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Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way: Adaptation Strategies of Russian LGBTQ NGOs to Repressions After the Onset of the War in Ukraine

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I. Abstract

This thesis investigates the adaptation strategies of Russian LGBTQ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in response to escalating legal and societal repression following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Utilizing data from 17 in-depth interviews with leading LGBTQ activists, the study identifies the primary risks and challenges faced by these organizations, including legal persecution, safety and security threats, funding difficulties, and mental health crises. The research highlights the significant impact of restrictive legislation, such as the 2023 law completely banning gender transition and the 2023 Russia Supreme Court ruling declaring the LGBTQ movement extremist. These laws have forced many NGOs to adopt various adaptive strategies, ranging from covert operations, digital security measures and relocating staff to innovative funding pathways, fostering international partnerships and the implementation of mental health support measures such as retreats for burnout prevention. This research contributes to the understanding of the resilience and adaptability of NGOs in autocratic regimes, offering insights applicable to other regions experiencing similar political shifts.

II. Acknowledgements

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III. List of Abbreviations

AUE	“Arestantskiy Uklad Edin” or "The Prisoners' Code is Unified" i
CFO	Central Federal District
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DFO	Far Eastern Federal District
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EU	European Union
FBC	Anti-Corruption Foundation (from Navalny)
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
IP	Individual Entrepreneur
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PFO	Volga Federal District
RFCAO	Russian Federation Code of Administrative Offenses
SFO	Siberian Federal District
SKFO	North Caucasian Federal District
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SZFO	Northwestern Federal District
UFO	Ural Federal District
YUFO	Southern Federal District

1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the world was shaken by Russia's aggression when it decided to escalate its invasion of Ukraine to a full-scale war. The support for the war within Russia is being accompanied by an extensive media campaign, showcasing Ukrainians as fascists and the West as their enablers (Wilson, Moses & Umar, 2023; Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2022). As time passed, mobilization was declared in September 2022 and an increasing number of people were affected by having their family members or themselves called to the front while Russia didn't advance as quickly as it wanted. As a result, the support for the war slowly dwindled (Gershkovich, 2023; Levada Center, 2024). To counteract this trend, the Russian government needed to unite the civilian population against another common enemy that can be easily and quickly dominated. It opted for the already established target: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) people.

LGBTQ individuals have been instrumentalized as a symbol of Western influence in Russia for some time (Edenborg, 2017). Now Russia took it to another level, declaring the LGBTQ movement proxies of Western liberal ideas which threaten national security (Buyantueva, 2022b; Narozhna, 2024). To show its dominance over the West, it began passing restrictive legislation on LGBTQ individuals and organizations, actively persecuting them according to new laws.

This rapid and severe change had a significant influence on LGBTQ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which provide support to the LGBTQ population in Russia. The unprecedented repressions jeopardize the physical safety and mental well-being of the employees and beneficiaries. Previous studies have examined the kinds of risks Russian LGBTQ NGOs are subjected to, mainly in the period before the war in Ukraine (Kondakov, 2014; Buyantueva, 2018). However, their adaptation strategies to cope with those challenges remain underexplored. This thesis aims to close this research gap by providing unique insights into how and in what ways Russian LGBTQ NGOs adapt to working in the increasingly repressive environment of post-full-invasion Ukraine.

The examination of Russian LGBTQ NGOs' changes and adaptation strategies is very timely as other countries have shown a shift towards an autocratic and right-populist direction (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Even Europe is not spared, as shown by the unprecedented strength of right-wing parties in the recent European election (European Parliament, 2024). Particularly relevant are the results of this study for the Eurosceptic East-European countries like

Hungary as well as Asian countries surrounding Russia like Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan (Hooper & Frolov, 2016). These countries have the tendency to follow Russia's example regarding laws that restrict civil society. After Russia introduced its first anti-LGBTQ "Propaganda Law" in 2013, several countries like Kazakhstan and Belarus made attempts to pass similar legislation in their countries (Hooper & Frolov, 2016). Most recently, Kyrgyzstan adopted a law in 2023 banning "LGBTQ propaganda towards minors" (Sphere Foundation, Coming Out & NC SOS, 2024). Therefore, understanding which risks emerge for NGOs with restrictive legislation and how they adjust to working in these increasingly oppressive environments can help civil society around the world adapt more quickly and anticipate the effects of legislative constraints in their countries.

The terms activists, LGBTQ NGO staff members, and employees will be used synonymously in this paper. The expression "volunteer" will describe non-staff NGO members who do not receive financial compensation for their work. The words queer and LGBTQ are used as equivalents. LGBTQ is meant to include other identities like intersex, asexual, panromantic and other individuals not directly covered by the five letters. The term homosexual is used as a synonym for same-sex, meaning to also include bisexual and pansexual people. Ukraine will always be the country referred to when mentioning the war or full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. The terms "war" and "full-scale invasion" will be used interchangeably.

This thesis will first highlight the theoretical framework, including Russian legislation, covering LGBTQ and NGO-specific laws as well as new regulations connected to the war in Ukraine. Societal attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals and their susceptibility to governmental rhetoric will be highlighted next, to convey to the reader the surrounding circumstances LGBTQ NGOs have to function in. The methodology for data collection and analysis will be explained in the subsequent section. The analysis is based on 17 interviews with leading Russian LGBTQ activists to inquire about the strategies of their NGOs in dealing with the current circumstances. The results and discussion chapter will illustrate the main identified risks and challenges: safety and security, funding, and mental health. Each risk is followed by a depiction of the various adaptation strategies employed by LGBTQ NGOs, such as increased safety measures, registration of NGOs abroad, or expansion of psychological services. The conclusion finalizes the present work.

2. Theoretical Framework: Legislation and Media Impact on LGBTQ NGOs

2.1 Impact of Russian Legislation on LGBTQ Advocacy

To understand the circumstances leading up to the need for adaptation strategies, this chapter will look at the changing legal landscape in Russia in the last decades. First, legislation directly affecting LGBTQ people will be explained, highlighting especially the slow repressions following the 2013 "Propaganda Law". Then the accelerated adaptation of new laws in Ukraine's post-full-invasion period will be discussed, culminating in the Russian Supreme Court's declaration of the LGBTQ movement as extremist in 2023. Simultaneously, attention will be given to relevant cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) where Russians sought justice for the lack of legal protection within their country. Following this, the chapter will outline other important legislation that had a direct effect on the work of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), including LGBTQ Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This encompasses legislation on "foreign agents," "undesirable" organizations, laws on protesting, laws on "fake news," and other war-related innovations following February 24, 2022. Concluding, the impact of governmental hate speech on the safety of LGBTQ people will be explained.

2.1.1 LGBTQ specific legal landscape in Russia

This section focuses on the most important legislation that was passed before and after the beginning of the war in Ukraine and affects the work of LGBTQ NGOs and the life of LGBTQ people in Russia.

2.1.1.1 Legislation passed before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Male same-sex relations have been legal in Russia since 1993, when the country abolished its paragraph 121 on "sodomy" of the penal code to accede to the Council of Europe (CoE) (Buyantueva, 2021; Kon, 1997; Kondakov, 2014). There was no explicit mention of the sexual orientation of the person; therefore, it included all homosexual and bisexual men who had sexual relations with other men. Meanwhile, no laws explicitly banning female same-sex relationships existed in the country.

Despite the legalization of same-sex relationships, their public appearance was not welcomed. For instance, Moscow municipalities prohibited pride parades for many years in a row even though no laws clearly forbade it. To find justice in this matter, Alexeev went to the ECtHR. In 2010, it ruled, finding violations of Article 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 2021), the right to effective remedy, in conjunction with Article 14, as domestic courts did not properly investigate Alexeev's claims due to biased opinions about LGBTQ (*Alexeyev v. Russia*, 2010). In *Berkman v. Russia* (2021), the ECtHR reiterated Russia's violation of Article 11 of the ECHR, freedom of assembly, as well as Article 5, the right to liberty and security in conjunction with Article 14, as it unlawfully arrested and detained LGBTQ activists and failed to provide protection from homophobic attacks. The lack of legal protection of LGBTQ activists was also recognized in *Romanov and others v. Russia* (2021). The court ruled that Russian police had failed to protect LGBT activists from private individuals assaulting them at a peaceful protest in 2013, therefore violating Article 3, Article 5, Article 11, and Article 14 of the ECHR.

In 2013, the State Duma, the lower house of Russia's Federal Assembly, unanimously passed the first "Propaganda Law" (Baker, Clancy & Clancy, 2020; Federal Law 135-FZ, 2013). The Federal Law 135-FZ introduced Article 6.21 to the Russian Federation Code of Administrative Offense (RFCAO) called the ban on "the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors," clearly showing that the Russian state considers homosexuality damaging to children. The law sets fines for individuals and officials, up to 50,000 rubles (approx. 500 euros[1]), and for legal entities up to 1 million rubles (10,000 euros) or administrative suspension of activities for up to 90 days, with increased fines for propaganda involving media (RFCAO, paragraph 6.21, 2024). This "Propaganda Law" has made it harder to support LGBTQ minors, as psychologists and lawyers have become more cautious about collaborating with LGBTQ organizations on teen-related topics.

The law was rarely invoked until 2019 (fewer than 50 cases within seven years). It has been mainly used to prohibit events, street protests, or bigger actions with the justification that it would be considered propaganda (Coming Out, 2023b). Increased persecution followed between 2019 and 2022, resulting in a total of 85 opened criminal investigations, 34 of which resulted in a conviction (Coming Out, 2023b).

[1] All currency conversions as of May 2024.

Baev and two other activists contested the rightfulness of the Propaganda Law under the European Convention on Human Rights. They complained about charges of administrative offenses of "propaganda of homosexualism among minors" for their activism. In June 2017, the ECtHR ruled that the Propaganda Law is in breach of the ECHR, stating that "the Russian authorities overstepped the margin of appreciation afforded by Article 10 of the Convention" (*Baev and Others v. Russia*, 2017, Paragraph 84). It also found violations of Article 14, the right to non-discrimination, in conjunction with Article 10 of the ECHR:

> "*Above all, by adopting such laws the authorities reinforce stigma and prejudice and encourage homophobia, which is incompatible with the notions of equality, pluralism, and tolerance inherent in a democratic society*."
> (*Baev and Others v. Russia*, 2017, Paragraph 83).

That interpretation was very on point as the law was followed by an increased level of homophobia in society, as will be highlighted in Chapter 2.2. Russia ignored the decision and its implication to abolish the discriminatory law and even tightened it after being excluded from the CoE in March 2022.

In 2017, an unprecedented wave of persecution of gay and bisexual men shook the country. Over 200 people were tortured, and several were killed in a coordinated raid in Chechnya ("One year after 'gay purge'", 2018). Only one person dared to speak up, Maksim Lapunov, who went to the ECtHR to get justice. In 2023, the ECtHR ruled, finding violations of Article 3, prohibition of torture, in conjunction with Article 14 (*Lapunov v. Russia*, 2023). This landmark case shows the brutality of the Russian state towards queer people.

In 2020, the Russian constitution was changed, adding point zh.1 with the phrase "Protecting the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman" (Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Article 72), therefore de facto stating that same-sex couples will not be safeguarded. This phrase has already existed in the Family Code, so the amendment to the Constitution was only to reiterate publicly the intolerance towards homosexual and bisexual people. The addition also contradicts the constitution's Article 19 which guarantees the right to non-discrimination. In 2023, the ECtHR passed the judgment in the *Fedotova and Others v. Russia* case, finding a violation of Article 8, right to family life, criticizing the Russian state for not providing equal opportunities and protections to same-sex couples.

2.1.1.2 Legislation passed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

The crackdown on LGBTQ rights in Russia is closely tied to legitimizing its war in Ukraine. For years, Russia has systematically used homophobia as a political strategy, portraying LGBTQ individuals as Western agents attempting to destabilize the country from within (Edenborg, 2017; Buyantueva, 2022b). This portrayal aligns with Russia's long-standing conflict with Western liberalism, particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, positioning LGBTQ rights as a symbol of the West's imposed values (Edenborg, 2017; Narozhna, 2024). The invasion of Ukraine represents the peak of this clash (Buyantueva, 2022b). To justify the war, Russia has intensified its crackdown, passing unprecedentedly repressive legislation to demonstrate its rejection of Western values (Buyantueva, 2022b; Narozhna, 2024; Quarteera, 2024). These laws aim to eliminate LGBTQ visibility and activism, forcing individuals back into hiding and symbolizing dominance over Western influence within the country.

In *November 2022*, the *"Propaganda Law"* was amended to ban "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations, pedophilia and gender transition" to people of *all ages* (RFCAO, Article 6.21, 2024). The new law prohibits any display of LGBTQ symbols or support for a "*distorted perception*" (RFCAO, paragraph 6.21, section 1, 2024) that heterosexuals and LGB are equal.

The first direct consequence for LGBTQ NGOs was the withdrawal of most information about LGBTQ issues from public access to avoid persecution by Russian authorities. This included deleting websites, and pages in Vkontakte (a popular Russian social network) (Buyantueva, 2021; Coming Out, 2023b), but also ceasing the sale of books and the showing of movies with LGBTQ content, as they were immediately fined for promoting "propaganda of homosexualism" (Efimova, 2023; "Fines for movie theaters", 2023). The decreased access to LGBTQ information was also facilitated by the Russian authorities, which blocked over 300 websites within the first two months of the enactment of the law (Coming Out, 2023b; ILGA, 2024).

The second negative effect was the decline of willingness to collaborate among many established contacts in psychiatric, medical, and legal areas, as specialists helping LGBTQ people could now potentially be punished for their work. Additionally, many LGBTQ organizations heavily restricted their work for a founded fear of persecution. In 2023, a record

number of harassment cases justified with the propaganda law was documented, leading many activists to flee Russia (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022).

Additionally, in *July 2023*, to the above-described legislation on all queer people, Russia passed a law completely *forbidding gender transition*, including medical or hormonal therapies, change of documents, and several other restrictions (Federal Law 386-FZ, 2023). The law had an immediate effect on trans people, resulting in decreased mental health and an increased number of suicides (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024).

Before that law, trans individuals in Russia could change their gender marker following a medical commission and obtaining the medical certificate "Spravka Nr 087/u." Name changes were permitted without further problems (Federal Law N 143-FZ, 2023). Trans people had access to hormones and other necessary medicine, even though it was not covered by the national health insurance scheme (Ministry of Health of Russia, 2013). But the lack of state support in that matter led to trans people ordering medicine from abroad, as it was cheaper. These hormonal medications are often not registered in Russia, which means that people buying them abroad could be prosecuted for illegal activity according to criminal codes 234 and 226.1 with up to 3 years of imprisonment (Sphere Foundation, 2023; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 234 and 236, 2024).

The restrictive laws found their culmination on *November 30, 2023*, when the "International *LGBT Public Movement*" was declared *extremist*[2] (Golubeva, 2023b[3]). The Supreme Court's closed-door ruling criminalized all LGBTQ activism[4] in the country, punishable by fines or imprisonment under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code, with up to 12 years for members of the organization and two to six years for participants in any organization's activities. Symbols of 'extremist' groups, including the rainbow flag, are prohibited, with display resulting in up to 15 days of detention at the first offense under Article 20.3 of the Administrative Offences Code, and

[2] Interesting legal fact: There is no such organization as "The International LGBT Public Movement", therefore the court made a decision on a non-existing entity. This is in fact no precedent, but it will make it more difficult in the future to defend against extremist accusations (Golubeva, 2023b).

[3] As the court refused to provide the full text of the decision, it only became available in January 2024 when a local media accidently discovered it ("Full text of extremist decision", 2024).

[4] The full list of activities considered extremist are the abbreviation "LGBT"; "rainbow" flag and its variations, black and pink triangle, lambda, etc.; images of them on clothing, toys, accessories, etc.;
the words "lesbian", "gay", "bisexual", "transgender", "transsexual", "crossdresser", "drag queen", "drag king", "genderqueer", "asexual", "pansexual"; calls for recognition of LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, allowing same-sex families to adopt and raise children, and anti-discrimination laws; LGBT literature; conducting events (i.e., that could be seen as LGBT-related); submitting alternative reports to international organizations; calls for protests and negative evaluations of laws (Sphere Foundation, Coming Out & NC SOS, 2024).

criminal prosecution starting at the second offense (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 282.2, 2024; RFCAO, Article 20.3, 2024).

This immediately led to a repeated and severe loss of established partnerships with institutions and specialists like doctors and psychiatrists. Furthermore, the day after the law was introduced, raids on queer bars and saunas started happening (Alexandrov, 2023; ILGA Europe, 2024). As of April 2024, there is already a precedent of legal criminal prosecution of administrators of the queer club "Pose" in Orenburg for participation in the "Extremist Movement LGBT" ("Two gay club employees arrested in Orenburg", 2024; ILGA Europe, 2024). At least three other cases were reviewed by Russian courts, imposing administrative fines for displaying the rainbow flag (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The rapid implementation of the newly passed law indicates future wide usage of it to repress existing LGBTQ NGOs and clubs and persecute activists for their work.

In March 2022, Russia was expelled from the CoE, but the ECtHR continues to examine cases submitted before September 2022. Even while being a CoE member, Russia was not keen on upholding ECtHR's judgments on LGBTQ issues. Therefore, this exclusion is even more of a justification for the Russian state to continue ignoring the decisions as they often did before.

Russia remains a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), therefore all the above-described laws are continuing violations of Articles 16, 26, and 27, stating that all people should be treated equally before the law and discrimination is strictly forbidden (ICCPR, 1976).

2.1.2 General NGO Legislation and Its Consequences for LGBTQ Organizations

The evolving legislative landscape in Russia concerning national and international NGOs after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significant implications for LGBTQ organizations as well. LGBTQ NGOs have never registered legal entities under their organizational names, often because they were declined this possibility by the Russian State (Equal Rights Trust, 2016; Torocheshnikova, 2010). Usually, they operated as unregistered movements and received funding through a legal entity connected to the NGO itself, e.g., established by the director of the NGO, or from other LGBTQ or friendly organizations willing and able to receive the money. These legal entities are usually referred to as "financial operators." For example, Russian LGBT Network, the biggest Russian LGBTQ organization,

had the financial operator “Sphere Foundation” that received money from international donors and realized it according to Russian LGBT Network's projects[5].

The strategy of using a different legal entity was implemented primarily for safety reasons. Initially, until 2020, it helped organizations avoid the punitive "foreign agent" (see below) status (Pakhnyuk, 2019). It was also a way to reduce detectability by the Russian state, especially for organizations receiving foreign support and aiding LGBTQ communities (Buyantueva, 2020). With this knowledge in mind, it becomes apparent why the NGO legislation affects LGBTQ organizations as well. The following will explain the chronological development of the two most significant NGO laws: those concerning “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations.”

In 2012, the first *“Foreign Agents” Law* FZ N 121-FZ was adopted, following the rise of protests and Putin’s aspiration to restrict the civil society movement (Federal Law 121 FZ, 2012; Hooper & Frolov, 2016). It targeted NGOs that a) *received foreign funding* (money or property from foreign states, international or foreign organizations, foreign citizens, stateless persons, etc.); *and/or* b) *participated in political activities*, including in the interests of foreign sources (Federal Law 121 FZ, 2012).

The definition of “political activity” was left purposefully vague so that any kind of action could be interpreted as such and therefore allegedly influenced from outside and be grounds for awarding the status (Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva & Henry, 2018). Organizations that received such status must register as “NGOs performing the functions of a foreign agent,” provide extensive quarterly reports on their finances, and mark the status on all their publications (Federal Law 121-FZ, 2012).

The evolution of Russia's “Foreign Agent” Law has been marked by a series of *amendments and expansions*, reflecting the government's tightening control over NGOs and individuals perceived to have foreign influence. In 2017 and 2019, media organizations and individuals engaged in political activities and/or receiving foreign funding were included as potential “foreign agents” (Federal Law N 327-FZ, 2017; Federal Law N 426-FZ, 2019). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, any statement against the war or the Russian forces was considered anti-Russian and led to the declaration of individuals as “foreign agents” (Golubeva, 2024). December 2020 introduced the possibility for unregistered associations to receive that designation (Federal Law N 481-FZ, 2020). This amendment particularly impacted LGBTQ

[5] Now Sphere Foundation has become its own NGO not connected to the Russian LGBT Network anymore.

organizations, which usually operated as unregistered movements precisely to avoid the status of "foreign agent".

July 2022 saw the passage of a comprehensive law regulating individuals and organizations deemed to have foreign influence, without necessary proof of foreign money, further tightening restrictions (Federal Law N 622-FZ, 2022). Again, no criteria to determine foreign influence were set. Additional amendments in December 2022, and February and May 2024 (Federal Law 42 FZ, 2024; Federal Law 99 FZ, 2024) extended the law's reach, prohibiting activities such as teaching minors, running for elections, or making advertisements as "foreign agents," the latter particularly impacting independent media and journalism.

To sum up the plethora of changes: any movement, media, NGO, or individual perceived to have foreign influence and/or engaged in political activity might receive the designation of a "foreign agent." This leads to a compulsion under the "Foreign Agent" Law to provide extensive quarterly reports about their work, clearly indicate their status in any publications, and often face significant fines in case of accidental or purposeful disobedience.

The effect on all NGOs, including LGBTQ organizations, has been negative on multiple accounts. *First*, it severely impacted the funding opportunities. As the "Foreign Agent" Law expanded, donations decreased since people associated with "foreign agents" could get fined or receive that status themselves. The purposefully chosen name "foreign agents," negatively associated with being a traitor during Soviet times, also decreased the population's trust in these entities and hence the willingness for donations (Flikke, 2016; Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2020; Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023).

Many international funders withdrew their support (Buyantueva, 2021). Some were forced to do so, especially as the counterpart to the "Foreign Agents" law, the "*Undesirable Organizations" Law* was introduced in 2015. That law banned any foreign organization put on that list from working in Russia by freezing their assets and threatening people involved with the organization with up to six years of prison in case of disobedience (Federal Law 272-FZ, 2023). In 2022, the law was extended to organizations that do not even work in Russia but can be deemed as foreign influence (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 284.1, 2024). Some of the major donors, like the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, and several German Foundations, are included in the list of 173 "undesirable organizations" (OVD

Info, 2024a). This resulted in a decrease of available funding for LGBTQ NGOs and significantly increased the risk for those continuing collaborations covertly.

The Russian state didn't hesitate to distribute fines to those non-complying with the "Foreign Agent" Law. Some examples are Memorial International, which was convicted to pay a 4 million Ruble fine (ca. 40,000 Euro) ("Memorial paid 4 Mio", 2021), Radio Svoboda 100,000 Ruble (ca. 1,000 Euro) ("First Fine for Media," 2018), Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation 500,000 Ruble (ca. 5,000 Euro) ("FBK Fine," 2020) or the previous head of the LGBTQ organization Coming Out, Alexander Voronkov, for 110,000 Ruble (ca. 1,100 Euro) ("Fine for Coming Out Director," 2023). Therefore, additional expenses for paying those fines had to be calculated. Sometimes that sum also threatened the mere existence of the organization, as with decreased financial support it could amount to a significant part of their budget (Romanova, 2022). In extreme cases, when organizations were unable to pay or chose not to comply with the ruling, they were persecuted by the Russian state and forced to close. That happened to the above-mentioned Sphere Foundation, which was liquidated by the court[6] ("Sphere liquidation", 2022). Another prominent, non-LGBTQ related example is the International Human Rights Center Memorial in 2021 (Karev, 2021).

Second, the administrative burden immensely increased, obliging all "foreign agents" to submit frequent detailed accounting reports about their work. In turn, this affected the available resources for projects and organizational development. Therefore, not only financial but also personal and psychological resources had to be redistributed. Many organizations shut down after receiving the status due to a lack of resources to comply with the administrative load (Hooper & Frolov, 2016).

Third, access to unbiased, non-governmental information became restricted as many NGOs had to close. Additionally, websites of organizations were blocked and put onto the list of forbidden sites, which further impeded access to unbiased information (Buyantueva, 2020; Khabidulina, 2023). This had a negative effect on the public attitude towards LGBTQ individuals in particular (more in Chapter 2.2).

The "Foreign Agent" Law was recognized as violating Article 11 (read in light of Article 10), restricting freedom of assembly and association, by the 2022 decision of the ECtHR (*Ecodefence*

[6] The liquidation of the legal entity "Sphere Foundation" in Russia was heavily connected to their work as financial operator for the Russian LGBT Network, and therefore regarded as promoting non-traditional values ("Sphere liquidation", 2022), which most likely was the main reason for the Court's decision.

and Others v. Russia, 2022). Several other institutions like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and Council of Europe Expert Council have called Russia out on their freedom-restricting laws (Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2020; Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023), obviously without success.

As of June 2024, there are over 170 recognized "undesirable" organizations and over 900 organizations and individuals on the list of "foreign agents," which is growing almost every week (OVD Info, 2024a). Among them are all major active LGBTQ organizations like Coming Out, Sphere Foundation, Russian LGBT Network, Moscow Community Center, T*-Action, Revers, Resource LGBT Center, T9 NSK, Alliance of Straights and LGBT for Equality, Community Center "Action," and NC SOS. Most of them, together with some individual LGBTQ activists, were included post-full-scale invasion between 2022 and 2024 (OVD Info, 2024a; Sphere Foundation, 2023).

For LGBTQ NGOs, the biggest obstacle for work remains the Extremist Law. However, before that, the "Foreign Agents" Law was often used to harass human rights defenders and restrict their work (Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023). Now it mainly presents an additional administrative burden for LGBTQ organizations that remain operating in Russia.

2.1.3. Broader Legal Pressures: The Impact of COVID and "Fake News" Laws on LGBTQ NGOs

The previous two chapters addressed the legislative changes that influence LGBTQ organizations' work the most. There are, however, several other laws and decrees, mostly connected to the war in Ukraine, that affect NGOs and individuals as well, especially in the sense of creating a hostile and stressful environment. This chapter will give a quick overview of the remaining important legal aspects and their effects.

Before the Extremist Law, street activism was a significant part of many LGBTQ organizations' advocacy (Baker, Clancy & Clancy, 2020; Buyantueva, 2021; Kondakov, 2014). In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, the Russian Federation passed laws to restrict public gatherings, including protests, pickets, and mass events (RFCAO 20.6.1, 2024). These COVID regulations remain in place until today, even though other pandemic related restrictions have been lifted. This law makes it increasingly dangerous to protest on the streets, necessitating additional strategies to avoid arrest. During demonstrations, authorities primarily use Article 19.3

of the Russian Federal Code of Administrative Offenses (RFCAO), which allows detention for up to 15 days for disobeying police orders. Just being part of the protest can be considered disobedience, as police usually demand to stop any kind of demonstration (Filimonova, 2019). Following detention, individuals could be charged with several other offenses.

Furthermore, many LGBTQ people are affected by the introduction of the *"Fake News" Law* (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 207.3, 2024), prohibiting any mention of the war in Ukraine that contradicts the state propaganda narrative, punishable with up to 15 years in prison. Most LGBTQ activists do not support the war with Ukraine and publicly share their dissatisfaction on social media. Several people have already been sentenced, among them a bisexual activist, Sasha Skolichenko, who exchanged price tags for anti-war slogans in a shop and was sentenced to seven years of incarceration for it (Golubeva, 2023a).

A second law prohibiting the spread of non-governmental information was amended in 2023 and 2024, punishing any "discrediting of the Russian army" with an administrative fine of 100,000 Ruble (ca. 1,000 Euro) at first offense, and with up to five years of incarceration for repeat offenses (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 280.3, 2024). As of June 20, 2024, 9,667 people have been charged with "discreditation" (OVD Info, 2024b).

These laws create a very stressful environment for people who want to openly speak about Russia's wrongdoings and add to the risks of persecution for LGBTQ activists, even if they do not write about LGBTQ issues in particular.

The last important aspect concerns mobilization and changes in the military enlistment procedure. In September 2022, Putin announced a partial mobilization to expand his army (Presidential Decree No. 693, 2022). Many people left the country after that in fear of being called to fight in Ukraine (Tofanyuk & Sapronova, 2022; "Running from Mobilization," 2022), prompting the Russian government to adopt more repressive measures for those unwilling to serve. Consequently, the laws regarding military summons were amended. Previously, a summoning letter had to be delivered in person to the individual's registered address. Since April 14, 2023, electronic summonses have been implemented (Federal Law 127-FZ, 2023). After receiving the summons, the individual must report to the recruitment office within 20 days. Failure to comply results in restrictions, including a ban on leaving the country, driving, obtaining bank credit, or purchasing property.

This amendment led to concerns in the LGBTQ community, especially among trans people. Technically, a person with a diagnosis of "transsexualism" [7] cannot be summoned to the army as this is a criterion to be declared unfit for duty (Government Decree No. 565, Article 18, 2024; Transcoalition, 2022b). However, since the Russian state is known for not upholding its own rules, there was increased fear that, for example, trans women[8] with an "m" gender marker in their passport would still be called to the recruitment office. Gay and bisexual men also feared conscription as non-heterosexuality is negatively viewed in the army[9]. Many LGBTQ persons said that the declaration of mobilization had a more detrimental effect on their mental health than even the beginning of the war (Quarteera, 2024).

Many LGBTQ organizations provided detailed information on how to avoid the summons and what to do after receiving them ("Mobilization", 2022; Transcoalition, 2022b). They put themselves at risk by doing so, but still chose to continue helping the LGBTQ community and everyone potentially affected by mobilization.

The most significant impact of these laws has been the added "background stress" for both the beneficiaries and employees of LGBTQ organizations. Now, they must be cautious not only about their identity but also about voicing any criticism of Russia's actions. The phrasing of the laws described in this chapter is intentionally vague, giving the Russian state the flexibility to enforce them as they see fit. The variety of restrictive legislation is a key factor inhibiting the development of political activism[10] in highly repressive states (Buyantueva, 2021).

However, legislation is not the only factor influencing the work of Russian LGBTQ organizations. Public opinion and public attitude towards LGBTQ individuals majorly affect their work as well. The next chapter will address the Russian attitude towards LGBTQ people and its consequences.

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[7] Russian doctors still operate according to ICD-10 where "transsexualism" is considered a "gender identity disorder" and deviance from the norm. The acting ICD-11 since 2022 replaces ICD-10's "transsexualism" and "gender identity disorder of children" with "gender incongruence of adolescence and adulthood" and "gender incongruence of childhood," moving them to the "conditions related to sexual health" chapter to reduce stigma and reflect current understanding of transgender individuals (WHO, n.d.).

[8] The term "trans women" means people who were assigned male at birth but identify as female.

[9] 4% of participants in the survey have received the summon letter (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022)

[10] In societies like Russia, where the identity of a person can be a reason for persecution, the personal becomes political. Therefore, in the context of this master's thesis, political activity is understood as the everyday advocacy people engage in to protect their rights to life, freedom, and absence of discrimination, and less as a strive to be elected to the parliament.

2.2. Impact of Government and Media Homophobia on LGBTQ Safety and Well-being

Recognizing the dangers faced by LGBTQ individuals, as most LGBTQ NGO employees are, is key to grasping the role of the LGBTQ NGOs and the ways they are adapting. The political climate has deteriorated, particularly over the past two years, which has had a negative influence on prevailing societal attitudes towards LGBTQ. By passing discriminative legislation, the Russian government clearly states that LGBTQ people are not equal to heterosexual individuals, which leads to increased homo-, bi-, and transphobia in society (Rasputin, 2023; Quarteera, 2024). Moreover, it encourages nationalistic and queerphobic groups to become more active as they feel reinforced by the state direction.

Media discourse plays an essential role in two key ways. First, it influences general perceptions of the public on topics like LGBT issues and same-sex relationships. Second, it helps LGBT individuals access information and understand how same-sex relations are viewed by certain groups, such as journalists, psychiatrists, politicians, and others (Buyantueva, 2018).

State media[11] outlets are very keen on reporting about LGBTQ issues in a stigmatizing and victimizing way (Pronkina, 2016), relying on discriminatory language from government officials and religious figures. Authorities often use the juxtapositions of “us vs them,” contrasting Russians vs the West, “traditional values” [12] vs “rotting Gayrope” (“Gay Europe”) (Baker, Clancy & Clancy, 2020; Buyantueva, 2021; Quarteera, 2024). Officials claim that the West, exemplified by its stance on LGBTQ rights, seeks to harm Russia, necessitating control and elimination of such influences (Baker, Clancy & Clancy, 2020; Edenborg, 2017; Narozhna, 2024). This stance is also portrayed as protecting Russian children from harmful ideas about gender and sexuality, positioning Russia as the defender of “traditional values" (Edenborg, 2023; Morris, 2023).

To give a few concrete statement examples: In January 2023, a deputy of the ruling party in the State Duma, Adam Delimkhanov, vowed to “destroy LGBT people” (“Destroy LGBT”, 2023). After the Law on Prohibition of Gender Transition was passed in the summer of 2023, Deputy Chair Pyotr Tolstoy said that the law is “yet another step to protect national interests”

[11] Non-state or alternative media have been labeled as “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations”, and their websites are mostly blocked, accessible only via VPN. To access their news, one must actively seek it out or subscribe to their Telegram channels. These outlets usually have a non-discriminatory stance on LGBTQ issues.
[12] The term "traditional values" is used to unify various conservative parties, but it lacks a clear definition. Typically, it serves to oppose gender rights, Western influences, or sexual rights, leaving the precise meaning of the values at hand open to interpretation (Muravyeva, 2014; Edenborg, 2023).

(Hajdari, 2023) and the Minister of Justice Konstantin Chuichenko voiced that trans people should receive forced treatment (“Forced Treatment”, 2023).

A major supporter of the Russian government is its close ally, the Russian Orthodox Church (Buyantueva, 2018). Homophobic remarks from religious leaders fuel negative attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals (Kondakov, 2014; Pronkina, 2016). For instance, Metropolitan Hilarion labeled gender transition a "crime against God" and gender reassignment surgery an "abomination" of the West ("Gender Change is a Crime," 2019). Similarly, Patriarch Kirill compared Pride parades to fascist movements and apartheid (“Gay marriage is fascist”, 2017).

The effects of those hate speeches and biased media reports can be seen in the change in attitude towards queer people over the years. In 2005/06, a time considered by many as more liberal and free, the media began to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues (Buyantueva, 2018). The Levada Center captured an all-time high in support for LGBTQ people at that time (51%) (Levada Center, 2019). A decline followed in the year of the statewide “Propaganda Law”: 39% in 2013 (Levada Center, 2013). Another high was captured in 2019 (47% support), which sociologists attributed to a decline in the active use of homophobic rhetoric following the 2017 ECtHR decision on the discriminative effect of the propaganda law (see Chapter 2.1.1.1) (Levada Center, 2019). This vividly illustrates the government's impact on societal attitudes. When the rhetoric reverted to its usual disdain, support for homosexual people plummeted to 33% in 2021 (Levada Center, 2021), aligning with the overall trend of deteriorating attitudes over the years (Rasputin, 2023)[13].

The negative attitude of the population results in an increase in hate crimes towards LGBTQ people. Between 2010 and 2020, 1056 attacks were carried out on LGBTQ individuals connected to their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) (Katsuba, 2024). The hate crimes have continued and even aggravated after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine (ILGA Europe, 2023; ILGA Europe, 2024). In 2022, 30% (1955 people) of 6439 respondents reported experiencing one or several forms of SOGI related abuse (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022). By 2023, this figure had risen to 43.5% (2045 people) out of 4701 respondents (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024). The annual number in 2023 of hate crimes against LGBTQ is therefore now nearly double the total recorded over the previous decade. Trans people

[13]No independent surveys were possible after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine; therefore, no concrete statements about the changes after 2022 are available.

consistently face more severe abuse than LGB individuals (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2023; Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024). In 2023, 8% of LGB and 13% of trans individuals experienced physical abuse; 24% of LGB and 34% of trans individuals faced verbal abuse; and 8% of LGB and 11% of trans individuals suffered sexualized abuse.

The homo-, bi-, and transphobic attacks are usually perpetrated by organized groups (Quarteera, 2024). Some of these attacks were particularly dangerous. The group "Internet Opolchenie" (Internet Militia) focused on online harassment through negative posts, comments, insults, and threats (Buyantueva, 2020; "Enemies of the People: May Day and LGBT," 2016). Between 2011 and 2014, the group "Occupy Pedofilia," using “pedofilia” to describe homosexual men, operated in 40 cities across Russia. They employed dating apps to lure gay and bisexual men into meetings where they were beaten, humiliated, and filmed (Buyantueva, 2018; Buyantueva, 2020). This group disbanded in 2014 due to the prosecution of its leader for the brutal attacks ("Members of 'Occupy Pedofilia' Convicted," 2015).

A dangerous movement called the "homophobic game 'Saw,'" inspired by the horror films, operated similarly to "Occupy Pedofilia," arranging fake dates and committing acts of violence. The motto of the movement, which, though less active, still exists to this day, is “more homophobia, more set-ups, more violence” ("Homophobic Game Saw," 2019). They particularly targeted prominent LGBTQ activists for possibly lethal attacks (Buyantueva, 2018). Private data like addresses, phone numbers, and names were published on their websites together with pictures of targeted activists. The organizers created lists of activists they planned to attack and kill (Satanovsky, 2019). In July 2019, the bisexual activist Yelena Grigorieva was murdered shortly after being included in that register. Though her murder was not conclusively linked to the game, it heightened fear among LGBTQ activists, who received threatening messages on WhatsApp on their phones (Satanovsky, 2019). Fake dates remain a significant threat to LGBTQ individuals, with 14% being extorted in this way in 2023, rising to 32% in the North Caucasian region (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024).

Despite complaints, the police did not intervene to stop the movement or investigate fake dates. The common police inaction leads to a lack of trust in that institution by LGBTQ people. Moreover, LGBTQ individuals are afraid to turn to the police as they expect to be harassed and humiliated by them, instead of being protected (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022; Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024).

The overall feeling of safety of LGBTQ people decreased after the full-scale invasion (Coming Out, 2023a). Seventy-eight percent of LGBTQ individuals voiced feeling unsafe in 2023, the number being even higher particularly among trans participants (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024). Thirty-nine percent reported increased homo-, bi-, and transphobia in their surroundings (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024).

The increase in state-sanctioned and legislated queerphobia has caused fear and anxiety among the LGBTQ community, becoming one of the most common reasons for emigration. For those remaining in the country, it led to a feeling of a loss of community, decreased mental health, and the necessity to conceal their sexual orientation and gender identity (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022; Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024).

In summary, LGBTQ organizations have to adapt not only to legislative changes and shifting public attitudes but also to the evolving needs of their beneficiaries, such as an intensified interest in emigration and an increased demand for psychological support and legal protection. Some authors suggest that LGBTQ activists have been operating in survival mode even before the war (Baker, Clancy & Clancy, 2020). With the situation for LGBTQ individuals and NGOs in Russia significantly deteriorating, as noted also by the UN's Special Rapporteur for Russia, Mariana Katzarova (United Nations, 2023), a legitimate question arises: how are they able to continue their work?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Question

This thesis explores *how and in what ways LGBTQ NGOs continue working and adapting in response to the increasingly repressive environment of post-Ukraine invasion on 24 February 2022*. To address this question, this paper examines the most prevalent risks identified by interviewees and the adaptation strategies they chose to cope with those challenges. By analyzing how strategies vary depending on the available organizational resources, prior experience, and cooperation skills, this research aims to uncover how Russian LGBTQ organizations navigate and survive in a hostile environment, contributing to the understanding of NGO resilience and adaptability in crisis situations.

3.2 Procedure

In light of the sensitive nature of the research, the author of this thesis consulted with a security expert familiar with the Russian context before conducting the interviews. To make sure that no harm will come to the participants, all his recommendations were followed, including gathering all additional data like age, sexual orientation, gender identity, region of activist work, years of work experience, and location through a preliminary survey. All of the interviewees gave written consent for data storage, analysis, and anonymized publication in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

When researching big countries like Russia, it is especially important to account for regional differences. Interviewees were successfully sought from all eight Federal Districts[14], representing organizations from each. The districts are coded by their first letters for quotations. Detailed explanations are provided in Table 1. Most organizations specialize in one region[15] (2 in CFO, 2 in SZFO, 2 in YUFO, 1 in UFO, 1 in DFO, 2 in SKFO, 2 in PFO, 1 in SFO), one is working in four regions (CFO, SZFO, YUFO, UFO), and five operate nationwide[16].

The total number of LGBTQ NGOs in Russia is difficult to assess, especially since the war in Ukraine has made it dangerous to publish or gather such data. Between 2018 and 2021, researchers identified 15 to 25 organizations (Pakhnyuk, 2019; Dunajeva, 2021). Therefore, the 19 LGBTQ NGOs that participated in this thesis likely represent the majority of the remaining larger, more active LGBTQ groups in Russia.

The thesis draws on 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews, conducted in May 2024, with activists representing 19 LGBTQ organizations that continue working in Russia. Two people (Participants 4 and 6) were actively managing two different organizations; therefore, the number of LGBTQ NGOs represented in the study is higher than the number of interviewees. The participants were acquired through the personal connections of the researcher and the snowball sampling method. Interviews were conducted online on the video conferencing platform Zoom, 16 in Russian, and one in English[17], transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed with qualitative data analysis software Quirkos. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes, depending on the length of the participant's replies to each question.

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[14] Russia consists of eight federal districts, which are divided into 83 federal subjects, similar to how European countries are divided into various administrative regions or states.
[15] Region is used as a synonym for district in this paper.
[16] One organization originally operated only in SZFO but expanded its reach after the beginning of the war to the whole country. As this thesis focuses on the post-full-invasion period, the NGO is regarded as working nationwide.
[17] The interviewee is bilingual (Russian and English) but preferred to do the interview in English.

Table 1. *District coding, examples and participant distribution*

Federal district	**Abbreviation**	**Distribution of participants and their position in NGO**	**Focus of the NGO**
Central Federal District	CFO	Participant 3, director Participant 7, coordinator	LGBTQ HIV, Trans people
Southern Federal District	YUFO	Participant 6, director (in both organizations)	LGBTQ, Trans people
Northwestern Federal District	SZFO	Participant 8, director Participant 17, director	LGBTQ LGBTQ
Far Eastern Federal District	DFO	Participant 1, director,	LGBTQ
Siberian Federal District	SFO	Participant 4, coordinator	LGBTQ, Trans people
Ural Federal District	UFO	Participant 5, former director	LGBTQ, Trans people
Volga Federal District	PFO	Participant 14, director Participant 15, coordinator	LGBTQ LGBTQ
North Caucasian Federal District	SKFO	Participant 11, coordinator Participant 12, coordinator	Violence against LGBTQ Cis queer women
Several regions		Participant 2, vice director	LGBTQ
Nationwide		Participant 4, 13, 16 directors Participant 9, coordinator Participant 10, director	LGBTQ LGBTQ Trans people

3.3 Participants

The youngest interviewee is 27 years old, and the oldest is 52. The participants represent diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) backgrounds, which they were able to freely indicate in the preliminary survey. There are 9 cisgender women, 2 cisgender men, 3 transgender men, 1 nonbinary person, 1 agender person, and 1 gender-nonconforming person[18]. Among them are 5 lesbians, 2 gays, 3 bisexuals, 2 pansexuals, 1 polysexual, 2 asexuals, 1 panromantic asexual, and one participant who did not indicate their sexual orientation. Four participants are still in Russia, while 13 left the country between March 2022 and May 2024, with one exception who has been abroad since 2021.

The participants started engaging in activism between 2006 and 2022, with an average of 10 years of experience in the field. Except for two individuals who started less than three years ago, the majority began their activist journey prior to 2017. All interviewees are either directors of their organization or the head of a specific department like media, evacuation, or psychological help. Since most interviewees were directors or coordinators, the quality of the gathered information is enhanced, as those in charge possess more comprehensive and higher-quality information, along with a clearer understanding of the employed strategies compared to regular employees.

Of the 13 people abroad, 12 consider their NGO to be partially relocated, with at least one staff member abroad. They share experiences from team members in Russia and abroad. The total number of employees per team was not collected, so no estimation about the ratio of relocated to remaining staff is provided. Participant 16's NGO is the only one that considers itself completely relocated, with all staff members abroad. Among the four employees who remain in Russia, the core team is still based there as well.

The LGBTQ NGOs represented by the participants had varying focuses. Twelve organizations provide assistance for the whole LGBTQ community, one of which primarily focuses on emergency support. Five NGOs focus exclusively or primarily on helping transgender

[18]Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. A nonbinary person is someone whose gender identity is neither exclusively male nor female. An agender person is someone who identifies with no gender or as gender-neutral. Gender-nonconforming is a person whose gender expression does not align with societal norms for their assigned sex at birth. (National Institute of Health, n.d.)

individuals, one organization works with HIV prevention, and one with support for queer cis-women.

3.4 Data analysis

A systematic iterative coding process following grounded theory methodology was employed to analyze the interview data. During the open coding phase, transcripts were carefully examined to identify distinct concepts, such as “verification” and “changing communication channels,” using Quirkos software for a comprehensive approach. In the axial coding phase, relationships between these initial codes were explored, grouping them into broader categories like “going underground” and “new communication codes.” Finally, in the selective coding phase, these categories were refined into core themes aligned with the thesis chapters, such as “safety and security risk,” “adaptation strategies to safety and security,” or “funding challenges.”

Due to the aggravated safety situation in Russia, it is no longer viable to publish quotes with actual names and cities, as was still possible in recent years. Consequently, all names, organizations, and cities were redacted prior to data analysis, and any interview segments containing particularly sensitive information, e.g., something that would be recognizable even with anonymized names, were deleted entirely. All data is stored safely according to security experts’ recommendations.

To be able to give a picture even with anonymous data, everything was coded in a systematic manner. Each participant was assigned a number based on the chronology of the interviews, e.g., “Participant 1,” “Participant 2,” etc. The NGOs mentioned by participants received their respective numbers, e.g., Participant 6’s NGO is coded as Organization 6. Cities received ascending numbers within their federal districts. For instance, Veliky Novgorod (used here solely as an example as it was not the case in this study) could be coded as City 1 in SZFO. The second city mentioned in SZFO would be coded as City 2 in SZFO, etc. The coding is continuous through all interviews. A structured template was developed and adhered to, helping maintain consistency across all interviews.

An interview guide was followed during the interviews. It consisted of 5 main questions and several sub-questions that were asked if the participant did not cover the topics in their reply. The interview guide can be found in Annex 1.

The researcher’s positionality should also be considered. She has worked in Russian LGBTQ NGOs since 2016, which increases her expertise on the research topic. Her involvement in the field has not jeopardized the objectivity of the research, as during the interviews and analyses she strictly adhered to previously developed protocols. She has followed a systematic coding process during data analysis and ensured her findings are based on empirical data collected from interviews. Additionally, she has incorporated diverse data sources, including perspectives from multiple interviewees and scientific studies, to ensure a balanced analysis. Her personal connections to the field work have been beneficial as rapport with interviewees was immediately established. The trust that data will be handled responsibly, which is especially important in the current context, allowed the interviewees to share more honest and detailed recollections and experiences. Hence, the researcher's positionality posed no significant challenges throughout the interviewing and analyzing process.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter will illustrate which risks and challenges participants and their NGOs are faced with and which adaptation strategies they implement to cope with them based on the conducted interviews. Initially, the regional differences in potential dangers described by participants are presented without reference to specific types of risks (Chapter 4.1). Subsequently, the three major challenges inferred from participants' statements are explained.

The first issue (Chapter 4.2) is the increased safety risk connected to legal persecution due to the new legislation passed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24.02.2022. The second challenge (Chapter 4.4) is securing funding amidst the changing donor landscape and the sanction consequences. The third obstacle (Chapter 4.6) is the strain on mental health driven by increasing fear of persecution and attacks, lack of safe spaces, and deteriorating human rights conditions in the country. Every risk type is followed by the according adaptation strategies (Chapters 4.3, 4.5, and 4.7 respectively), explaining how and in what ways Russian LGBTQ NGOs manage to mitigate those dangers and continue providing support to the LGBTQ community.

4.1 Regional Differences in The Risks for LGBTQ Population

To understand how the geographical location potentially influences the risks impacting LGBTQ NGOs' work, the following part will highlight the most prominent regional differences. Despite having uniform national laws, their enforcement and the specific obstacles encountered vary locally. “It is impossible to put the whole country under one umbrella. Even if we have the same laws, they work in each region a little differently,” explains Participant 5. The distinctions are not just between “the capital and the regions[19],” says Participant 10, but rather among each district and its own context. Participant 4 exemplifies: “In my region, they flood us with administrative cases because of ‘foreign agency.’ Somewhere there are threatened police searches, and somewhere there are not.”

However, larger cities provide certain benefits for LGBTQ NGOs since it’s “a little easier to go unnoticed” (Participant 17) in a broader range of civil society initiatives and general events in metropolises. This protection by city size was also observed before the war (Buyantueva, 2020). Conversely, in smaller cities, there are fewer civic society organizations, which makes LGBTQ NGOs more visible and vulnerable. Participant 3 commented that LGBTQ NGOs there are “like a pimple on the ass, pardon my French.” Activists in smaller towns face more direct scrutiny and pressure from local authorities, who may see targeting these organizations as an opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness. “These assholes [the police] also want to earn their commendations. [...] I think it's a plus that it's a big city, a lot of people, and there's a lot for these cops to do,” states Participant 3.

Smaller cities also provide additional challenges, such as the difficulty of finding specialized help from professionals like lawyers and doctors. “We have regular problems with finding lawyers in small regions, and especially in regions far from the center—I mean from Moscow, Voronezh, St. Petersburg,” says Participant 9.

Interestingly, for the work with doctors and psychiatrists on trans-related issues, the regional component of working in small cities was emphasized by Participant 10, a trans activist, as potentially positive: “Medical professionals in smaller cities do not know anything at all [about trans issues], and it's easier to teach something from scratch,” explains Participant 10. It provides a clean slate without prejudice. Despite global and some Russian media attention, people in

[19]In the Russian discourse, Moscow and St. Petersburg are often juxtaposed to “the rest of the country” as they usually have more resources and a different economic and social standing than other cities in the country.

smaller Russian towns and villages often have limited information about LGBTQ issues, especially regarding trans individuals. Compared to the extensive coverage of the war and other topics, LGBTQ issues seem less relevant to many.

The biggest determining factor of the attitudes towards LGBTQ, but also of the work opportunities of LGBTQ NGOs, seems to be whether the city or the region has a rich and active civic society. A vibrant civic movement is often accompanied by an openness to change and learning, which facilitates the efforts of LGBTQ organizations by creating a more supportive community environment. “The difference of City 1 in DFO is that people are more capable of change, more open to change, more open to new information,” shares Participant 1.

Another important indicator is whether the region supports the war, as both the general population and local authorities who back the invasion of Ukraine often adopt the state's propaganda-driven attitudes towards LGBTQ issues. A positive correlation between higher support for the war in Ukraine and negative attitudes towards LGBTQ was also found by Tsaturyan (2024). “We have a very big agitation for these military actions on the territory. We have people in favor of war [in Ukraine],” shares Participant 6.

Participant 8 shares about changes in his city: “The drama theater began to be misused. [...] They put the letter Z on several venues. And I know specifically that actors were asked to record a poem about the war. And then they [local government] used it to say that the actors are supporting SWO[20].” As already mentioned above, many LGBTQ people do not agree with the war and therefore could also be attacked or threatened not only due to their SOGI, but also due to their attitude towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A further risk in these regions is that former acquaintances who support the war might out an individual as LGBTQ or report them for extremism. “This could be an old friend who, for example, used to support you and was not against LGBTQ, but now the agenda has changed, and he might support the war, and he knows you. And if he finds out that you are against the war, he might report you, for that or for being LGBTQ,” recounts Participant 6.

Regions that can be called conservative, e.g., heavily influenced by any religion, make it more difficult for NGOs to continue working. As Russia is predominantly a Christian Russian Orthodox country, in many instances it is Christianity that is equated with “traditional values” and set as opposite to LGBTQ (Buyantueva, 2018; Pronkina, 2016). As a result, efforts to

[20]SWO is short for Special War Operation, which is how the Russian government is calling the war in Ukraine.

advocate for LGBTQ rights may face resistance or hostility from both local communities and religious institutions, making it challenging for LGBTQ organizations to advance their goals effectively.

> *"First comes the cross, and then the name of the settlement. A cross! I tell everyone, it feels like entering a cemetery. Near each settlement, there's one like this, three meters high. [...] This is the kind of Orthodox Christianity that's being pushed onto us."*
> Participant 6

Special attention must be given regarding conservatism to the North Caucasus. It is a region that is mostly Muslim with a very restrictive interpretation of Islam. Participant 11 explained that women there still have almost no rights; they are not allowed to leave the city, buy a phone, or apply for documents without the permission or accompaniment of a male relative. Female genital mutilation and forced marriages are still heavily present in the region. Lesbian and bisexual women are subjected to corrective rape[21] if their relationship to another woman is discovered, often followed by forced marriage. Honor killings are still being practiced. Therefore, not only the local authorities but also the families of the victims pose a significant problem. Commonly, several of the relatives are closely connected to the local police and would together fabricate a criminal offense to look countrywide for the person who fled the region and bring them back forcefully. After being involuntarily returned, LGBTQ individuals are often subjected to physical assault, coerced into declaring themselves okay, confined to their homes, forcibly married—especially women—or even killed.

> *"Most often it is an application from relatives for theft, for example. In other words, they try to return fugitives by opening some fabricated criminal cases against them, saying that he stole something when he escaped, or they simply take some case they have pending and make the person a suspect, then bring him back to the republic for questioning, allegedly, and hand him over to his family."*
> Participant 11

[21]Corrective rape is a form of sexual violence targeting individuals based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, with the intent to force them to conform to heterosexuality or being cisgender (UN Women, n.d.).

In 2017, Elena Milashina from Novaya Gazeta uncovered a systematic persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya (Milashina, 2017). The victims were tortured, and several were killed. The verdict of the ECtHR, as described in Chapter 2.1.1.1, officially recognized the crime as torturous, violating Article 3 of the ECHR. Another spike of intimidation happened in 2018 ("One year after 'gay purge'", 2018). According to Participant 11, who is involved in evacuating LGBTQ individuals from the North Caucasus, the persecution of gay and bisexual men has not stopped. The local police just figured out how to hide it better from the press and made it into a business of extortion.

> *"They find a gay man, through a fake date, for example, and detain the person. They try to get some more contacts, leads, or ransom from his family. If he, for example, can't rat anyone out and can't pay, he has to work for them. For example, participate in the same fake date scheme, i.e., get acquainted with someone and make him agree to come to a meeting. The law enforcers wait for the person there, and the same thing happens to him. And it is such an endless conveyor belt, on which they enrich themselves."*
> Participant 11

An added threat in the North Caucasus after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is that those who would usually be extorted for their otherness as queer are now "sent straight to the front lines. Without any formalities or military training," details Participant 11. This is a way to indirectly kill a person without having to do it with their own hands.

Additionally, if a young man wants to obtain a passport for potential traveling abroad, he might encounter difficulties as the local authorities do not like to let potential soldiers who can be mobilized leave. "New incidents that began after the war started, that passports are refused. [...] It's very difficult to get one. [...] And with men now too, because men are a reserve for mobilization," states Participant 11. This is particularly relevant for LGBTQ NGOs that help evacuate gay and bisexual men and are met with this hurdle when trying to get them out of the country. "Without a passport, it is very difficult for a man to relocate," explains Participant 11.

In the North Caucasus, where the situation was already critical before the war, little has changed regarding safety measures for LGBTQ organizations. "I would say no. Nothing much

has changed," says Participant 12. The example of the North Caucasus is a picture of the most dangerous and severe circumstances that LGBTQ activists in Russia have to face. With the current development of the state direction, it might also be a "prototype of what the rest of Russia is moving to. It's the model they can slowly come to," estimates Participant 11.

In summary, LGBTQ NGOs adjust their strategies to address varying regional risks. These risks, influenced by factors such as urban size, civil society engagement, support for the war in Ukraine, and religious influence, lead organizations to adopt customized approaches. In more hostile environments, they implement heightened safety measures, while in other cases, they leverage geographical advantages to collaborate with non-LGBTQ NGOs. However, even regions with less hostility towards LGBTQ are affected by the legislative repressions and state propaganda that uses LGBTQ as a target to justify the war and the fight against the West. The upcoming chapter will discuss security concerns and the impact of legislative changes across all regions, including the North Caucasus, as well as the measures taken to safeguard LGBTQ NGO operations.

4.2 Safety and Security Risk

The most significant security concern for LGBTQ NGOs is the increased risk of legal prosecution due to new legislation passed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The safety of employees and beneficiaries has become a critical issue, with both old and new laws being used to harass and persecute LGBTQ NGOs and their beneficiaries. This chapter examines the intertwined issues of safety and legal prosecution that are faced by LGBTQ individuals and organizations in this increasingly repressive climate.

The theoretical analysis of the crackdown against LGBTQ described in Chapter 2.1.1.2 corresponds to participants' personal experiences. "Quite quickly it became [...] clear that LGBT among others were chosen as such a target to compare [to the West] and justify the invasion. This was evident from the official channels," says Participant 17. Not only legal persecution, but also physical threats have escalated. The increased homophobic state rhetoric resulted in a spike in homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in society and therefore an increase in attacks on the LGBTQ community. "A lot of homophobic statements started appearing after that, up to the point of 'go to the front, they'll cure you there,'" mentions Participant 8. Participant 10 confirms, "All this was accompanied by a huge transphobic campaign in the pro-governmental media. [...]

There were a lot of publications about the fact that some Ukrainian saboteur is immediately a trans person."

LGBTQ people were harassed verbally but also threatened physically when people from the Wagner group, a Russian paramilitary group known for its persecution of minorities in the country, stormed private LGBTQ events, or detractors infiltrated these gatherings under false pretenses, claiming to be part of the community and in need of help, as described by Participants 5 and 14.

4.2.1 "Foreign Agents" Law and its Influence on LGBTQ NGOs Persecution

The additional burden of persecution through the "Foreign Agents" Law remains after the onset of the war and is even aggravated. As was mentioned in Chapter 2.1.2, all active leading LGBTQ NGOs were included in the list of "foreign agents." Some connect their expedited inclusion to their public work and official stance on the war. "I think we had been on the radar for a long time, but this was the last straw, since we reported and strongly opposed the mobilization," says Participant 5.

The awarding of the status meant additional risks for the beneficiaries, employees, and particularly directors of LGBTQ organizations. "It also adds a very strong vulnerability for the decision makers of the organization," states Participant 4. Directors are automatically mentioned in the list as the head of the "foreign agent" NGO, which made them more vulnerable, prompting many of them to emigrate[22]. Beneficiaries and staff members could receive the status or be put on the list of people affiliated with "foreign agents." This threat influenced the willingness of LGBTQ people to participate in events or financially support organizations as they wanted to avoid troubles like fines or interaction with the police.

As some organizations moved abroad and established a legal entity of an NGO there, they continued to offer financial support to beneficiaries in Russia. However, this posed an additional risk as money received from a foreign entity could lead to the declaration of the recipient as a "foreign agent."

"Since we are also involved in legal assistance, psychological assistance, [and] paying for housing for those who need to relocate within the country, [...] we're faced with the

[22] More on emigration in Chapter 4.6

fact that we again just can't transfer them [money], so as not to put ourselves or the people we interact with in jeopardy."

Participant 9

4.2.2. The Impact of the "Propaganda Law" of 2022

The extended "Propaganda Law" is not perceived by the employees of LGBTQ NGOs as a big threat to safety and security as it merely expanded the use of the already familiar "Propaganda Law" of 2013. LGBTQ NGOs "did not adjust to it much" (Participant 5), as it "hardly changed in terms of some actions" (Participant 4). However, it affected the trans community somewhat, as there were precedents of charges of "propaganda of transgenderism." This is unusual since before, the "Propaganda Law" was only used to charge with "propaganda of homosexualism," which points to increased negative attention towards the trans community. Participants 7 and 10 noted that these transgender cases are usually not reported to the media to hide the transgender status of those affected.

The biggest impact of the "Propaganda Law" was the influence on potential collaboration partners not connected to the LGBTQ community. The adoption of that law was widely shared in state media to demonstrate how Russia fights the West (Buyantueva, 2022b; Narozhna, 2024). This led many people to perceive collaborations with LGBTQ NGOs as a threat of potential legal reprimands. Participant 5 outlines that their organization was denied a venue because the owners became aware of the newly passed propaganda law and feared persecution. The owner was aware that it's an LGBTQ NGO and was not against it until he heard about the legal changes and grew afraid to become a target of the Russian state himself.

4.2.3 Law Completely Banning Gender Transition for Trans People from July 2023

The next passed law, forbidding medical and legal gender transition, had a severe effect on trans organizations and the trans community. The data provided in reports from LGBTQ NGOs described in Chapter 2, was corroborated particularly by directors of trans organizations in this study.

Activists call the implications of the law "being taken out of the legal field completely" (Participant 4). Therefore, any connection to the procedure of transition became illegal. The persecution effect was immediate. Police and the General Administration for Combating

Extremism[23] (Center E) started to look for trans people to intimidate and potentially prosecute them. They gathered data from clinics that facilitated the transition and pressured those medical institutions to stop any collaborations in that regard. “There are signals that Center E is trying to fabricate cases against medical clinics that have been issuing documents with diagnoses,” shares Participant 3. Center E also made lists of all the trans people recorded in their databases. Participant 6 recounts: “In City 2 in SZFO, they were looking for transgender people. They came to their workplaces. [...] In City 1 in YUFO, they also collected lists of trans people. For what purpose, she [medical worker] does not know. It was about six months ago.” Even though the police have not yet acted upon all of them, the probability is high that they intend to do so in the near future.

But trans people don’t disappear only because the law denies their existence, and the diagnosis “transsexualism” F64.0 of ICD-10 is still being assigned in Russia. However, doctors refuse to provide trans-specific medical support[24] because doing so would be illegal, and no one is ready to take that risk. Even trans-friendly doctors who would be willing to look for legal loopholes are unable to help, which is particularly difficult for trans men. “My documents have not been changed, but I have passed all the commissions. I talked to the chief endocrinologist of the department at the regional hospital, and she explained that there are no medical procedures for a woman, since it’s a woman according to the documents, to prescribe testosterone to me in any way,” shares Participant 6. Participant 16 confirms that currently “there is no way” to receive hormonal treatment or change documents in Russia. The lack of access to testosterone forces trans men[25] to obtain it from other countries, risking criminal charges for contraband under Russian law (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 234 and 236, 2024). Consequently, they must choose between suffering from gender dysphoria or risking imprisonment.

But doctors still have the medical duty to provide support to a “sick” person, as the diagnosis makes trans individuals out to be. However, gender transitioning is forbidden, therefore they

[23] The Russian General Administration for Combating Extremism, known as Center E, is a police unit responsible for identifying and addressing extremist activities, including political dissent and opposition groups, within Russia (Merzlikin, 2019).

[24] The primary healthcare standard for trans individuals in Russia included consultations with various specialists, psychodiagnostic testing, psychotherapy sessions, and hormone treatments with testosterone, estradiol, medroxyprogesterone, and cyproterone (Ministry of Health of Russia, 2013).

[25] The term “trans man” means a person who was assigned female at birth, but identifies as male.

revert to addressing transgenderism as a mental health disorder and recommend psychiatric institutionalization to trans people.

> *"They suggest psychiatric treatments. [...] Homosexuality and transsexualism should be treated psychiatrically. Only psychiatrists will treat, no endocrinologists, no surgeons, no one but psychiatrists."*
> Participant 6

Not only appropriate medical help connected to the transition is denied. According to Participant 10, general medical assistance also becomes a challenge as doctors are afraid to treat trans people for colds, stomach issues or other problems for fear of persecution. Despite the trans law focusing solely on transition procedures, this generalized fear results in additional hurdles for trans people.

4.2.4. The Russian Supreme Court's Decision Declaring the "International LGBT Movement" Extremist in December 2023

The biggest security risk to the LGBTQ community stems from the decision of the Russian Supreme Court to declare the "International LGBT Movement" extremist (Golubeva, 2023b). As described in Chapter 2.1.1.2, one of the dangers is the ambiguity of the phrasing of the decision, making it difficult to assess to what exactly it will apply. "From the perspective of legal rights, this law [against LGBTQ] is the first time in history. Also, because of the vagueness, it's not at all clear whether it's possible to continue our activities, to what extent, how it will be used" comments Participant 4.

Gay clubs and saunas were raided in 2023, and the first criminal charges against club administrators were introduced (Alexandrov, 2023). But there is no legal precedent for the prosecution of an LGBTQ NGO as extremist yet. Experts confirm that the assessment of consequences is possible only after a legal precedent (Quarteera, 2024). This means that LGBTQ NGOs still do not know what to expect, which makes them overly cautious and agitated.

> *"We're faced with the fact that the lawyers say the same thing. 'Until there's a precedent, we don't know'. [...] And you sit and wait. You might become that precedent. […]."*

Participant 6

This insecurity regarding the decision's implementation also affects the LGBTQ community. People understand that even without being activists, they could be considered extremists if they are seen associated with an LGBTQ organization or display any same-sex affections in public. This leads to growing distrust in the community as people fear betrayal by others or suspicion towards newcomers potentially being government informants. Participant 10 reiterates: "The danger of extremism, obviously, it's a separation of the community. So that people are afraid to trust each other, afraid to communicate."

A split in the community is sometimes also created by differing attitudes towards the ongoing war. There are rare instances where LGBTQ individuals might express support for it. This phenomenon is particularly notable in regions like North Caucasus and other conservative areas, where people tend to align closely with state propaganda, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The contradicting views on the war also influence the safety of the atmosphere in LGBTQ community centers. "It added a certain amount of discomfort to people in the community," says Participant 15. Participant 12 adds, "on the other hand you can't argue about it either, because you don't know who will go and turn you in." Most organizations do not enforce a strict "no talking about the war" policy, allowing discussions to unfold naturally. They prepare for potential escalation "to handle conflicts" (Participant 15), or, as described by Participant 3, believe that war supporters will eventually leave on their own as they feel less welcomed by the community.

One of the LGBTQ NGOs was unable to withstand the intense pressures resulting from the war and legislative repressions, leading to its closure. "Our organization actually crumbled and was dissolved by the end of 2023 after the passage of the law to declare the non-existing [LGBTQ] movement extremist," shares Participant 14. However, the people who worked for this organization established their own local initiatives and continue their efforts under a different name. Participant 14 explains, "On its base we planned to open three initiatives, which for an outside observer will not be connected to each other."

The experience shared by the interviewees corresponds to the theoretical examination made in Chapter 2. Therefore, it is a strong indicator that the interviewees are a representative group to

assess the situation in Russia. To mitigate the risks described in this section, various strategies were adopted, which will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

4.3 Adaptation Strategies to Mitigate Safety and Security Risks

To address and mitigate the safety and security risks related to the legislative changes, LGBTQ NGOs implemented several strategies. All participants consistently emphasized security as a focal point of their organizations' work. Security protocols have been established and revised several times as the circumstances in which the organizations operated changed. "Now we have a separate security focus that has been strengthened. It is for the sustainability of the team, making us feel comfortable too and knowing what it's for," says Participant 17.

Many LGBTQ NGOs appointed safety specialists within their teams who handle security (Participant 5), while others regularly consult with security experts to maintain effective safety protocols. Participant 4 noted, "We have a dedicated activist lawyer, who's up to date on what is going on, who is talking to everybody."

While developing the strategies described below, some organizations indicate that they can rely on previous experience. "We are not starting from scratch," says Participant 4, "we were taking care of our security before as well." Several NGOs were already preparing for growing restrictions after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and were therefore less taken by surprise when the decision to declare the LGBTQ movement extremist came into place. "By that time we already had the process so well established that we knew what to do in case of A, B and so on," explains Participant 16.

Especially after the LGBTQ movement was declared extremist, an unprecedented persecution of the LGBTQ community in Russia, several LGBTQ NGOs turned to other civic society organizations and media that had been designated with this status before to draw on their experience and understand what likely awaits them.

> *"When it all started, we consulted a lot around New Year's Eve [2023] with lawyers, with people who are already included in these extremist lists like Navalny's FBC, and we realized that we would have to curtail our public activities completely. No law on 'foreign agents' is even close to extremist articles. This is very serious."*
>
> Participant 3

This way, the NGOs realized that first LGBTQ individuals and organizations will likely be prosecuted for any visible signs like the rainbow flags or the abbreviation “LGBT,” and took that into consideration in their work. “For example, it was immediately clear that the first charges would be for emblems. Because the same thing happened with AUE[26]. Even if we talk about Navalny's supporters, there too, if there are some reposts, something else, it is more obvious. We realized that the first thing, the persecution would be more online than offline, because it's easier,” explains Participant 5.

4.3.1 Going Underground

The first strategy to achieve security can be described as “going underground.” To evade legal prosecution due to being labeled an extremist LGBTQ movement or because of “foreign agent” status, the LGBTQ NGO must effectively become invisible to the Russian state. By staying undetectable, the LGBTQ NGO and its affiliated individuals avoid charges related to propaganda or extremism, as well as fines for failing to mark publications as “made by a ‘foreign agent’” or untimely reports.

This transition from operating openly to going completely off-grid was not unfamiliar to seasoned activists. “I guess now, because we have already gone through this experience of underground work, maybe it was easier to go underground than it would have been if there had been no such experience at all,” says Participant 1. However, despite prior experience, there is an understanding that circumstances are different than before. “It's not like when it was 2013, 14,” adds Participant 1. Even though the first propaganda law was somewhat restricting LGBTQ NGOs’ work since 2013, it doesn’t compare to the recent legislative changes and the corresponding need for substantial adaptations.

4.3.1.1 Dissolve Legal Entity.

To maintain invisibility and work underground, several methods can be used. The most straightforward approach is to dissolve the legal entity associated with the LGBTQ NGO. As described in Chapter 2, due to the impossibility of registering as an LGBTQ NGO, many

[26] Arestantskiy Uklad Edin” or "The Prisoners' Code is Unified" is a criminal subculture that originated in Russian prisons. AUE was declared extremist in Russia for promoting criminal behavior and undermining legal order, particularly by recruiting youth into violent and illegal activities (“AUE banned”, 2020)

organizations had established alternative legally registered entities to receive funding. “Before all of this, we had a non-profit organization, with a bank account, and we were getting grants to that account. [...] We closed it,” says Participant 1.

Over time, some of these covert structures became known to the Russian state, leading to heightened attention towards them. Consequently, these structures needed to be eliminated to erase any traces that might reveal the ongoing operation of LGBTQ organizations. “We closed the cafe. We are now in the process of liquidating the legal entity from which the cafe operated, because the cafe was targeted, police officers were frequenting the place,” reveals Participant 3. Participant 13 shares: “We've closed our organization in Russia, the attention on Organization 13 has significantly reduced. While we were there [in Russia], there was a lot of pressure on us.”

The liquidation was, of course, only necessary if the legal entity was exposed. Those who already operated completely covertly did not need to make any adjustments in that regard. Participant 12 from North Caucasus explains, “I haven't had that difficulty. [...] Like I said, I have it [her NGO] hidden as a business and I'm registered as IP[27].”

To avoid being prosecuted as extremists or “foreign agents,” “many organizations announced that they were closing their operations” (Participant 2) to give the impression to the Russian state that they had stopped working. Meanwhile, most of them continued their work underground. “In fact, it [the NGO] does exist and continues [its work],” says Participant 2. Participant 15 adds, “People who visited our center, they kind of know that we didn't close down completely. They know about what is happening.”

To be able to work underground, the organizations sometimes choose to *rebrand,* which can be described as a sub-strategy of going underground. Rebranding can be split into two versions. The first is *renaming,* which means the NGO chooses a different name, therefore a different brand, and continues working with the LGBTQ community. This strategy is mostly used when the original organization received a “foreign agent” status, and the NGO wanted to operate freely without that burden. Additionally, as the name is new, the police and other local authorities are not yet familiar with them, which again decreases the risk of prosecution. “Rebranding helped us

[27] The Russian "Individual Entrepreneur" (IP) is similar to the European "Sole Proprietorship," both being legal forms where a single individual owns and operates the business, assuming all profits and liabilities. Registration as an IP in Russia involves submitting an application to the Federal Tax Service, comparable to the local business registration processes in European countries.

a lot because we basically kind of immediately positioned ourselves as an organization that helps queer individuals," explains Participant 5.

Big and famous LGBTQ organizations whose reputation very much depends on the brand chose not to change it and stay as is. "We don't change the brand, it doesn't make sense for us. But we do fewer public events," says Participant 4. Participant 9 explains, "We didn't change the name with the liquidation [...]. First of all, we just started building the naming at the beginning of '22. [...]. Second, a lot of donors knew it, people who had been involved in activism for a long time also knew it. [...] And thirdly, we had just made a brand book of our own, and we needed to implement it somehow." They all closed their legal entities in Russia to have at least somewhat less pressure from the state.

The other, more elaborate and complicated strategy of rebranding is to open a cover organization that will focus on different areas, like psychological support or entertainment. The participants referred to it as "*creating a cover story*." These are in-depth, comprehensive legends created for the organizations that open anew. For instance, Participant 17 says, "It is a simple urban space with a psychological focus. It helped even after the adoption of the law on extremism because we continue our work." Participant 14 implemented a similar idea, "We have a brand new mental health service, an offline support group." Such medical or psychological support centers have an additional bonus that, according to Russian law, they cannot be declared extremist (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 282.2, 2024). Another example is a commercial structure covertly supporting LGBTQ that was established before the war but underwent stricter regulations after 2022. "My space is hidden behind a business. What kind of business, I can't tell you. But it's a business where only women can come. And only women can be present," details Participant 12.

In this context, it's important to ensure that visitors of offline events are well-informed about how to handle interactions with the police or street questioning. To achieve this, people are educated on what to say about the cover story to prevent accidental information leaks or outing of the visitors. Volunteers are also taught to handle police encounters.

> *"I would say that we have started to convey as much as possible to the visitors, to the facilitators, to the volunteers what we say. Our cover stories. If before we could say, 'oh well the administrator will tell you, oh well the administrator will sort it out', now in*

order to prevent this administrator from becoming the administrator of an extremist community, we try to convey to people this kind of information."

Participant 17

Understanding the importance of undercover work, one LGBTQ NGO decided to help others implement it and developed a training where they teach LGBTQ organizations' teams how to create the cover story, what needs to be taken into account, and how to make sure that it's believable. It could also be a real enterprise and therefore provide sustainability in funding long-term. That NGO also added a security drill to their training to teach activists how to react if they are detained and questioned by the police. It helps provide an all-around preparation for dangerous situations or, best case scenario, to avoid them completely.

"You can try to disguise as any kind of, I don't know, flower store and teach to do ikebanas, bouquets, etc. Anything you want, you can do. You just have to develop it competently, build it and produce it. Then people will have entry points, then they can gather. [...]

We outline a plan for who goes where, who opens a legal entity, whether it's necessary, maybe it's already there. Who looks for a space, what cover story we choose, how we present it. How we communicate this legend to the community, how we involve them and what events we hold there. Where we get the money for it, because the first couple of years it will work at a loss, as a rule. [...].

To these legends we also add a three-day training "Search, Interrogation, Arrest." The same people, the same group, participate in the event. We play out that they have contact with law enforcers. In conditions close to reality."

Participant 3

4.3.1.2 Close Community Center.

The second step to erasing traces of LGBTQ NGOs to be able to go underground is to close LGBTQ community centers, physical spaces associated with the LGBTQ organization. Not all LGBTQ NGOs had or have such venues; some focus on organizing offline events, while others engage in monitoring, providing psychological services, or assisting trans individuals during

their transition process. Budget constraints or lack of suitable locations may also prevent organizations from establishing community centers in their cities. Over the years, local police often became aware of or suspected the presence of LGBTQ organizations in these venues, especially when NGOs published their addresses. “We had a community center for many years in City 1 in DFO. And, of course, after this visit [of the police], after probably three months, we decided to close the community center,” states Participant 1. However, this practice was more common in liberal regions of Russia (see Chapter 4.1).

The raids on gay clubs, which were previously considered apolitical and left alone, have raised concerns about potential community center raids. This highlights a severe crackdown on any organization associated with the LGBTQ community, regardless of their activist involvement. Quarteera (2024) also forecasted, based on the analysis of the LGBTQ situation after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, that arbitrary arrests of LGBTQ persons will follow soon. Therefore, to avoid endangering employees and visitors, the difficult decision to close community centers was made. “Naturally, we closed our community center, which has been in the same place for many years,” shares Participant 6.

> *“The CC was an insanely important story for everybody. [...]. We believed to the last minute that we would find some kind of solution. [...] But at that time, we did come to the point where we were, well, almost out of options.”*
> Participant 15

In line with the ‘cover story’ strategy (Chapter 4.3.1.1), certain LGBTQ organizations opted not to give up on the concept of a permanent physical space. Instead, they opened such places under disguise. Meanwhile, other groups that continue to organize offline events have adopted a different approach: they use *changing venues*. Rather than settling on a single location, these events occur in LGBTQ-friendly spaces or even personal homes. “We meet wherever we can find. For example, someone from our beneficiaries works at a library. [...] someone has a big house, we gather in the house,” mentions Participant 6.

A benefit from seemingly closing down is that the Russian state assumes that it is reaching its goal of getting rid of the “spoiling” Western influence in the country and those who “threaten” traditional values. Participant 13 shares: “I sometimes do a search on the internet and nobody,

none of our former enemies, Milonov [a leading anti-LGBTQ proponent] or all these people, there is absolutely no mention of Organization 13." Therefore, it gives LGBTQ NGOs more time to regroup and continue their work.

4.3.1.3 Stricter Security Measures for Offline and Online Spaces.

To be able to keep those physical places safe, be it a cover organization or a permanent or changing venue, stricter security measures and prevention techniques had to be put in place.

First, a thorough *verification* of every new participant who wants to attend the event is conducted. This practice in itself is not new, as many LGBTQ NGOs, particularly those who did not disclose the address of the community center before the war, verified all participants (Buyantueva, 2018). However, the verification rules have become stricter for both offline and online events. "We have strengthened the system of checking and verifying people. [...] It takes twice as long now," shares Participant 4. Participant 15 adds, "We have a verification of visitors. New people come through the [Telegram] bot, or through friends of friends."

Those with a permanent new location must exercise extreme caution. If their address were to be leaked, it would pose a significant risk to everyone involved, prompting a repeated search for a new and safe location. "Since 2022, our address isn't public; it is only given after verification," says Participant 5. The potential threat from law enforcement, Center E, and nationalist groups would be substantial. Potential aggressors or government spies could try to obtain information about the location, programs, or people by infiltrating the events and posing as someone who needs help. Participant 5 shared an incident where a journalist managed to come to a support group, previously convincing the facilitator that she was part of the community. Therefore, even after verification, organizers are cautious about the information they provide and only share more once they are sure the person is safe. "Before we let a person into the circle, we are testing the waters, of course. We're a small town, and everyone knows each other through someone else," explains Participant 12.

Indeed, the prediction made by Participant 11 from North Caucasus, as discussed in Chapter 4.1 on regional differences, has already partially come to pass. LGBTQ organizations in North Caucasus had stringent verification rules even before, and this approach has now been adopted by the rest of the country as well.

The second strategy to ensure the safety of venues is to *make no public announcements* of offline events, avoiding open publicity. Instead, event details, including location, are shared privately through "verified chats" (Participant 14) - groups in safe messengers with trusted members, and by "word-of-mouth" (Participant 1). Alternatively, a verified member can bring "someone [they] trust along" (Participant 10).

There are a few LGBTQ organizations that continue making public announcements but do not publish the event location. The address is provided only after thorough verification, and those already in the know simply arrive. Participant 5 explained that by openly publishing information about the event, NGOs attempt to attract a new audience unfamiliar with them without jeopardizing their safety.

4.3.1.4. Information Security.

The fourth strategy is to make sure that organizational information is secure and not leaked or easily accessed from outside. LGBTQ NGOs achieved this by clearly defining roles and responsibilities, paying special attention to what volunteers (non-employees) are allowed to know.

> *"That is why people who work with us know only the vertical organizational structure and don't know the horizontal one. [...] E.g. a psychologist comes to work with us, they know only the coordinator [of the psychological services]. They don't even know me [director]. [...] If a psychologist has a client, they know the client. All psychologists work under a pseudonym, and all clients come under a pseudonym. This way we block information right at the entrance."*
>
> Participant 3

Additionally, clear boundaries were established for communication with external entities such as the media and police. "In our organization, the communication with journalists, with the media, I'm the only one running it. According to security protocols. And in general, people should not even respond to such requests. [...] We prohibited even redirecting to me [director], because that also reveals the connection with the organization," explains Participant 5.

Some LGBTQ NGOs view volunteers as potential liabilities as it is difficult to control whether they follow all the security protocols. As many people emigrated, volunteers are now all over the world, and ensuring they do not share sensitive information accidentally or deliberately has become difficult. Volunteers are not reimbursed for their services, which is perceived as a reason to be potentially less responsible about the tasks. Therefore, organizations from Participants 3 and 9 have decided to pay every person working for them and refrain from using volunteers or give them only the absolutely necessary information.

Simultaneously, there are LGBTQ NGOs that have a different approach and entrust volunteers with important tasks like dealing with the police. This is particularly the case for NGOs with smaller budgets and well-trained volunteers. Participant 15 describes that their volunteers are meticulously taught how to interact with law enforcement officers, how to divide responsibilities, and how to act in case of emergencies.

Considering the security concerns, the *channels of communication* have been changed. LGBTQ NGOs stopped using messengers like Telegram or VKontakte (a popular Russian social media network) and switched to messengers on secure encrypted servers. “We don't use Telegram. We use another channel of communication, which is safer,” says Participant 13. “Telegram and Vkontakte are strictly forbidden. We use only Signal [a messenger app],” adds Participant 12. Even if employees receive requests through insecure channels, they encourage the beneficiaries to switch at least to Signal, a more secure messenger.

> *“They text me first. ‘Hi, I need help.’ I tell them to download Signal and text me there. We switch to Signal and I tell them: now on that social network, text me that you have the wrong number. We say goodbye to each other in VKontakte and delete the correspondence. We continue to communicate on Signal.”*
>
> Participant 12

Many beneficiaries continue to have personal and organizational accounts on Telegram and VKontakte, primarily because these platforms remain highly popular among Russians, making them the most convenient means of communication for many users. “We have a Telegram channel,” says Participant 15. A lot of LGBTQ individuals are not aware of the risks of using these messengers for sensitive information. To enhance security, LGBTQ organizations switch to

non-Russian SIM cards to connect to these messengers. A two-factor authenticator is always a must. “The people who administer the channel have working accounts that are registered to non-Russian SIM cards,” explains Participant 15. “We don't write our nicknames, our real names anywhere in any social networks, and almost everyone has changed their numbers. I, for example, have a Ukrainian number,” states Participant 12.

For internal communication, some LGBTQ organizations started to establish their own independent servers to increase security standards. “We use an open-source enterprise messenger that is deployed on our own server. It's a little less convenient, but it's more secure,” explains Participant 9. Participant 15 elaborates for her NGO: “We have our own server that has a VPN on it, that has our email addresses that are used to register on various servers that are also not supposed to be associated with any of us in any way and are not used outside of our media [Participant 15’s NGO].” Having their own servers is not the case for many, but it might become more necessary in the future.

To ensure the safety of employees and beneficiaries, anonymity is prioritized. Team members use only pseudonyms in internal and external communications. “Everyone on the team has nicknames that have not been used anywhere before and cannot be attributed to anyone or the team,” shares Participant 15. One LGBTQ organization chose a creative approach and uses a name for a person who has left the country. Even if this pseudonym is discovered, the person whose name is used will not be at risk as they are abroad and not reachable for the Russian police. “We have an administrator, aka a bot, aka a person who kind of offers everyone to do something. We took the name of a person who is no longer in Russia, and everyone uses that as an option for the fact that they are communicating with them,” reveals Participant 17.

4.3.1.5 Additional Challenges of the Underground Strategy.

The complete covertness also has some disadvantages in regard to work with the community, as it becomes more difficult for people who are not familiar with these LGBTQ organizations to find information about the support they provide. “A lot of people are left out. [...] If you get too camouflaged, people simply won't find you,” shares his concerns Participant 2. It is an obvious consequence of going underground but was mentioned by several participants as something they realize is happening. It is the price that has to be paid for the safety of the majority and the

possibility to continue their work in Russia without significantly jeopardizing the employees and beneficiaries.

Another challenge with the underground strategy is the lack of interconnectedness among LGBTQ NGOs in Russia, which was particularly emphasized by Participants 7, 12, and 14. Although some LGBTQ NGOs have long-standing collaborations with their colleagues in other regions, it is not the case for everyone. In times of crisis, when unity and mutual reliance are crucial, some NGOs lack information about which organizations are still active. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that during difficult times, these NGOs had to prioritize their own survival, resulting in lost contacts and reduced collaboration.

To counteract the isolation effect, some LGBTQ NGOs intentionally create secure spaces and networks to maintain contact and facilitate connections among each other. “I was at a meeting recently, and there were a lot of organizations which are still working in Russia. They just don't disclose their work because it's dangerous,” says Participant 2. This recent meeting was also mentioned by Participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 17, indicating that there is ongoing communication between these NGOs. Participant 5 shared another example: “We have a project now, it's about community centers, specifically about physical spaces in different regions. We have united [...] 10 regions, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, [...], those who work with the community on the ground.” This vividly illustrates that despite the growing isolation of LGBTQ organizations within Russia, LGBTQ NGOs continue to strive for connection and mutual support during these challenging times.

4.3.2 Relocation and Emigration

The second strategy to provide safety and security to LGBTQ NGOs and their team members and beneficiaries is relocation and emigration. Relocation implies a temporary move out of the country and applies mostly to LGBTQ NGOs’ directors and employees. Participant 5, a former director of an LGBTQ organization in UFO, said, “It was important for me to understand how the whole thing would end. Whether they [the police] would start a case against me or not. So I left for a while. But since everything is quiet now, I think that as long as I have any possibility of staying in Russia at all, I will still go back.” Despite leaving, their NGOs and they themselves continue to support LGBTQ individuals in Russia and express a desire to return when conditions improve. Emigration, on the other hand, refers to leaving the country as a permanent decision

with an outlook to establish a life abroad. This is observed by the participants, majorly happening with beneficiaries who “left without the possibility of coming back” (Participant 17).

4.3.2.1 Relocation of the LGBTQ NGOs Team Members.

The existence of LGBTQ NGOs in Russia was known to local and state authorities to varying degrees. Depending on the level of advocacy they engaged in and their geographical location, some LGBTQ NGOs were more well-known than others. Team members whose identities were publicly disclosed through media interviews or other public initiatives were usually the first to be relocated. ”If there's any indirect threat to the employee, they’re evacuated from Russia,” explains Participant 11. “We persuaded those who had been very much exposed to leave,” says Participant 1. This was particularly true for directors of LGBTQ organizations, who were not only public figures but also at greater risk due to their leadership roles. Consequently, in certain cases, only the heads of these NGOs were relocated. “I left, the rest remained in City 2 in YUFO and City 1 in YUFO,” comments Participant 6.

Some teams relocated only a few members, while others experienced migration over the last two years, resulting in the majority of the staff being spread across the globe. Participant 13 shares, “Some of our staff in 2022 were still there. Some left later in December. So they were kind of holding the fort for a little while.” Participant 1 adds: “After the full-scale invasion, I and one other activist left Russia. And at the end of last year, two more people left. And now the majority [of the team] is no longer in Russia.”

Having part of the team in Russia also facilitates the reorientation and transition period to remote work as some people remain on the ground. Another advantage of different locations is increased international collaboration. Those who can afford to be visible due to being relocated can become “[…] the voice. They can speak, they can communicate, they can meet with donors. And those who are left, they are often silent because they cannot be public,” notes Participant 2.

Many organizations did not relocate their teams to a single country due to various reasons. Some individuals needed faster relocation, while others were not prepared to leave or lacked necessary documents like passports. Additionally, waiting for visas can be a time-consuming process, complicating evacuation plans.

Although emigration or relocation sounds tempting, it is never an easy decision. Many are unwilling or unable to leave everything behind and move to an unfamiliar environment.

Therefore, some people stay due to "family ties, jobs, real estate" and uncertainty about "how to build a life from scratch," explains Participant 6. LGBTQ NGOs try to “protect those people who stayed in Russia, who before this whole horror were out in the open,” says Participant 1. This included increasing informational security measures described in Chapter 4.3.1.4, but also implementing preventive measures like deleting “all of our social media, all of our photos, not only with our activists, but also with our beneficiaries,” emphasizes Participant 1. Where possible, a multi-year Schengen visa was prepared in case of urgent evacuation. Participant 14 shared that with the help of Organization 4, she was able to obtain such a visa, which gives her a “feeling of security” as she can evacuate to a safe country if needed.

While evacuation without visas to neighboring non-EU countries is also possible and often used as a medium-term solution (given the time-consuming process of obtaining Schengen or humanitarian visas), it is essential to consider the risks associated with non-EU countries in Europe and Asia. These countries may still pose dangers, including the possibility of extradition to Russia. Notably, there have been instances where activists—beyond just LGBTQ activists—residing in Georgia, Armenia, or Kyrgyzstan were handed over to the Russian government, as Participants 2 and 11 report. These countries cannot therefore be considered as completely safe, but they do provide more security than remaining in Russia.

One LGBTQ NGO made a conscious decision to relocate the whole core team and start working completely from abroad. Participant 16, director of that NGO, realized that “it would be more difficult further on. There would definitely be repression. Primarily, there would be pressure on the queer community, so it would not be safe to stay and it would be quite difficult to continue working. And we are still convinced that we made absolutely the right decision that we completely relocated [the team].” It is important to note that only the main NGO staff was relocated, while lawyers, doctors, and other partners mostly remained in the country. The NGO offered relocation assistance to those who wanted to leave.

In other LGBTQ NGOs, in most cases, the choice to relocate or stay was left to individual staff members. However, the decision was no longer voluntary if an employee handled sensitive information related to emergency evacuation. These individuals possess critical data about beneficiaries, “knowing every person we are helping” (Participant 9), and the employees’ arrest or search by the police could jeopardize lives if information is leaked. If the employee declined to leave the country, they were either reassigned from sensitive roles and “offered another

position" (Participant 9) or let go entirely as "it's not safe for them [who remains in the country] and it's not safe for us [who relocated]" (Participant 16). Obviously, the laid-off employees still possess some personal information, but at least the risk is minimized by cutting access to new incoming cases.

4.3.2.2 Change of Communication in Teams.

The relocation of the team, be it complete or partial, obviously leads to the need to adapt the internal organizational processes. Several organizations found it necessary to reevaluate their structure. Some concluded that adopting a "horizontal management structure" (Participant 1)—where power and responsibilities are equally distributed rather than concentrated in one or two leaders—would be more beneficial. Others, like Organization 3, tightened the vertical separation to ensure that access to information is highly restricted (see Chapter 4.3.1.4).

New communication structures in teams needed to be tested and implemented. While addressing various challenges, LGBTQ NGOs opted for predominantly online meetings due to team members being in different countries. Participants 2 and 5 explicitly emphasized the need to get used to remote work and online correspondence. However, understanding the importance of in-person interactions for team building, LGBTQ NGOs also organize offline meetings in third countries accessible to all team members, even those without Schengen visas. "We moved the meetings to a third country," explains Participant 8. These countries often are Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, or Central Asian nations.

4.3.2.3 Supporting Emigration of LGBTQ Beneficiaries

Of course, the safety risks connected to legislation also affect the non-activist LGBTQ community. Therefore, the strategy of emigration is also applicable to the beneficiaries.

In contrast to activists who systematically prepared for relocation, beneficiaries' desire for emigration happened in waves strongly connected to every new LGBTQ legislation. "People who ever thought of leaving, now [after the extremist law] did. Especially families who had children" says Participant 3. A "decrease in visitors [in our center] after the declaration of the first mobilization" was noticed by Participant 7, indicating that the fear of being called to war was also an important factor in the decision to leave. This observation is supported by statistics

gathered by LGBTQ NGOs, showing that one of the biggest emigration waves happened after the declaration of mobilization in September 2022 (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022).

The demand for information surrounding emigration opportunities “increased quite significantly” (Participant 2). Reports indicate that 22% of their beneficiaries have emigrated in the last two years (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022; Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024). Logically, the LGBTQ NGOs answered this demand by readjusting their services to aid those who want to leave. That includes writing support letters confirming the persecution of LGBTQ individuals in the country, which are often necessary to be able to receive a humanitarian visa or when applying for asylum. Particularly, Participants 3 and 7 emphasized this as a major new task in their work after the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

A good example of LGBTQ NGOs' speed of adaptation is how quickly they reacted to the demand for emigration and expanded their knowledge about that area. New directions like “emergency assistance” (Participant 9), particularly regarding urgent evacuation, were founded. LGBTQ organizations also created new networks in other countries to provide the best quality of assistance to beneficiaries. Some NGOs even established shelters, safe physical places offering protection and refuge, in different states. “There are temporary shelters in CIS countries too, where it is safer than in Russia, but it is not completely safe yet, because you can be extradited to Russia,” shares Participant 11.

International advocacy has become more important in this regard. The receiving countries need to understand why these people are in danger and need support “because it determines whether our beneficiaries get visas, asylums, and so on,” explains Participant 11. Especially when fleeing the Caucasus region, LGBTQ individuals need to be evacuated “not in the CIS countries like Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. It is not safe; it is necessary to get them to the EU or the States,” reiterates Participant 11.

4.3.2.4 Additional Challenges of the Relocation and Emigrations strategy.

Relocation and emigration undoubtedly provide benefits, especially in aspects of the physical safety of LGBTQ people. However, they also present challenges beyond the need for establishing new communication structures within the team.

One such challenge is the *feeling of isolation* felt by those who remain in the country, as many LGBTQ organizations have “moved out of Russia” (Participant 7) by relocating their operational

headquarters abroad or going completely underground (see Chapter 4.3.1). The remaining activists feel like, as precisely described by Participant 10, it's a "barren wasteland." This also applies to other civic society organizations who left in fear of state persecution. The LGBTQ-friendly physical safe spaces decreased, leading to the fact that "now you can count on one hand the number of people you can [collaborate] with," says Participant 17. The full effect of this isolation will be discussed in Chapter 4.6 under mental health risk.

Although emigration offers new opportunities, it also brings bureaucratic and personal struggles, requiring everything to be established anew. In Russia, although challenging, legal, administrative, and financial processes were clear, but in a new place, figuring out these details demands significant effort. People often rely on national and international partners for success, as noted by Participant 16: "We took consultations from employees of international organizations or our partners. [...] Got a lot of insights from media outlets like 'Meduza,' which had already gone through relocating and restructuring their work." Additionally, personal challenges like climate changes and health issues complicate the process of relocation. Participant 9 mentioned, "someone got sick, someone couldn't stand plus 40 [°C] in the summer."

Relocation potentially presents long-term disadvantages, including the loss of experienced activists who possess extensive knowledge about navigating the intricacies of the Russian context and its repressive environment. Sharing this expertise becomes increasingly challenging as maintaining and establishing contacts with new activists is complicated through geographical separation and is often limited to online or carefully planned offline meetings. Setting up these meetings requires knowing who is active in the field, which is hindered when everyone operates clandestinely. Therefore, valuable knowledge risks fading if not passed on to the next generation. "In other words, we're *losing activist potential*," says Participant 3. New activists are, for instance, already less knowledgeable about funding opportunities and technicalities (see Chapter 4.4), making it challenging to obtain grants.

However, even establishing this next generation of activists is a challenge, given the closure of LGBTQ NGOs. Additionally, the lack of visibility for LGBTQ organizations, as discussed in Chapter 4.3.1.5, reduces the likelihood of new individuals joining advocacy and community support efforts. Fear of persecution by the Russian state further exacerbates these challenges. "There are fewer volunteers, fewer people who are willing to do something," comments

Participant 7. “The main pool of activists is now outside Russia. And a new wave has not emerged yet. I don't know if it will or not.”

An additional problem is that the longer people are out of the country, the more they lose touch with how dire the circumstances there actually are. “They can no longer feel the insecurity, which is getting worse all the time, because they are abroad. [...] They read these laws and it does not affect them psychologically, this stress and risks and lack of understanding of what will happen,” says Participant 6. It is a natural phenomenon since people quickly adapt to their new circumstances, in this case, being in a safe environment. Therefore, “some of the strategies and options for how you should take care of your safety, they differ,” notes Participant 17, and sometimes those who left Russia may not always grasp them.

To counteract these consequences, LGBTQ NGOs make efforts to “reinforce connections between those who left and those who stayed” (Participant 2). So that when they return, they would be able “to pass down the knowledge” (Participant 3) to future generations.

4.3.3 New Communication Codes and Self-Censorship

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, access to non-governmental information about general topics, including LGBTQ, has decreased as websites of LGBTQ organizations continue to be blocked (ILGA Europe, 2024). The situation is aggravated by the fact that writing about LGBTQ can now lead to charges of extremism. However, it remains important to provide information about LGBTQ topics and events. Therefore, new ways and channels to safely communicate information need to be found.

4.3.3.1 Protective Measures in Social Media Engagement.

Social media presence of LGBTQ NGOs was affected the most. The first step to avoid persecution or jeopardizing beneficiaries and employees was to delete any previously published information on LGBTQ topics present on social media pages like Vkontakte or Instagram (see Chapter 4.3.1.4). “We cleaned out our website as much as possible. We removed all news that mentioned LGBT, [...] all pictures that reflected the rainbow in any way,” says Participant 7. “In order not to be immediately blocked, we hid all content that mentioned LGBT,” adds Participant 8. Even though the propaganda or extremist law has no retrospective effect, leaving the information online would provide a high risk for persecution. The Russian state could use the

justification that regardless of the date of the publication, the information is still accessible and therefore could be interpreted as supporting an extremist movement.

Sometimes, in addition to deleting the information, LGBTQ organizations chose to remove their previous accounts on social media completely and either establish new accounts under the new brand (for the strategy of rebranding see Chapter 4.3.1) on the same social media platform or move to another platform altogether. “We had [a media platform], but of course it had to be deleted [...] after the law on extremism,” explains Participant 12. Unsafe social networks that are easily accessed by the government like VKontakte were abandoned completely. “Vkontakte group, we destroyed it. [...] We cleaned out literally every post, every subscriber. We left an empty space,” details Participant 14.

Some LGBTQ NGOs restrict access to their social media accounts, allowing entry only after verifying the identities of those requesting to join (for details on verification strategies, refer to Chapter 4.3.1.3). For instance, they may use private Telegram channels[28] or migrate to alternative platforms like Discord. Other organizations have completely shut down their public social media presence, choosing to disseminate information exclusively through closed channels such as group chats in secure messengers or email newsletters (reported by Participants 3, 5, 10, 14, and 17).

An exception to the discrete social media strategy are bigger LGBTQ NGOs, particularly those whose team members have mostly relocated. They use their voice to openly address the challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals in Russia and “report as much as we can about the events that are happening. The “Propaganda Laws”, the increased pressure, the Supreme Court decision on extremism, and so on,” explains Participant 4.

The content of the information provided on social media by those who continue to run them changed as well. As public announcements of activities became less frequent, particularly regarding offline events, LGBTQ NGOs sought new ways to engage their audience. Some organizations decided to share more “good news” (Participants 5 and 16) about LGBTQ-related topics both within the country and globally. Participant 9 shared that they’ve “come up with a super cool format that's really hit the mark. We are looking for a month's worth of what good things for LGBT+ has happened around the world. [...] Trying to keep hope alive.” This was

[28] Telegram Channels are considered suitable as a social media regarding data security, but for communication of more sensitive data more secure channels described in Chapter 4.3.1.4 are used.

eagerly received by their followers as, most likely, it is a nice change to the all-surrounding bad news and provides a small virtual safe space. Simultaneously, the focus on useful content remained, sharing “instructions” (Participant 5) about what to do in case of arrest, contacts of lawyers and psychologists, and “texts about self-help” (Participant 15).

Social media and website publications of LGBTQ NGOs remain popular regardless of the extremist law. “Our total reach in social networks has doubled. As of today, we have a monthly audience, about 500 thousand users in total,” says Participant 16. Participant 13 adds, “articles are being accessed by a lot of people. Maybe one article had 7,000 reads, which is a lot for a small project.” NGOs publishing posts directly mentioning LGBTQ can be charged with extremism, but since most publications are anonymous and NGOs don’t have an official registration in Russia, it becomes more difficult for the Russian state to indict someone in particular.

Therefore, it can be seen that the type of information provided, its frequency, and the platforms where it's posted have changed significantly following the full-scale invasion and subsequent repressions. LGBTQ NGOs now prioritize discreet, supportive content on safer platforms like Telegram and Discord, reducing public posts and focusing on private, controlled dissemination to avoid persecution.

4.3.3.2 New Language and Visual Codes.

To be able to safely report about LGBTQ topics without immediately being charged with extremism, an adjustment to the use of language and visual codes had to be made. As per the decision of the Russian Supreme Court of November 30, 2023, the abbreviation LGBT and the rainbow flag can be considered extremist symbols (“Full text of extremist decision,” 2024), most LGBTQ NGOs decided to abstain from using them in their publications. LGBTQ NGOs were able to find new language and visual codes without jeopardizing themselves or the community. An example of this is “to say ‘sapphic women[29]’ instead of homosexual women,” reveals Participant 5. The NGO represented by Participant 10, which focuses on transgender issues, uses a well-known mascot from their organization, familiar throughout the Russian trans community. The mascot's name has become synonymous with transgender individuals in all their

[29] The term "sapphic women" comes from the ancient Greek poet Sappho, known for her poetry about love between women (Darling, 2021).

publications. The animal and name of the mascot will not be disclosed in this paper for security reasons. However, it is unrelated to LGBTQ and does not appear in Google searches for trans organizations. This approach enables the trans community to continue receiving trans-related information while allowing the NGO to disseminate it without directly using the term “trans.”

4.3.3.3 Adapting Media Outreach in a Restrictive Environment.

Communication with media outlets was affected after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine as well. State media was, obviously, never a partner to LGBTQ NGOs, but alternative media have also become more hesitant to write about LGBTQ topics as they could now be accused of propaganda or extremism. The biggest independent media outlets like Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, TVRain, and Radio Svoboda have left the country, at least physically, to be able to broadcast more safely from abroad. “Accordingly, it is more difficult for us to convey our positions to the media that are abroad,” says Participant 2, emphasizing the difficulty of maintaining connections not only with relocated LGBTQ colleagues but also with media outlets that moved abroad. Some of them were declared “undesirable organizations” (see Chapter 2.1.2) after opening a legal entity outside of Russia (OVD Info, 2024a). This adds additional strain on working with them as, according to Federal Law 272-FZ (2023), open collaboration with “undesirable organizations” can result in administrative and criminal prosecution.

The media outlets that stayed are mostly smaller local ones, covering predominantly topics of their city or region. Some LGBTQ organizations managed to continue working with them, but the amount of collaboration has become less due to “some complicated nuances,” as delicately described by Participant 5.

There are a few exceptions where LGBTQ organizations reported having more contact with the media than before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is particularly true for LGBTQ NGOs, such as those represented by Participants 5 and 16, which provide media training on how to write about LGBTQ issues accurately and without discrimination. These NGOs can benefit from their established connections as journalists view them as experts in these areas and turn to them for comments on different occasions, like new legislation, persecution, or the impact of war-related developments on LGBTQ NGOs' work.

Some organizations considered it essential to take action without waiting for potential collaboration with the media. One newly formed organization, following the dissolution of a

previous LGBTQ NGO due to state pressure, focused exclusively on their own media work and launched a new queer media outlet in February 2023. “One of our main tasks is to give people the opportunity to talk in a situation where it is dangerous to talk openly [...]. Plus highlighting the visibility of the community, making sure that the community is not isolated,” explains Participant 15.

4.3.3.4 Disadvantages of the Communication Codes and Self-Censorship Strategy

The disadvantage of the new codes strategies is that even though the LGBTQ population will be able to continue receiving at least a certain amount of information, for the general population, the LGBTQ discourse is disappearing almost completely from the media easily accessible to them. “Invisibility nourishes stereotypes,” emphasizes Participant 2, especially as the state propaganda continues to use LGBTQ as a scapegoat. This will also have negative long-term consequences for LGBTQ people as the attitude towards them will likely deteriorate further due to the lack of accessible alternative information to the state narrative.

> *“Judging by the level of censorship we now face and the level of laws that are constantly being passed, it is true that we will find ourselves behind a notional Iron Curtain, but one that is erected not against us, but by ourselves.”*
> Participant 9

In conclusion, social media management is predominantly either abandoned in favor of closed channels and groups or continued with coded language to avoid extremism charges. LGBTQ NGOs that have mostly relocated broadcast more openly due to reduced physical threats at their new locations. Collaborations with media outlets are possible but challenging, requiring heightened caution or offering mutual benefits, such as training, to attract journalists.

4.4 Funding Challenges Following the Onset of the Full-Scale Invasion

Russian LGBTQ NGOs receive most of their funding from Western partners like funds, international NGOs, endowments, etc. (Essig, 1999; Buyantueva, 2022a). Therefore, their ability to continue working is highly dependent on these collaborations as well as crowdfunding from private supporters. This chapter will explore the multilayered difficulties encountered by

interviewees after the beginning of the war in Ukraine regarding work with donors and public donations.

4.4.1 Challenges and Changes in Donor Support

Several participants reported that some of the donors they worked with have left Russia. “Donors are there, but their number has decreased,” says Participant 1. “Some funders have pulled out,” confirms Participant 13. The reasons for their withdrawal varied. Some donors no longer wanted to work with Russian organizations after the full-scale invasion, equating them with the Russian government. "Donors' attitude towards Russia deteriorated after the war," notes Participant 2. "After the invasion started, some grant programs turned us down because of our location, so to speak," adds Participant 14.

As many funders supported Russia in the hope of advancing human rights values in the country (Gugerty & Kremer, 2006), Russia's initiation of a war in Ukraine extinguished their aspirations. Disappointed, they withdrew their support from Russia, assuming that “the situation won’t change, [and therefore] don’t want to continue working with Russia," explains Participant 16. Some donors were forced to withdraw as they were declared “undesirable organizations” and therefore had to immediately stop their projects in Russia to avoid their own and their partners’ legal persecution (see Chapter 2.1.2). Some of them left temporarily to figure out new ways to continue collaborating with Russia and return to work completely covertly afterwards, as was the case for funders of Participants 5 and 17.

As a result, several LGBTQ organizations suffered from “a decrease in funding” (Participant 6), resulting in some organizations experiencing periods where they did not have any money. “For example, in the beginning of this [2024] year, we didn’t have it at all,” says Participant 1. Additionally, younger initiatives have struggled to obtain grants due to their lack of experience in that area. Participant 14 notes that securing funding is challenging because new members are "less experienced in fundraising than the previous ones." "When we launched the new initiative, we didn't have any money," recounts Participant 15. For others, the total funding was not affected. “Some donors might have left, but it [funding] hasn't decreased,” shares Participant 7. The reasons why it was possible for these organizations to sustain the amount of funding will be discussed in Chapter 4.5.

4.4.2 Challenges in Transferring Funds Amid Sanctions

For the collaborations with donors that continue working with Russian LGBTQ NGOs, the main challenge became getting the money to the grant receivers. Previous algorithms, like direct transfers to financial operators (see Chapter 2.1.2), are no longer possible due to sanctions. Almost all Russian banks[30] were removed from SWIFT, and the EU and US prohibited Dollar and Euro transfers to the country, leading to a complete bank isolation (Council Regulation (EU) 2022/345, 2022; Executive Order on Prohibiting Certain Imports, Exports, and New Investment, 2022). “We had to figure out how to build this whole financial system all over again,” says Participant 9. “It's unclear how to receive the money going forward,” adds Participant 7.

> *“Our conversations with donors start with questions like, ‘how will you get the money?’ I mean, we haven't been awarded anything [any grant] yet, but they are already asking how will you get the money, because, well, if there's no way to pass it on, what's the point of it all?”*
>
> Participant 5

Due to difficulties in receiving money, connected costs, and relocation, LGBTQ NGOs have seen a significant rise in administrative expenses. This is compounded by a longstanding issue where Western donors' demands often do not match the actual needs of these organizations (Buyantueva, 2022b). A common problem is the lack of core funding, meaning that grants are awarded for the implementation of specific projects and do not foresee budget allocation for salaries or rent. In the current aggravated circumstances, flexibility is even more important than before, as well as convincing funders to adjust their requirements. “We need to pay salaries closer to European levels in order to exist normally," elaborates Participant 2. This especially concerns teams that have mostly or completely relocated from Russia. "Our expenses for everyone have increased. If salaries in Russia were at one level before, now they are different, making it quite difficult to adapt," says Participant 16. Notably, since “it’s well-known that

[30] The remaining bank available for SWIFT transfers, Raiffeisenbank, was previously used by Participants 5 and 9 before the LGBTQ Movement was declared extremist. Currently, any transfer from countries deemed “unfriendly” by the Russian Federation faces heightened scrutiny from the Federal Service for Financial and Budgetary Supervision (Komarovsky, 2022). Such transactions can result for the recipient in Russia in being labeled a “foreign agent” and if linked to LGBTQ NGOs work, it may be considered financing an extremist movement. Therefore, this option is no longer viable.

salaries in [Russian] NGOs are quite low," adds Participant 9, "especially if it is an NGO that works with Russia, and you are not in Russia, there is simply not enough money. This is obvious to everyone, I think, except the donors." Therefore, compromises with donors regarding funding priorities are necessary.

4.4.3 Crowdfunding Challenges for LGBTQ NGOs

The second source of income for Russian LGBTQ NGOs, although significantly smaller than grants, is crowdfunding, mostly consisting of private donations from supporters in Russia and abroad. For the safety reasons described in detail in Chapter 4.2, receiving donations from individuals in Russia for LGBTQ NGOs would mean that the donor is financing an extremist movement. Therefore, "many organizations have stopped donations altogether, simply because it immediately finances extremist activities, and this is dangerous for those who donate," comments Participant 2. "We turned off Telegram donations on November 30 [2023]," says Participant 9. Those who did not have a legal entity usually received donations to a Russian personal bank account of the director or one of the team members.

Consequently, many LGBTQ NGOs have lost this financial opportunity. It was also a significant setback as the organizations were trying to establish a culture of self-support from the community where everyone could contribute in small ways to help the LGBTQ movement. "It's a shame because there was positive movement in that direction," says Participant 2.

Donations from abroad, which have constituted a part of the organizational income, have ceased as Russian bank cards are no longer able to receive international transfers. Moreover, even if such transfers were possible, organizations and individuals receiving the money would immediately risk being declared "foreign agents," jeopardizing their carefully prepared cover stories that save them from Extremist and "Foreign Agent" Laws.

To summarize, some donors have left Russia after the onset of the war, making financial sustainability more challenging. Crowdfunding has become a high-risk endeavor potentially endangering beneficiaries and the organization. Sanctions and the isolation of the Russian banking system had the biggest effect on LGBTQ NGOs, as new ways to receive money from donors and private persons need to be established. The solutions found by LGBTQ NGOs will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.5 Adaptation Strategies for Funding Challenges

To be able to continue helping LGBTQ people in Russia, LGBTQ NGOs had to find ways to retain the donors who are willing to continue support and figure out ways to receive money from abroad. This chapter will first explore how LGBTQ NGOs secure funding in changed circumstances. Then, it will examine the ways they establish to receive the money, and finally, the mechanisms for crowdfunding that are being implemented.

4.5.1 Strategies for Maintaining Donors Support

The primary goal is to retain the donors who are willing and able to work with Russia. Those funders who decided to retract their support from the country are not pursued further. Many Russian LGBTQ NGOs have "very good relationships with our funders; they are long-term, and we have a good reputation," emphasizes Participant 13. Over the years, they have built mutual trust by providing excellent results in common projects and responsibly fulfilling reporting requirements. As Participant 5 states, "We are trusted because, despite everything, we have consistently fulfilled all our obligations over the years."

This mutual trust fosters a shared interest in supporting civil society in Russia, leading donors to proactively inquire about the current needs of the Russian LGBTQ community. "Donors on their part are also asking, doing something to understand what is happening, what is needed now," says Participant 10. This proactive engagement facilitates dialogue about adapting strict reporting requirements that are no longer feasible in the Russian context, such as NGOs being unable to "keep original records for several years" (Participant 5) due to safety concerns.

Additionally, this dialogue allows for negotiating budget allocations or even initiating new projects aimed, for instance, at burnout prevention, as mental health issues have worsened since the onset of the war (see Chapter 4.6 for mental health risks). "We have increased resources for mental health services," says Participant 2. "We have special retreats that we do for activists," adds Participant 4. The dialogue also fosters ways to continue collaboration with organizations that have been declared "undesirable." This partnership must be completely clandestine, as per Federal Law 272-FZ (2023) any connection to "undesirable" organizations can result in prison sentences of up to 6 years. Together with donors, LGBTQ NGOs find ways to cooperate without being detected by the Russian state.

"Especially with 'undesirable' organizations, that's very private work. I'm only telling you. Just to make clear that we're working, we're still out there working with some donor organizations as well. But for each organization we have different security protocols depending on their status."

Participant 5

Some organizations are able to seek out new donors despite all the challenges, most likely compensating in this way for the absence of financial inflow from those donors who have decided to stop supporting Russian LGBTQ NGOs. "We even got new donors in 2022. And we continue to work with them. And that's great," says Participant 8. "We quite often have new opportunities, new projects, sometimes new donors too," reports Participant 9.

4.5.2 Solutions for Receiving Funding Post-Sanctions

Donor organizations had to adjust and figure out together with their Russian NGO partners how to transfer the money into the country. Both parties have experience in adapting, as Russian legislation has been slowly changing in a more restrictive direction for the last decade, albeit at a much slower pace than in the last two years (Tsyachniouk, Tulaeva & Henry, 2018).

No direct transactions to Russia should be made due to several significant risks. The Russian state closely monitors any transfers in foreign currency occurring in the country (Komarovsky, 2022). Additionally, since the onset of the war, Russia has labeled many countries, particularly those imposing sanctions, as "unfriendly" (Presidential Decree No. 95, 2022). This status leads to heightened scrutiny of any financial flow from these countries. If detected, such transactions could result in the recipient in Russia being labeled a "foreign agent" at best or facing charges of collaborating with "undesirable organizations" (up to 6 years in prison) or financing an extremist movement (up to 12 years in prison) if linked to LGBTQ organizations. This section will explore potential solutions for receiving grants outside of Russia, and Chapter 4.5.3 will discuss how to bring these funds into the country after donor receipt.

One way to receive money from donors without being detected by Russian authorities is via a *foreign bank account of the NGO*. This account can belong to the NGO that the LGBTQ organizations opened abroad to continue working. "We opened an organization here within a couple of weeks, it was quite easy," says Participant 13. This strategy is especially relevant for

teams that have relocated completely or mainly to another country and established an organization in their country of residence. “In a sense, it has become easier to work with donors, with some projects, to receive money, because we are here [abroad], we can quickly come, meet and personally communicate with someone, attend some conferences and so on,” explains Participant 16. Especially if the donors have been declared “undesirable” in Russia, it helps to stay off the radar from the Russian government. “Now being outside the territory of Russia, I can safely sign contracts and enter into interaction with donors who are ‘undesirable organizations’,” reveals Participant 8.

This strategy is not new to the period after February 24, 2022, as even before the war in Ukraine, some LGBTQ NGOs had opened legal entities in neighboring countries like Latvia or Estonia to receive grants there and avoid detection by the Russian government, as indicated by Participants 5 and 8. However, this strategy has now become essential to secure financial stability.

Another method to receive the awarded grant is by opening a *personal account in a foreign bank* and accepting the funds as an individual rather than as an NGO. This approach is particularly viable for Russian LGBTQ NGOs that cannot, for reasons beyond the scope of this thesis, establish an NGO abroad. Instead of transferring funds to a legal entity, an individual team member or a trusted external party receives the grant. As Participant 2 explains, “People are opening bank accounts in other countries.” Often, these accounts are in neighboring states such as Armenia, Georgia, or Kazakhstan, as opening a bank account in the EU has become challenging for people with a Russian passport. Additionally, not all activists have a Schengen visa to travel to the EU. Similar to the first strategy, this approach was also used before the war in Ukraine, becoming more prevalent now as the search for money receipt requires flexible solutions.

The last tactic described by interviewees involves *picking up the money in person*. An employee of the LGBTQ NGO travels to another country to meet a representative from the donor organization and collect the cash. The donor usually covers the travel expenses. “We have to [...] go to Europe to pick up the money,” noted Participant 2. Participant 5 explained, “We don't have any ways to get money on a stable basis. […] I have to go somewhere to pick it up.” This strategy is less welcomed by donors as it complicates reporting. The documentation of funds received relies on signed receipts rather than bank transfer records. However, major donors like

the European Commission have long employed this method in countries where other forms of money transfer are either impossible or unsafe (European Commission, n.d.). Despite potential challenges, this remains a common way to receive funding, highlighting the trust donors place in LGBTQ NGOs to find mutually agreeable solutions.

4.5.3 Establishing Pathways for Getting Money to Russia

After receiving the money from the funder, either to a bank account or in person, it needs to be brought to employees that remain in Russia. Two main methods have been described by interviewees to achieve that.

The first method is to bring the *money in cash* to Russia. An employee travels to another country either to meet with the donor (see Chapter 4.5.2), withdraw money from a personal bank account, or receive money from an intermediary whose bank account was used for the transfer. Once the cash is obtained, the employee returns to Russia with the money. “Mostly, I have to ask someone to get it or I have to go somewhere to pick it up,” says Participant 5. Usually, it is dollars, as the EU’s fifth sanctions package prohibits the “transfer or export of euro-denominated banknotes to Russia” (Council Regulation (EU) 2022/345, 2022, Article 5i., Paragraph 1). As a result, any euros received must be exchanged for dollars to be brought into Russia, which might result in additional expenses and money loss through currency conversion. Participant 2 shares the experience, “I change these euros to dollars at a terrible rate. So, I lost. [...] And when I withdrew them, I also paid the bank commission in the ATM.” Russian regulations require amounts over 10,000 euros or dollars to be declared at the border, so larger sums are avoided to prevent detection.

A second, completely new way of money transfer that started being used after the beginning of the war in Ukraine is *cryptocurrency*. It is still available in Russia, is less traceable than conventional bank accounts, and it can be withdrawn, e.g., through Bitcoin ATMs (Statista, 2023). This method is not used for grant wires directly to Russia, as it is rarely considered an option in donors’ internal regulations. Therefore, it is mostly used to transfer the money through cryptocurrency to partners and colleagues in Russia after it has already been received abroad. “If before they [colleagues] could transfer directly, now the risks have increased, financial transactions are monitored, and we have to solve everything through cryptocurrency,” highlights

Participant 12. “It is necessary to somehow get the money to the Russian Federation; it is either through crypto or through a chain [of people],” says Participant 15.

4.5.4 Evolving Crowdfunding Strategies for LGBTQ NGOs

The use of crowdfunding by Russian LGBTQ NGOs has changed significantly over the last two years, but LGBTQ NGOs found ways to revive public donations despite the above-described risks. Especially in 2022, when there were major difficulties in getting the money to Russia and new ways of transfers had not been established yet, the support of the community and allies proved life-saving for some LGBTQ NGOs. An increased reliance on crowdfunding was also documented after the “Foreign Agents" Law was first passed and NGOs struggled to adapt to the new legislation (Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2020), highlighting it as a recurring strategy for delays in donor support. Participant 15 shares: “For a while there was just no money, we were living on donations because the grants weren't coming in. [...] We literally survived for a while there just by people donating to us.” The NGOs were able to cover rent costs with the gathered donations and continue to provide offline assistance. “Especially in 2022-23 [...] we had the biggest contributions. [...] We raised almost 100 thousand every month in rubles for support. It was incredible,” remembers Participant 17. Therefore, it was important for LGBTQ NGOs to find ways to restart public donations.

4.5.4.1 Undercover Donation Tactics.

LGBTQ NGOs that have an elaborate cover story without any connection to LGBTQ people at all (see Chapter 4.3.1) reopened the possibility of private donations after rebranding. “We're disguised, there is every reason to believe that we're just a psychological center for some vulnerable groups,” explains Participant 17. Obviously, the term vulnerable groups is held neutral and does not mention LGBTQ in any way. However, the concern remains if the NGO is ever exposed, all of their supporters in Russia will be in grave danger. “It's scary that even that support, heaven forbid, could be qualified as something,” shares Participant 17.

Some NGOs continue gathering donations on private bank accounts, others opted for the possibility of crowdfunding through Boosty, a Russian content monetization platform that allows to earn money through subscriptions. “We continued to exist thanks to Boosty and thanks to donations from our visitors,” says Participant 14. The possibility to donate in person when

coming to offline events also remains, as it is the safest way to be untraceable by the Russian government.

4.5.4.2 Foreign Donations to Foreign Accounts.

Several LGBTQ NGOs decided to add a focus on potential European and American donors and started working on crowdfunding in that direction. Those donations are obviously going to foreign bank accounts. Participant 16 shares, “We are just developing it, see some first results, and we hope that it will provide in the long term, [...] will allow us to grow seriously.” Participant 17 says, “In '22 we had a lot of support from the community from abroad, from America, among others. Just private donors who helped us, through these super clandestine ways [...] I would say that especially in '22 it was very encouraging.” After the donations are gathered, the same ways of getting them to Russia as described in Chapter 4.5.3 are used.

In summary, despite several obstacles, Russian LGBTQ NGOs manage to continue securing funding for their activities. In close cooperation with donors, they develop new and optimize old ways to receive the money to foreign bank accounts or in cash and get it to colleagues in Russia through personal pickups or cryptocurrency.

As money is not an eagerly discussed topic due to its sensitive nature, it was covered only with a general sub-question, “How did the situation affect the ability to finance the work?” during the interviews. Some interviewees refused to provide any details besides that financial flows have changed, while others were ready to provide more comprehensive information. The specific strategies described here were attributed during axial coding (see Chapter 3.4). Therefore, it can be assumed that more strategies to continue securing funding are being implemented by Russian LGBTQ NGOs that have not been addressed in this paper.

4.6 Mental Health Risk

The third risk for LGBTQ NGOs is the mental health strain on their employees and beneficiaries due to increased repressions and funding insecurity. The decrease in mental health of LGBTQ individuals was recorded in reports as well (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022). This chapter explores the emotional and psychological consequences of the constant stress LGBTQ employees and beneficiaries live in after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

4.6.1 Navigating Stress, Guilt and Burnout in LGBTQ NGO Employees

Russian LGBTQ NGOs work, especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, under an enormous amount of pressure. Activists are living in constant fear of whether they might be the next to get persecuted, arrested, or harassed. It is a fear “for themselves, for their safety, for their activities in general,” details Participant 8. A “kind of fear that I had never experienced in Russia before,” shares Participant 13. This is particularly relevant for the employees who stay in Russia and continue working on the ground. “I haven't done anything, but suddenly I'm a criminal. I am forced to be afraid. And everyone around me tells me that I'm doing something very bad. That's what knocks you off your feet, that's what's discouraging,” shares Participant 14. Those who emigrated feel less under pressure of prosecution, as described in Chapter 4.3.2.

LGBTQ activists are aware that the Russian state has created very convenient conditions for itself to charge LGBTQ NGOs’ employees and beneficiaries easily for any transgressions, be it a 10-year-old post, an old interview, or a colorful sign on the clothes that someone deems to be a rainbow (e.g. Mityagin, 2024). Several activists compared the feeling to the events of 1937, referencing Stalin's Great Terror when political dissidents were arbitrarily arrested and executed, describing themselves as "*sitting ducks* waiting for when they'll come for you" (Participant 7). For those activists who have been working covertly and are not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, a constant *fear of being outed* is added. This is especially true if they have other occupations that view being queer as a contraindication to that work. “I'm an elementary school teacher. For me, being outed would mean a ban on my profession,” shares Participant 15.

An aggravating mental health influencing factor that should not be underestimated is seeing the work that has been done and the progress that was laboriously achieved destroyed within just two years. It seems as if the LGBTQ activists “have been doing it in vain,” describes Participant 3. The established contacts with authorities are no longer working, it is difficult to keep previous collaborations going, and all the materials produced, like books, guidelines, and badges, must be hidden away or destroyed if an NGO has no physical space (anymore) to keep them safe. Although owning the literature technically should not be considered extremist, activists are aware that the state will not hesitate to charge the NGO with intent to distribute if these materials are discovered. “What experience and practice shows, how laws work, you understand that no

medical license[31] will stand in the way of some Eshnik[32] who needs to make a check mark," states Participant 7.

Functioning under "immense stress" (Participant 6), "feeling exhausted from everything that is happening around us" (Participant 7), and "increased emotional strain" (Participant 1) decreases the amount of mental resources available to continue working and exacerbates depression. It is therefore not surprising that under these circumstances LGBTQ NGOs employees exhaust quicker and that "the emotional load has increased, depression and *burnout* have intensified," summarizes Participant 1.

Many LGBTQ NGOs employees additionally feel "*guilt* and responsibility for what [their] country does to the citizens of another country," reveals Participant 7. For many LGBTQ NGOs employees, the war became the primary mental health stressor, particularly before the extremist decision on the LGBTQ movement was announced (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2022). They continue to "live in a country and work in a country that is an invader, an aggressor, a militant. It had quite a strong moral impact and still does today," states Participant 4. Even though LGBTQ activists clearly do not support the war and often participate in Russian anti-war initiatives to make a positive impact or assist Ukrainians, risking liability for violating new war laws (see Chapter 2.1.3), feelings of guilt can persist. This guilt can even paralyze their regular work, as it especially did in early 2022 when the war had just begun.

> *"I was like that when my mom died. It was such a huge shock, I had never experienced anything like it before. And then, when the war started, I was in the exact same state. It's a feeling that the ground is just gone from under your feet. It even physically felt that."*
> Participant 7

4.6.2 Impact of Isolation and Hostility on LGBTQ NGO Members

Adding to the mental load is the feeling of being isolated or sometimes abandoned. The LGBTQ NGO employees who remain in Russia see their colleagues and fellow organizations leave the country or close down, leaving behind a void that cannot be filled quickly. The first

[31] Es explained in Chapter 4.3.1.1 according to the Russian Law, medical facilities cannot be declared extremist (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 282.2, 2024).
[32] Referring to an employee of the Russian General Administration for Combating Extremism, known as Center E. See also Footnote 23.

direct consequence is the “deficit in communication” (Participant 3), as there are fewer people a person can “vent to their resentment about it all” (Participant 6). Therefore, there are fewer like-minded individuals who share similar views on anti-war and human rights movements. It feels like being “in a bubble,” says Participant 6, and “like a certain loss,” adds Participant 2.

Simultaneously, Russian LGBTQ NGOs encounter hostility from foreign partners such as donors, other LGBTQ NGOs, or individuals. Because they are seen as representing the aggressor's country, they are often equated with Putin's supporters, despite their ongoing efforts to resist his regime. "In the end, we end up being the scapegoats. We're being pushed from both sides," says Participant 2, “it’s a double isolation". Participant 17 describes the inner torment as follows:

> *"I think it's still not always clear to me who I am, a bad Russian, a bad person with a Russian passport who doesn't deserve to get any support because her country has invaded and is fighting a war. Or is my situation a little bit more complicated because I am an LGBT activist and I do this kind of work. And I did before the invasion started, and we resisted the pressure that was put on the community."*
> Participant 17

4.6.3 Mental Health Strains on LGBTQ Beneficiaries

One of LGBTQ NGOs' goals is to improve the lives of LGBTQ people. Therefore, the mental health strain on the beneficiaries should be examined closer to understand the adaptations in their work. Many LGBTQ individuals were “crushed by the fact that this aggressive act was committed by Russia, especially after Bucha[33],“ reflects Participant 3. While living with that devastation, they are also “very frightened” (Participants 6, 7, and 13) for their own lives and are “panicking,” adds Participant 11 as restrictive laws keep being introduced.

Additionally, LGBTQ individuals experience a *loss of community,* which again adversely impacts their mental health. Community support is an essential factor for positively influencing the management of mental health issues in hostile environments (Kranz, Arontschik & Osin, 2024) and its absence can have detrimental effects. Participant 13 shares, “Earlier volunteers

[33] In March 2022, Russian forces were accused of massacring hundreds of civilians, many with signs of torture, in Bucha, Ukraine ("Russian 'War Crimes'," 2022).

were kind of doing a lot of informal events, [...] organizing picnics. [...] And people now are even concerned about just doing that." As many LGBTQ people emigrated within the last two years and most LGBTQ NGOs ceased their offline activity, it "caused the community to feel regret and even panic," comments Participant 2.

LGBTQ individuals who are in Russia have become more *afraid* to go to offline events if the NGOs still hold them for fear of being outed. "The average LGBT person, you do not know who they are more afraid of. Persecutors, who may be, for example, parents. Or us, because [...] they can get caught somewhere and go to jail for participation in an extremist community," states Participant 3. Participant 4 describes the reaction of the LGBTQ community as "extreme closedness." Participant 17 adds that "people often tend to retreat into some kind of reduced contact with the community. Because it's like, you might be safer on your own, but in the end it's not a suitable strategy for the long term."

The lack of social support in some cases leads to *increased addiction* if LGBTQ individuals cannot find other coping mechanisms. "There are people who, unfortunately, start drinking more, using drugs, having promiscuous sex and contracting some diseases," says Participant 2. Participant 7 confirms that especially among gay and bisexual men "chemsex [having sex under the influence of narcotics] has increased very strongly" as well as "alcohol and drug use." Of course, the increase in substance abuse has negative and sometimes lethal consequences.

> *"We already have stories from people who are no longer with us, literally within those two years. Because the way they probably managed to cope with before, stopped working."*
>
> Participant 17

The decrease in mental health wellness of LGBTQ people was documented by several Russian LGBTQ organizations (Coming Out & Sphere Foundation, 2024; Transcoalition, 2022) and confirmed by interviewees. "Their need for psychological help in general has increased dramatically. [...] All over the country," states Participant 14. The restrictions have a particularly detrimental effect on the mental health of the trans community. The closing down of support

networks and commissions[34] under pressure from authorities has led to a notable rise in "suicidal thoughts and attempts," emphasizes Participant 16, especially among teenagers. "Which makes sense. They lived waiting to be 18 to change everything inside, and they were basically deprived of their future. Everyone who didn't make it [transition] in time," stresses Participant 10.

In conclusion, LGBTQ NGO employees and beneficiaries experience similar emotions and mental health problems that have aggravated since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Depression, suicidal thoughts, feelings of guilt, and burnout can be identified as the most severe occurrences. The coping mechanisms for the resulting mental health challenges will be explored in the next chapter.

4.7 Adaptation Strategies to Mitigate Mental Health Risk

To counteract the negative emotional and mental health consequences, several strategies have been implemented by LGBTQ NGOs. This chapter will first highlight the measures taken by LGBTQ organizations to ensure beneficiaries' mental well-being, followed by strategies for the employees, finishing with a description of additional sources of support for LGBTQ activists.

4.7.1 Supporting Beneficiaries: Expanding Psychological Services and Fun Activities

As fear and depressive conditions increased among beneficiaries after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, their demand for psychological services grew correspondingly. Several NGOs reported that psychological services "were swamped" (Participant 10) and "have remained very busy and popular" (Participant 17). The trans community, in particular, required emergency support due to the effects of the trans law, with much of it becoming focused on "suicide prevention" (Participant 10).

Therefore, LGBTQ NGOs responded to this need by expanding their psychological services. "Psychological services are the most rapidly growing direction," says Participant 5. Some organizations trained their "counselors a lot in crisis intervention" (Participant 10), while others optimized the application process for psychological help, decreasing waiting time from "month and a half, two months, sometimes as long as three months to one working day" (Participant 16). Even though some psychologists stopped collaborating with LGBTQ organizations, many

[34] Transgender commissions in Russia typically included healthcare professionals, psychologists, and legal experts who evaluate applications for legal gender recognition and gender-affirming medical procedures. (Ponomarev, 2020)

specialists remained, and even some new ones could be acquired to continue providing support. Those who offered in-person services before “have given up offline psychological counseling due to extremism” (Participant 9), as it became unsafe for psychologists and clients. Hence, all organizations provide psychological assistance exclusively online.

Support groups, which involve meetings with other LGBTQ individuals facilitated by a specialist, have remained popular after the war. These are usually offline events held at a venue of those LGBTQ NGOs who have one. An additional benefit of support groups is that psychological services cannot be declared extremist, as described in Chapter 4.3.1.1, making them “the kind of events that's hard to prosecute. It's a therapeutic thing, too,” explains Participant 5.

To provide a space to relieve the constant pressure beneficiaries live in, many NGOs started organizing fun, non-politics related activities that were received exceptionally well. “People need a place where they can laugh, where they can get out of feelings of helplessness, aimlessness and some kind of dead end through laughter, through making fun of some things,” says Participant 1.

Those who have offline spaces, be it regular or changing, provide events in-person. Some opted for “a dining format that evolved into conversations” (Participant 15), others for joint “tea drinking” (Participant 2) or “drinking wine, having conversations, talking about kitties” (Participant 3). Organizations without a community center get creative, offering online activities like speed dating or queer quizzes. Participant 1 shares: "The first speed dating we did, we gave people names like Jon Snow. And people were so into it. [...] We'd ask them to go out on a date under that alias for safety and for fun. And people really loved it." These events create a feeling of having a community, which helps cope with the impression of loss and isolation described in Chapter 4.6.3.

4.7.2 Supporting Employees: Burnout Prevention and Community Support

To effectively provide services, employees must be in good psychological condition. The mental health of employees is a crucial factor for the stability of the NGO (Onegina, 2020). As described in the previous chapter, burnout is a significant mental health risk for activists due to the constant pressure they face. Therefore, the primary focus of mitigation efforts has been on “increasing resilience” (Participant 4) through burnout prevention.

4.7.2.1 Increase of Psychological Services for Employees.

NGOs allocate more resources to "psychological support for employees" (Participant 5) and "preventive care for employees so that they can, for example, additionally go to massage, swimming pool, pay for a psychologist, psychotherapist[35], etc." (Participant 17). Directors of NGOs make sure that their employees and volunteers feel seen and respected. "I try to encourage them in some way. I write them warm words. [...]. I am aware of all the diagnoses, exams my volunteers have. So if they can't participate for a while or they're not very ok, I try to take it into account too," shares Participant 14.

Special attention is given to a healthy work-life balance. There is a very strong tendency for LGBTQ activists to work without breaks, especially when situations are urgent, such as the persecution of gay men in Chechnya described in Chapter 2.1.1.1. This imminently results in burnouts, which can be prevented with appropriate and frequent breaks. Some NGOs have implemented strict rules banning "overtime, messaging after hours or when someone is on vacation" (Participant 16). Many LGBTQ NGOs have several weeks off, usually in the summer, where everyone is forced to take a break and rest. A varying amount between two and four weeks was indicated by Participants 14, 16, and 17.

Another important strategy is organizing retreats, especially for those employees who stay in Russia. "Because it's still a heavy job, especially if you personally work with beneficiaries," says Participant 11. Employees are brought together, if possible, outside of Russia or at least in a different city to escape the everyday pressure. This allows for some time to let go, recharge, and do something unrelated to work.

> *"We have special retreats that we do for activists, more thorough. We have improved them a lot in connection with the current events. So they have become longer, more comfortable."*
>
> Participant 4

Emigration might also be considered a burnout prevention strategy as many activists report that leaving the country gave them the possibility to mentally recover from the constant pressure

[35]Although Russian State Medical Insurance provides free health services, it does not cover psychological support (Federal Law 326-FZ, 2023). Therefore, employees both abroad and in Russia must personally finance their therapy expenses.

and provide better help to beneficiaries. “Having left Russia, I have much more time to work with people, much more resources and strength to do so,” shares Participant 1. However, it is a double-edged sword, as emigration demands significant personal resources and adaptation to a new country, culture, and language, all while continuing to provide support. This often necessitates taking a break from work to adjust to the new life abroad.

> *“The most difficult thing, probably, was to make sure that the people with whom we moved also adapted instantly and started working. [...] Because some of the employees during this move, unfortunately, stopped working with us due to the fact that they were not able to adapt properly and, accordingly, to do their work.”*
> Participant 16

4.7.2.2 Community Support for LGBTQ Activists

The second strategy facilitated by LGBTQ NGOs can be described as community support. It encompasses encouragement from team members and beneficiaries in Russia as well as help from people who live abroad. Participant 14 shares, “The support of like-minded people is an incredible feeling. Organization 14 divided my life into ‘before’ and ‘after.’ I had never been in such an accepting environment, really such a powerful, united environment. And I was depressed for a long time, and it was in that organization that I somehow found the strength to move on, to help someone else.”

When asked what helps them cope with the current situation, most interviewees answered that it is the team: “support of colleagues, great support and solidarity” (Participant 4), “a great team supporting each other” (Participant 11), and “an amazing team that wants to work together” (Participant 15). Team members have respect and admiration for each other and provide mutual assistance, which is especially important in times like this “considering the collective trauma we are going through,” reflects Participant 4.

Many teams have been working together for a long time, “established 5-6 years ago” (Participant 8), “working together more than 10 years” (Participant 10), which creates a solid foundation for deep trust towards each other. They “supported” (Participant 17) and “inspired” (Participants 5 and 16) the interviewees to continue working and make them “proud” (Participant 6) to be one of them. Several interviewees noted that their teams have become more adaptable

and professional, likely prompted by the severity of the situation and the need to optimize their work. Less “carelessness” (Participant 8) in the work was noticed, more “resilience and quick adaptability” (Participant 5), and higher levels of “cooperation” (Participant 1) within the team. The trend of increasing professionalism within teams was also observed in the 2010s when heightened governmental pressure on LGBTQ NGOs compelled skill improvements and led to stronger consolidation between organizations (Buyantueva, 2020).

Established collaboration projects with other LGBTQ NGOs, as mentioned in Chapter 4.3.1.5, reduced isolation and facilitated seeking advice during difficult times. Participant 5 noted, “The project with community centers helped. [...] We have such trusting communication that we can talk about any issues.”

Another essential source of support is foreign partners and colleagues abroad. “To activists in Russia, it is very important to have support from outside, especially in the state we are in right now,” reflects Participant 8. This includes donors who try to relate to LGBTQ NGOs' struggles and understand the changing circumstances and needs (see also Chapter 4.5). Colleagues who have emigrated take on tasks that would put people in Russia in danger, like “sign contracts and engage with donors who were declared ‘undesirable’ organizations” (Participant 8).

The beneficiaries' positive feedback is a crucial source of support too, as it underscores the importance of LGBTQ NGOs' work and validates the services they provide. It clearly demonstrates “how much we influence people,” says Participant 1, and that “it was and is a very successful project,” mentions Participant 13. Additionally, it is significant to observe how “the community supports itself,” emphasizes Participant 17, providing strong evidence of the impactful work done by the LGBTQ NGO in creating a safe space where people can connect and aid one another. “Of course, the audience also shares their feedback extensively. I think this is the main reason we continue doing this,” acknowledges Participant 16.

4.7.3 Other Sources of Support for LGBTQ Activists

Several interviewees shared sources of support that are not directly connected to or provided by the NGO but are important to account for as well. Going to therapy has had a positive effect on coping with depressive episodes and decreased mental health. “The fact that I've been in therapy for many years, that certainly helped,” notes Participant 1. Participant 9 agrees, “Therapy is probably helping in some ways.” Some had to resort to additionally taking antidepressants.

“The war started in February, and in May I started on the pills. I'm still on them, so I feel fine,” says Participant 6. Participant 17 adds, “I was on antidepressants after this episode [the beginning of the full-scale invasion].”

Family and friends also provide psychological comfort to those who have a good and close relationship with them. “What helped me was going to my friend's place and staying with her for a few months. We supported each other,” contributes Participant 2. Feeling their support or just sharing the burden helps relieve the pressure. “I'm so lucky in life that my entire family is supportive of my work. And both proud of me and admire me,” shares Participant 7.

While this thesis primarily focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ activists, it does not delve into how beneficiaries cope, but rather on how LGBTQ NGOs help them adjust. However, it is reasonable to assume that therapy and antidepressants are useful for them as well.

4.7.4 Personal Resilience: Finding Meaning in Activism

There are additional factors that help LGBTQ activists cope with the mental health strain. Even though they might not be summarized as a particular strategy, these aspects should nevertheless be taken into account when aiming to understand how activists in LGBTQ NGOs cope in the current circumstances.

The individual's attitude and approach to work can help put aside the overwhelmingly negative influence of the environment they live and work in. Participant 1 reported being stubborn as a possible personal strength. Having hope for the future is also an asset.

> *“Hope gives strength. [...] A friend gave me a bottle of champagne for the grandfather's [common referral to Putin] death. He said when he dies, you and I will celebrate. I said, okay, and I've got the bottle right here.”*
>
> Participant 7

Finding meaning in their work is a significant source of inspiration and strength. Knowing that by staying in the country, either physically or remotely, they can improve the lives of LGBTQ people provides direction and motivation. As Participant 14 states, “if I can cheer up at least a couple of people, then it is worth continuing working and staying in the country.”

Furthermore, Participant 13 emphasizes, “it's even more important that we try to do something for the community, and I think that keeps us going.”

Several interviewees reiterated that “activism saves” (Participant 6) as it gives them a purpose in life and prevents them from giving in to despair. Many have found their vocation in what they are doing and derive strength from that. “I really don't know how to live any other way if you don't help those who need help” admits Participant 9, “this is probably the meaning of my life, already on a more global scale” shares Participant 7.

Overall, to counteract and mitigate the mental health strain on LGBTQ people, LGBTQ NGOs provide more psychological services for beneficiaries and employees, with a special focus on burnout prevention. Additionally, they facilitate events that strengthen the feeling of community and support. LGBTQ activists rely on family, friends, and individual characteristics to survive and even thrive personally and professionally despite all the obstacles.

5. Limitations

This thesis has potential limitations. It covered 19 Russian LGBTQ organizations. While this provides valuable insights, the limited number of participants may not fully capture the diversity and breadth of experiences of all Russian LGBTQ NGOs, especially those who may operate completely underground or have stopped existing as a result of repression after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The use of personal connections and snowball sampling to acquire participants may introduce bias, as it is more likely to include organizations and individuals within the researcher’s network, potentially excluding those less connected or more secretive due to security concerns. The necessity for high-security measures and complete anonymity also led to the exclusion of particularly sensitive information, which might limit the depth of analysis on certain issues.

This is a cross-sectional study; therefore, changes that occur over time are not detected and only statements about the current state of adaptability can be made. The findings may quickly become outdated as new repressive measures are introduced or as NGOs further adapt their strategies.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyze how and in what ways Russian LGBTQ NGOs adapt to working with the Russian LGBTQ community after repressions have intensified due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through comprehensive qualitative analysis, including interviews with key NGO representatives and an examination of organizational strategies, several important adaptation mechanisms have been identified.

Physical safety due to legal persecution, financial sustainability, and mental health were recognized as the biggest challenges. These three types of risks are interconnected and should be considered together. Even though physical safety can be viewed as a primary concern, without financial support and mentally stable employees, it cannot be guaranteed. Relocation, evacuation, or the purchase of security equipment like surveillance cameras are only possible with sufficient funding. Similarly, burnt-out activists can potentially jeopardize their own safety and the safety of beneficiaries when they lack resources or sharpness to analyze and react in time to occurring threats. Providing mental health prophylaxis, in turn, also requires financial investments.

As interconnected as the challenges are also the adaptation strategies chosen by the LGBTQ NGOs, mitigating several types of risks at once. The solutions are wide-ranging and vary among organizations, depending on their geographical location, years of experience, and human and financial resources. LGBTQ NGOs with less funding compensate through other sources of support. For instance, mental health welfare can be secured by providing support groups and strengthening ties with friendly psychologists who might be willing to work pro bono. NGOs with more financial resources can develop retreat programs for their staff and other colleagues and potentially even financially support smaller initiatives within the country. Lack of funding could also be compensated by leveraging expertise. For example, if hiring a security expert isn't feasible, an organization with a strong psychological team could offer a specialist exchange with another NGO. This way, one NGO gets security consultations as needed, while the partner NGO benefits from free psychological services. This exemplifies the foundation for most of the coping strategies—cooperation.

LGBTQ NGOs rely on their colleagues from the Russian LGBTQ movement. These ties will strengthen over time, and the need to work clandestinely will likely lead to establishing underground networks that rely heavily on close partnerships with others. The underground

strategy provides not only increased safety from persecution but also benefits mental health. It allows for offline events, giving beneficiaries a physical safe space and visible community support. The covertness also serves to secure funding, as money is wired to foreign bank accounts and is therefore less traceable by the Russian State. Relying on international partners like donors is crucial for this success and will continue to be an important asset for ongoing work.

Collaborations with other civil society organizations (CSOs) and media are also essential sources of strength. CSOs and LGBTQ NGOs combine their expertise to find solutions to the rapidly changing circumstances. However, over time, changes in these connections can be anticipated. Partnerships with those also forced to work underground, like independent media, will persist, although very cautiously, while collaborations with eco-activists or NGOs working with other vulnerable groups, like people with disabilities or survivors of domestic violence, are expected to be scarce. This scarcity is due to the lack of public information on LGBTQ issues, which will lead to an increase in homophobia in society likely spreading also to potential CSO partners. Additionally, CSOs will be afraid of being associated with an extremist movement and therefore decline cooperation.

To ensure safety for those who cannot stay in Russia, as well as provide a resource for psychological comfort, emigration or relocation is offered as one of the possible options. Being abroad provides a chance to recover and regain resources to continue working after leaving the country. At the same time, it is a “safety net” when a person has a visa and a passport and knows that they can leave the country quickly. Concurrently, it is one of the most challenging strategies as it geographically separates the activist community, prompting new problems like establishing secure communication ways and fighting isolation. Activists who have emigrated are also increasingly losing touch with the severity of the situation in Russia, particularly the fear for physical safety, leading to a growing disconnection from their colleagues who remain. However, this geographical separation has the possibility to offer new advantages as well. Those in exile can build stronger connections with foreign NGOs, activists, and funders, thereby attracting greater attention and resources for Russian LGBTQ organizations and their colleagues still in the country.

When examining the strategies chosen by LGBTQ NGOs, it is essential to bear in mind that the organizations had previous experience in adjusting to the changing legislative and public

landscape. Most of the participants have extensive activist knowledge they can draw from, like the accommodation during the first Propaganda Law in 2013, which helps them cope with the current circumstances. Even when previous strategies cannot be applied due to unprecedented legislation, the existing knowledge on how to adapt, initiate the process, understand its stages, and identify potential contacts for assistance facilitates transition to the new realities. This learned resilience is likely the reason why NGOs were able to adapt quickly and effectively to every new restriction and a prerequisite for future adjustment success.

To ensure that knowledge is not lost and can be built on, it is crucial to maintain and strengthen connections between seasoned and young activists. Raising new activists should become a long-term strategy for current LGBTQ NGOs to preserve their expertise and networks built over the past decades. This could become a new approach to advocacy, as traditional methods are no longer viable due to the decision that declared the LGBTQ movement extremist.

To better understand the implications of the results of this thesis, future studies could examine how previous experience of LGBTQ activists helps shape new strategies. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate the process of adjustment of volunteers and LGBTQ people who are not engaged in activism. Their inclusion might offer deeper insight into their interactions with LGBTQ NGOs and a more holistic picture of mechanisms influencing the adaptation processes. Furthermore, a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research, can provide a deeper understanding of the underlying conditions and yield more comprehensive data on how LGBTQ NGOs manage to operate in the rapidly changing and increasingly repressive environments. A longitudinal study could illuminate ongoing strategy changes and document the adjustment process over time.

Continuing in-depth research on the adaptation of heavily marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ community, is essential not only for understanding and predicting the effects of restrictions in autocratic or heavily conservative states but also for learning how to withstand and counteract these repressions. Given Russia's strong influence on neighboring countries, activists in Georgia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and other regions can benefit from the experiences of Russian LGBTQ organizations. Highlighting the resilience of activists demonstrates that resistance is possible, even in the most difficult circumstances, and provides hope for a better future by emphasizing the strength and tenacity of civic society movements.

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Annex 1. Interview Guide

English translation.

Good afternoon,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

(For those who don't know me personally, I shortly introduce myself. For those who new me personally this step was omitted as they were aware of my background).

My name is Nadja Arontschik. I have been engaged in LGBTQ activism in Russia since 2016 and have volunteered in different organizations, especially in Moscow like the Moscow Community Center and Resource. I also collaborated with the Russian LGBT Network. In 2019 I founded my own initiative BiPanRussia to create a safe space for bisexual people. I was manager of the EC co-funded project "Uniting efforts" while working in the Russian Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The project worked with Russian LGBTQ NGOs and organizations helping women who survived violence and provided networking opportunities, education and grants.

Currently I am studying at the Global Campus of Human Right, EMA of Human Rights and Democratization and writing my thesis about LGBTQ activism in Russia.)

This research is being conducted as part of my master's thesis, in which I will investigate how Russian LGBT activists adapt to working in the challenging environment after February 24, 2022. The results of the research will be compiled both in the final paper itself and in recommendations for people working both in Russia and for colleagues from countries that face similar problems.

The information collected during the interviews will be analyzed and published publicly only with your explicit consent. At any time prior to publication, you may withdraw your consent to all or part of the data processing. Sensitive information that should not be in the public domain will be disseminated exclusively in closed sources. (For example, strategies that the Russian government should not know about).

If during the interview you would like to share information that you consider important but should not be in the public domain, please indicate this and it will be taken into account when processing and publishing the data. I will also ask you this question at the end.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. After that it will be analyzed using the Quirkos software. [Interviews were conducted in zoom] The video recording will be deleted immediately after the interview is completed, I will leave only the audio track for transcription and analysis

Are there any questions at this point about security or data usage?
(If no, continue. If yes, answer)

The interview consists of 5 main questions. Please answer as elaborate as you feel comfortable. Depending on your answer, I will ask follow-up questions. Your answers will be completely anonymous, third parties will not be able to identify you or contact you.
The interview will take approximately 1-1,5 hours. Please make yourself comfortable. You can interrupt the interview or take a break at any time. You can drink, lie down, move around as you please and as you see fit. The only thing I will ask you to always be close to the microphone so that the recording will be of high quality.
I will be also taking notes as you speak.
Do you have any questions before we begin?
(If no, continue. If yes, answer)

Questions:

1. How has your organizational work changed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?
Possible sub-questions depending on the reply:

- What strategies do you use to continue your work? (personal and organizational)
- What specific events have influenced changes in your work and approach to your work?
- Do you work under your brand?
- What are the biggest risks and how do you deal with them?

2. How did the strategies differ depending on the direction of the work (psychological assistance, media, advocacy etc.?

- Did you have to give up on any areas of work?
- Are there areas that have not required adaptation?
- What new directions have emerged?
- How did the situation affect the ability to finance the work?

3. Were there any difficulties in adaptation related specifically to your region or area of work? What are the differences from other regions of Russia?

- Are there more difficulties for some specific groups? (Trans, queer families etc.)
- was there collaboration with other CSO?

4. How have you used past adaptation strategies (after the 2013 law, the law on foreign agents, etc.)?

- Did you have to invent new ones?
- What could have been relied on?
- Did you rely on the experience of other NGOs?

5. What helped in adapting and continuing to work? (personal resources, connections with other NCOs inside and outside the country)

6. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked you?

After the interview:

Thank you very much for participating

All names and titles will be removed during transcription.

Do you want any of the strategies you mentioned not published publicly?

Thank you, I will stop the recording now.