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# Ukraine: 'This War Shows It's Very Fragile to Rely On Force'

Meet Ukraine's Human Rights Activists

Thursday 28 April 2022, by [NORRIS Sian](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2022).

**Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, people around the world have become spectators to the horrors of alleged war crimes and human rights abuses - including mass rapes and massacres in the city of Bucha.**

As we watch events unfold, Ukraine's human rights activists have been actively responding to the devastation in their country - painstakingly collecting evidence of the crimes in order to one day hold Russian forces accountable.

*Byline Times* spoke to human rights activists in Ukraine to find out what kind of future they hope to build for their country when the war ends, and how out of the ashes of conflict, a fairer and more democratic society can flourish.

## The LGBTIQ Activist

Since the first small and threatened Kyiv Pride March in 2012, the movement for LGBTIQ equality in Ukraine has grown and grown, explains Edward Reese. The activist fled Ukraine when war broke out.

"Last year, we had Pride marches in Kyiv, as well as in Odessa and even in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions," Reese said. "We try to involve the whole country and work with a range of LGBTIQ and feminist groups."

Before the Russian invasion, the LGBTIQ movement in Ukraine was focused on introducing a hate crime law that would provide better legal protections for the community.

"There are several transphobic and homophobic groups which are connected to Russia, the church and the far-right," he said. "And, from time to time, particularly around elections, they become quite active. I hope we can start work on this law again after the victory."

The war has caused specific issues for the LGBTIQ community in Ukraine. Trans women who do not have legal recognition of their gender have struggled to leave a country where all young men are facing conscription. Reese is also concerned about the welfare of LGBTIQ people who may face discrimination and prejudice at home, but are now obliged to live with their families.

"Pride organises activities to support them," he said. "We offer psychological support to those forced to stay in difficult situations who are separated from the ones they love."

Some LGBTIQ people have experienced violence since the war began.

“A lesbian activist named Olena Shevchenko was attacked when she was offering humanitarian aid,” he told *Byline Times*. “It was celebrated on far-right social media channels. But people who were not connected to the far-right did not support it as they saw her as helping those in need. They see that doing an attack like that before the war was crazy. Doing it during a war is even crazier.”

Reese believes that there is hope for the future of the community, however, not least because homophobia and transphobia are now so closely associated with Russia and Vladimir Putin’s regime.

“I know a lot of the hate will be gone because it’s Russian, it’s Russian Nazi politics, and people will turn their backs on it,” he said. “LGBTIQ people are soldiers, we are fighting for our country and when the victory comes we will march together on Pride again.”

### **The Workers Rights Activist**

Vitaly Dudin is a left-wing trade unionist activist who leads the Sotsialny Rukh – a socialist movement advocating for workers’ rights.

“Before the war we helped people to defend their rights in work and to demand better conditions from employers and the Government,” he said.

In recent years, Dudin has campaigned against growing neoliberalism in Ukraine and the introduction of laws which benefit employers and investors over workers. He is concerned that the war has created conditions for labour rights to be suspended or challenged – and he and his movement are determined to keep advocating for workers’ rights.

Ukraine’s economy is set to shrink by 46% this year. Dudin has spoken to various workers who have had their wages reduced or suspended – but when the time comes to rebuild Ukraine’s infrastructure, those workers will be needed more than ever.

“It is a way of deepening the social crisis in Ukraine,” Dudin warned. “I think it could make matters worse if people have their work suspended, their wages suspended, and can’t afford to buy food or essentials. People are not receiving their pay, they are reliant on state aid.”

Many of the people Dudin works with are experiencing intense suffering as a result of Russia’s invasion.

“A lot of people are being killed by Russian tank bomb and shells. People are suffering because of lack of food, water and so on,” he said. “Homes are being destroyed.”

For this reason, he is clear that, when the war is over, the emergency labour laws must be lifted. But he also argues that Ukraine’s international debt should be cancelled in order to help the country rebuild.

Dudin draws strength and solidarity from the energy and determination of Ukraine’s left-wing workers’ movement, even as war rages.

“We the people will not be defeated,” he told *Byline Times*. “We shall overcome. But we need to connect as a movement and recognise shared and common interests. We can show that capitalism and neoliberalism doesn’t work and that we don’t want to bear additional costs that risk making our lives more terrible.”

### **The Human Rights Activist**

Oleksandra Matvichuk has worked in human rights for two decades. She supported protestors who were prosecuted and mistreated during Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity and documented alleged war crimes in the Donbas region following Russia's invasion of Crimea.

Now, she told *Byline Times*, "we are working in several directions, including recording war crimes".

"My major concern is how we can stop this war," she said. "The question we face right now is not only how can we record evidence of war crimes, but how we can stop the war crimes before new victims emerge. Because we see Russia using war crimes as a message. Russia deliberately ruins critical civilian infrastructure, deliberately attacks the civilian population, in order to provide enormous loss and pain and to stop resistance of the nation."

Matvichuk is very clear about what is needed to support human rights in Ukraine and calls for international solidarity, including "weaponry from Western democracies and real, tough sanctions that can freeze the Russian economy on the spot".

Doing so, she argues, will stop war being profitable to Russia. "The main challenge for me is not only how to document war crimes for future justice," she said. "But how we can help much more people to survive, and to be alive ready for the moment when this future justice will appear."

Matvichuk recognises that many people will be struggling with trauma from seeing loved ones killed, surviving sexual violence, being separated from their families, and witnessing deadly violence.

"We will need efforts to restore the ruin to civilian infrastructure, to return people to real life and to provide adaptation for soldiers and for people who go through rape, tortures, and who suffers from post trauma syndrome. We will need to restore the belief that the law exists."

Despite the horrors the country now faces, Matvichuk remains hopeful. "I look with optimism in the future. This war shows that it's very fragile to rely upon force."

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**Sian Norris**

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**P.S.**

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