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Ukraine: First-ever Pride march in Kharkiv marred by violence, underscores multiple failures by the authorities

Local authorities and the police in Kharkiv (north-eastern Ukraine), have failed to put in place sufficient safety measures in advance of the first-ever Pride event in the city, KharkivPride March, on 15 September 2019. The marchers were attacked by counter-protesters, and some participants were chased down, beaten and otherwise injured by members of groups advocating discrimination and systematically engaging in violence. The local authorities failed in their duty to ensure that everyone was able to enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly during the Pride event, without discrimination and fear of reprisals. While the Ukrainian police effectively protected Pride marches in Kyiv and Odesa and [women's rights rallies across the country earlier this year](#), this was not the case in Kharkiv. This was yet another failure to combat violence and near-total impunity enjoyed by so-called “far-right” groups in Ukraine.

On 15 September, between 2,000 and 3,000 peaceful demonstrators in support of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people assembled in central Kharkiv. Some of them faced intimidation and violence on their way to the event. An activist told Amnesty International about an incident where a group of six men entered a café where she and her fellow activists were sitting. One of the men snatched the placards they had prepared for the march, made derogatory remarks, and headed to the exit. When the activist stepped in his way and demanded that the man return her property and attempted to call the police, he grabbed her by her throat, pushed her away and walked out.

As the Pride marchers were assembling, they were separated from the counter-protestors (totaling several hundred) by the police. Nevertheless, the marchers were pelted with eggs by the counter-protesters from a short distance across the police lines. Having marched several hundred meters, the marchers were instructed by coordinators to fold away their banners and other materials and leave the event via a nearby underground (metro) station. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that, at this point, a violent group of counter-protesters broke the police line and moved towards the participants; she also heard an explosion in the vicinity. Many in the crowd felt confused and disoriented and began to run. There was apparently no safe way out. As she was running for safety, the eyewitness saw a group of police officers simply acting like onlookers and laughing at the scene. She ran to another group of police officers to ask what she and the other Pride participants should do. One of the officers said: “Go there” and pointed in the direction of the violent group that broke the police line.

While some of the Pride participants were able to reach safety via public transport, others were chased and attacked on their way home. This practice – commonly referred to as “Safari” – is a well-known and widely-used tactic by violent groups. It involves following LGBTI rights activists, typically to desolate locations out of site of the police and eye-witnesses, and then brutally attacking them. In the absence of effective protection and organized retreat locations for LGBTI rights events, this practice remains an ongoing serious risk for participants. Video footage of at least one such attack, against a man returning from the KharkivPride March, is widely available on the internet. He was chased by a mob, pushed to the ground and punched and kicked with chilling brutality.¹ Many of his assailants are

¹ E.g., see https://news.liga.net/region_news/video/izbieniya-i-vzryvy-stolknoveniya-posle-harkov-prayda-foto-video.

clearly identifiable in this footage. Amnesty International has also received reports of other such incidents.

Notably, weeks before the pride, the Kharkiv authorities indicated that they intended to prevent the event from happening. In particular, Kharkiv City Council members stated that they were going to seek a court injunction against the planned pride event, and it was not until 9 September that the councilors finally decided against pursuing this measure.

In the end, several Pride participants were severely injured, some received head injuries, according to information from eye-witnesses. Additionally, numerous other reports confirm that police officers also displayed homophobic attitudes or made homophobic remarks. The KharkivPride March has exposed a string of manifest failures on the part of the authorities. Violence at the event was predictable and expected, and a number of well-known groups advocating discrimination made their intent to disrupt the Pride well known before the event.

While police were present at the Pride event, it appears that there was little prior intelligence and preparation, strategy and/or tactics to protect participants against the violent counter-protesters. Rather, safety measures were extremely narrow and apparently only amounted to a mere separation of the LGBTI rights activists and their opponents during the march. In fact, eyewitnesses confirmed that some well-known members of the violent groups were able to pass police through control with the use of media credentials and join the march participants, from which point they were able to take their photos freely from within the group. The LGBTI rights opponents were able to fully exploit the activists' main vulnerability, the absence of safe getaway routes, and engage in acts of intimidation and violence.

It is paramount that authorities learn a lesson from KharkivPride March and take immediate steps to address past mistakes and ensure their non-repetition in future. At the national level, the Ukrainian authorities must address [the rise of groups advocating discrimination and end impunity for those who engage in crimes and violence motivated by bias and hatred](#). In relation to the 15 September events in Kharkiv, every effort should be made to document all incidents of violence and identify and hold to account all people who engaged in such acts, both during the march and in its aftermath when the march participants were attacked on their way home. Further, victims and eyewitnesses of these attacks should be encouraged and supported to report these crimes and in exchange, they must be given firm and effective assurances of security and protection. Along these lines, the Ukrainian authorities should fully deploy a witness protection scheme, and extend it to all people who are prepared to report and/or provide information about incidents of intimidation of and attacks against LGBTI rights activists. The police should also conduct a scrupulous review of the adequacy and effectiveness of its safety planning in advance of and the actions taken during, the events of 15 September in Kharkiv, and take genuine measures to address the mistakes made. The police should also investigate all reports of incidence of homophobic statements and attitudes among its officers, and take disciplinary and other measures as necessary against anyone found to be responsible. The authorities as a whole should give effective and genuine assurances of non-repetition of the above failures.