



ГРОМАДСЬКА ОРГАНІЗАЦІЯ «КИЇВПРАЙД»

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION «KYIVPRIDE»

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Understanding the Fight to Protect LGBTQI+ Rights in Europe and Eurasia

Chair Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, and the distinguished members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this important subject during Pride Month.

I represent an NGO that annually organizes the largest LGBTI rally in Ukraine - Kyiv Pride “March of Equality”. The story of our Pride marches is illustrative of the wider history of the LGBTI movement in Ukraine.

Back in 2013, the Kyiv Pride march began as a short walk of about 50 people and took place in the outskirts of the city. It was tremendously hard to make sure the authorities didn’t ban it and to ensure our protection from orchestrated groups opposing equal rights.

In just six years, the Kyiv Pride march has transformed into a massive rally of more than 10,000 people, taking place in central Kyiv in 2019.

This striking difference in numbers within a span of just a few years demonstrates the remarkable progress our society has made in terms of respecting and protecting LGBTI rights.

This progress would not have been possible without the consistent support of the United States: the efforts to strengthen Ukraine's police reform and civil society were not in vain.

However, some very serious challenges remain for our community. Our increased visibility has sparked a surge in the number of hate crimes against LGBTI people. Violent groups advocating hatred and discrimination began targeting us. They often come to our events and do whatever they can to disrupt them – including, resorting to violence. These groups are operating in an organized manner. They are easy to identify. But they are enjoying near total impunity for their attacks.

Today, several right-radical NGOs are clearly visible and acting in many cities of the country. In 2020, they’ve organized several attacks on LGBTI community centers and events, such as Odesa Pride when a dozen of participants were physically attacked and injured. In 2021 the community



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center of the LGBT Association “LIGA” has received bomb threats twice this year. These actions are widely supported by many Ukrainian politicians and MPs and the number of attacks on LGBTI activities by far-right groups has sharply increased: 24 cases in 2020 against 11 in 2019.

Just within the last week of May this year, there have been four such attacks, including one attack on a KyivPride-organized film screening.

Every time, we have to live in fear of yet another attack. It takes courage to attend LGBTI events and it takes even more courage and emotional resources to organize them.

Unfortunately, the police are not doing nearly enough to address such attacks and hold the perpetrators accountable. Currently, Ukraine doesn’t explicitly recognize homophobia and transphobia as motives of a hate crime in its legislation. This issue is invisible for the state under current legislature.

Holding perpetrators accountable even without acknowledging the hate motive is also incredibly rare.

In one emblematic case of activist Vitalina Koval, people who threw paint at her and caused chemical burns to her eyes were charged with causing her minor bodily harm and were brought before a court. The court was looking into her case for almost three years and, eventually, released Vitalina Koval’s attackers on the grounds of an expired statute of limitations for such crimes.

The lack of legislation that recognizes homophobia and transphobia as types of discriminatory motives, as well as the lack of effective investigations, is what keeps pulling our country back in terms of LGBTI rights progress. The good news is our government has recently registered a bill that will introduce the long-overdue reform of the anti-hate crime legislation. We expect this bill to be widely opposed and so we would like to ask for solidarity from the international community. Our members of parliament should be urged and convinced that this reform is necessary.

I would also like to emphasize that even if we would have the most perfect law addressing hate crimes, this law would still have to be implemented. That is why, any kind of support to continue Ukraine’s police reform is most welcome.

In 2013, the Kyiv Pride March of Equality took place largely because of the direct international support from governments, embassies, and allied organizations; today, civil society in Ukraine needs that same support in order to ensure that legal reform continues and that these acts of violence against the LGBTI community are rightly considered hate crimes and are prosecuted as such.

Thank you.