of this war<sup>12</sup> and has worsened since then. With the start of the war, this situation, as well as the anti-gay persecution and purge in Chechnya, have worried the Ukrainian LGBT+ community. LGBT+ Ukrainians fear not only for their lives, but the persecution of their identity under a potential Russian occupation. They thus face a double challenge: for the independence of their country and for the protection of their lives and rights.

#### **4. The Russian invasion and the Ukrainian LGBT+ community’ attitude**

In 2022 following the new stage of the Russian invasion the LBGT Human Rights NASH SVIT Center posted a statement entitled “Together to victory!” on its website summarizing the widespread attitude in the Ukrainian LGBT+ community.

The war for Ukraine’s independence is a war for free democratic European Ukraine. Without Ukraine, there will be no freedom, no democracy, no human rights. All Ukrainian people must unite at this time in

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<sup>11</sup> See G. Codevilla, *The war in Ukraine: history of relationship between religious and civil powers*, May. 6, 2022, available on RiSU (Religious information service of Ukraine) website.

<sup>12</sup> In 2020, the explicit ban on same-sex marriage was included in the Russian Constitution (Article 72.1), as amended by a federal law that binds the Federation and its regions in compliance with the protection of “marriage in a form of union between a man and a woman ”: see ECtHR 13 July 2021 (*Fedotova and Others v. Russia*). para 23 (the Strasbourg Court ruled unanimously that Russia’s refusal to provide any legal recognition to same-sex couples violated the applicants’ human rights under Article 8, ECHR). For an overview on the 2020 amendments of the Russian Constitution inspired to “traditional values” (God, homeland and family), see C. Carpinelli, *La “nuova” Costituzione russa e il suo codice di civiltà*, in *NAD*, 21/055/2021.

the fight against our common fierce enemy, the Russian World. There is no time for disagreements now, and the Ukrainian LGBT+ community, as an integral part of our people, must do everything for our victory! In the Russian World, our existence – either as LGBT+ people or as Ukrainians – is simply impossible. Let us do our job in our places – in the army, in the Territorial Defense, in the workplace, as volunteers<sup>13</sup>

As reported by Aydan Greatrick, Tyler Valiquette and Yvonne Su the imperative for LGBT+ people to protect Ukraine from the occupants is also echoed in the advocacy of LGBT+ rights groups such as Ukraine Pride, LGBT+ Military and Kyiv Pride. These groups defined LGBT+ participation in armed defense as critical to Ukraine's survival<sup>14</sup>.

The war has led to greater unity of the Ukrainian people, which allows to hope for rapid progress in achieving equality for LGBT+ people who are defending the common homeland. The war is causing devastation and tragedy for every Ukrainian, but it may accelerate the improvement of the LGBT+ citizens' rights. There are recent political factors: for example, on 23 June 2022, Ukraine has been granted official European Union candidate status, after being endorsed by the leaders of the European Union member states during a summit in Brussels<sup>15</sup>. This process requires steps towards greater rights and safeguards for LGBT+ people, but more powerful, according to the opinion of activists who have organized the LGBT+ community for the past decade, is a growing sense of national unity that is inclusive and tolerant together with the commitment to the common defense of the freedom and independence of Ukraine.

According to the "Daily Beast" website, members of the Ukrainian LGBT+ community had been preparing for the Russian invasion and the possibility of a permanence of Russian troops on the territory for a long period, through exercises and training. The Daily Beast reports the story of Veronika Limina, who lives in L'viv, in the western part of the country, and who in the weeks before the invasion managed a camp in which basic combat and paramedical first aid instructions were taught to LGBT+ volunteers<sup>16</sup>. The LGBT+ Ukrainian community believes it has even more reasons than most of the population to resist a Russian occupation after Putin's troops poured into the country.

The situation is complex and the LGBT+ community contends with war's mixed and ambivalent impact. Media and non-governmental organizations have highlighted how, due to the war, a combination of martial law and anti-LGBT+ positions could have serious repercussions on Ukrainian LGBT+ people. For instance, David de Groot, Micaela Del Monte of the European Parliamentary Research Service in the Report "Russia's war on Ukraine: The situation of LGBT+I people" state that trans and intersex people in Ukraine do not have identification documents with gender markers matching their gender identity. So they may lose access to hormone replacement therapy or other medical treatments. Some may not be able to flee the country, as trans women, non-binary people registered as "male" at birth<sup>17</sup>. In fact, according to the decree of February 24, 2022 declaring martial law in Ukraine with a general mobilization of all reserve forces, all able-bodied men from 18-60 years old were not allowed to leave the country.

On the other hand, many proactive LGBT+ community members joined the Ukrainian Army or Territorial Defense forces, a civilian corps that reports to the military, to protect their country against the Russian invasion; LGBT+ Ukrainians who are not fighting raise money, help in medical endeavours, and prepare items for warring soldiers.

<sup>13</sup> <https://gay.org.ua/en/>.

<sup>14</sup> A. Greatrick, T. Valiquette, Y. Su, "How the war in Ukraine is transforming the LGBTQ+ rights landscape in Europe", in "Mamba Online.Com" (Headlines), May 12, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220616IPR33216/grant-eu-candidate-status-to-ukraine-and-moldova-without-delay-meps-demand>.

<sup>16</sup> A. Kumar, *Ukraine's Gay Combat Volunteers Are Ready to Fight for Their Lives Against Anti-LGBT+ Putin*, in "The Daily Beast", February 25, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729412/EPRS\\_ATA\(2022\)729412\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729412/EPRS_ATA(2022)729412_EN.pdf).

The choice to serve in active combat contrasts, as already mentioned, with the ideals of pacifism typical of the movement but in reality LGBT+ Ukrainians fear not only for their country and their lives, but for the persecution of their identity under a potential Russian occupation. Members of the LGBT+ community have a dual motivation to defend Ukraine; in others words they are fighting because of what could happen if Ukraine loses the war.

Another important novelty is that soldiers belonging to the LGBT+ community have started to show off their identity. They are fighting alongside their heterosexual comrades on the battle front and share a common will to protect their homeland, but also with the hope their participation will erode prejudice.

Some of them have taken to adding an unicorn patch to their uniforms just below the national flag<sup>18</sup>. The unicorn patch became popular with the Ukrainian LGBT+ community after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. As there were supposedly no gay soldiers in the military, LGBT+ people sarcastically chose the mythological unicorn as a symbol; in fact, the unicorn does not actually exist. Although the qualities that the mythical animal represents can vary, it is one of the few creatures that is always given positive associations. In the modern world, the unicorns often represents and symbolizes positivity, joy, hope, healing, pride, and diversity. The choice of this powerful symbol is meant to show the stereotypes that LGBT+ soldiers are fighting daily and the pride to be both LGBT+ Ukrainians and Ukrainian patriots. The unicorn has become the symbol of the LGBT+ soldiers as evidenced by the emblem on the page of the LGBT Military for Equal Rights association<sup>19</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion. LGBT+ fighters: visibility and increasing acceptance

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 2022, the debate on the LGBT+ fighters' visibility gained a big relevance. With some speculating on the out-dated "gays cannot be patriots" myth, LGBT+ Ukrainians are defending their homeland and are also subverting the myth of widespread intolerance in the Ukrainian army. Faced with the common enemy, people on the front lines are open about sexual and gender identities. The stories of queer Ukrainians on social media show that some homosexuals and transgender people participate in the resistance with their proudly visible identity and that they are gaining acceptance into the Ukrainian military.

The "LGBT Military for Equal Rights" association has been sharing stories of LGBTQ+ soldiers on its Instagram page and the profiles of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer within the armed forces. As of June 2022, some people shared their experiences of serving in the Ukrainian army or in territorial defense force and spoke about the reality of being there as a LGBT+ person.

Vlad Shast a prominent member of Ukraine's queer scene, known to the public as the drag queen Guppy Drink, in an interview with the American Forbes said:

No one here cares about who I am, even the most conservative team members prioritize the fight for freedom over their personal views. Everyone is a human being, and there is a frontline for every soldier who joins the defense [...] We function as a whole body, where each person understands their value and responsibility. The reason for this is of course the powerful goal to defend our national identity, dignity, and freedom – and not only for Ukraine<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/ukraines-unicorn-LGBT+q-soldiers-head-war-rcna31214>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://lgbtmilitary.org.ua/eng>.

<sup>20</sup> J. Wareham, [Ukrainian LGBTQ Soldiers Fight Against "Darkness" of Russian Invasion](#), in "Forbes", Mar 16, 2022.

Illia Leontiev who serves in the Kyiv territorial defense forces, despite some negative experiences, believes that Ukraine is becoming more tolerant and there is less discrimination, by noting that:

It is important to acknowledge that LGBTIQ+ representatives are taking part in the war, too. ... We defend our state exactly the same way that others do. A lot of people have been supporting me, especially after I came out. So, LGBTIQ+ Military serves a very important role<sup>21</sup>.

Serhiy Afanasiev, a special forces soldier, recently came out on social media. Afanasiev said comrades on the front lines accepted him: "I have a good commander. He told me it's my life and he has no right to get involved. I serve well, and that is enough for him"<sup>22</sup>

Viktor Pylypenko tells about the possibility of a general attitude change on his web page:

Now I can say with an absolute confidence that the fellow servicemen don't care about sexual orientation. If you're a good soldier, you didn't let anyone down and you carried service in the same way that others did, then no one would have any complaints about you [...]I know quite a few soldiers and far-right activists who have changed their homophobic stance on LGBT issue in recent years. When these people saw LGBT military men and women on the frontline, a situation they couldn't have imagined in the civilian life, when they saw our faces and heard our stories, it had changed their attitude<sup>23</sup>.

It is obvious that the stories vary: some of soldiers have no issue being openly LGBT+ person, others still live by the "don't ask, don't tell" rule, the unofficial policy according to which service members would not be asked about their sexual orientation, but are required to hide it.

Cultural changes take time and there is still a long way for Ukrainian society to get rid of prejudices about sexual orientation, but the progress is also already visible. The brave Ukrainian resistance offers opportunities to change hearts and minds in the country and the work of LGBT+ veterans and active-duty soldiers is increasing LGBT + friendly attitudes in Ukraine. The army enjoys more public trust than any other institution in the country and LGBT+ people on frontline have earned the right to equality.

The NASH SVIT Center reports significant change signs in public opinion emerging from the survey conducted by the KIIS in May 2022. In this survey the last question was: "How do you feel about the participation of LGBT+ people in defending Ukraine from Russian aggression?" Two thirds of those polled answered yes, and only 11.4 per cent denied their LGBT+ citizens even their civic duty and respectable right to defend their homeland from Russian invasion.

Despite the devastation of the country and the many difficulties, LGBT+ activists continue the struggle for their fundamental rights. Due to the war, this year's Kyiv Pride march took place in Warsaw on June 25th. The LGBT+ organizations across Eastern Europe have combined their usual messages for the elimination of discrimination against the LGBT+ community with a broader one on freedom and condemnation of the Russian invasion war. They have also commemorated the many LGBT+ soldiers who were killed fighting against Russian troops.

The war accelerated the submission of requests. While a bill was expected to be introduced by the end of 2023 to extend partnership rights to same-sex couples – as part of a multi-pronged strategy to comply the EU application process – just months after the Russian invasion a petition calling for same-sex marriage to be legalised has gained more than 28,000 signatures, enough for the President Zelensky to consider the proposal<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> M. Bakyeva, *Ukrainian LGBTIQ+ community: 'we're also taking part in this war'*, in "Geneva Solutions", May 30, 2022, updated on June 20, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> M. Berdny, *LGBTQ troops and vets go to war with homophobia in Ukraine*, in "Deutsche Welle" (Media Center), June, 27, 2021 (<https://www.dw.com/en/lgbtq-troops-and-vets-go-to-war-with-homophobia-in-ukraine/a-58059054>).

<sup>23</sup> <https://qua.community/virtual-pride/viktor-pylypenko>.

<sup>24</sup> S. Williams, *Ukraine to consider legalising same-sex marriage amid war*, in "BBC News", Kyiv, July 12, 2022 ([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62134804?at\\_medium=RSS&at\\_campaign=KARANGA](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62134804?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA)).

In Ukraine the same-sex marriages not recognized has caused problems for LGBT+ people signing up for the military following Russia's invasion. For example, if someone in a homosexual relationship dies, the partner cannot have the body or bury it and seek compensation if necessary.

Responding to the petition, President Zelensky explained that it would be impossible to legalize same-sex marriages during wartime. According to the Constitution of Ukraine, marriage is based on the free consent of a woman and a man (Article 51) and the Constitution cannot be changed during a martial law or a state of emergency (Article 157). However he said the Ukrainian government had worked out solutions regarding the legalization of registered civil partnership as part of the work on establishing and ensuring human rights and freedoms<sup>25</sup>.

It is difficult to imagine how this tragic war between Russia and Ukraine will evolve.

In any case, an important message comes from the story of the Ukrainian LGBT+ fighters: one can be a 'patriot', fighting both to defend one's homeland and to defend the freedom and dignity of the person at the basis of the values (which should be) common to all countries.

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## Abstract

*Il contributo si concentra su un'analisi preliminare degli ucraini LGBT+ arruolati nelle forze armate per difendere il proprio Paese. I membri della comunità LGBT+ – non solo veterani ma anche civili organizzati – combattono in prima linea non solo per l'indipendenza e l'autodeterminazione dell'Ucraina, ma per l'uguaglianza, la libertà e la pari dignità di tutti i cittadini. Gli ucraini LGBT+ temono non solo per la propria vita, ma anche per la loro persecuzione sotto una potenziale occupazione russa. Si trovano quindi ad affrontare una doppia sfida: per l'indipendenza del proprio Paese e per la salvaguardia della propria identità e dei propri diritti fondamentali. Come difensori, hanno un alto livello di rispetto da parte dell'intera società e una maggiore visibilità come comunità; come patrioti stanno cercando di realizzare una trasformazione della cultura e della società.*

**Parole chiave:** guerra, Ucraini LGBT+ combattenti, patriottismo di genere

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*The paper focuses on a preliminary analysis of LGBT+ Ukrainians joined the armed forces to defend their country. LGBT+ community members – not only veterans but also organized civilians – fight on the front line not only for the independence and self-determination of Ukraine but for equality, freedom and equal dignity of all citizens. LGBT+ Ukrainians fear not only for their lives, but their persecution under a potential Russian occupation. They thus face a double challenge: for the independence of their country and for the safeguard of their identity and fundamental rights. As defenders, they have a high level of respect from the whole society and greater visibility as a community; as patriots they are trying to bring about a transformation of culture and society.*

**Key words:** war, LGBT+ Ukrainian fighters, gender patriotism

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<sup>25</sup> Pietsch B., [Zelensky floats civil unions amid gay marriage push in Ukraine](#), in "The Washington Post", August 4, 2022.