

Russian Federation

Raising their voices: HRDs respond to the human rights crisis. LGBT+ perspective

Submission prepared by Sphere Foundation for the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders



INTRODUCTION

This report is prepared by Sphere Foundation for the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders.

Sphere Foundation (spherequeer.org) is a human rights organization that has been supporting LGBT+ individuals and organizations in Russia since 2011. Beginning in late 2024, in addition to our existing work, we also provide psychological support to cisgender heterosexual women. Sphere's core mission is to counter the anti-gender movement in Russia and to advocate for systemic change in the country so that no one faces violence or discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sphere possesses expertise in developing and coordinating programs for psychological, emergency, and legal assistance, as well as monitoring of discrimination and engaging in national and international advocacy. It actively assists and supports LGBT+ individuals and collaborate with other organisations that share similar objectives in various regions of Russia. Additionally, in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sphere Foundation has taken an active stance against the war.

1. What motivates you to uphold, protect or promote human rights? (This may include, for example, work promoting women's rights, LGBTI rights, rights of minorities, labour rights, environmental rights, children's rights, housing rights, migrants' rights, health rights etc – this list is non-exhaustive). Please give examples.

Our organisation continues to uphold and promote the human rights of LGBT+ persons in Russia, despite the Supreme Court's decision designating the so-called "international LGBT movement" as extremist and the name of our organization explicitly mentioned in the decision, which put multiple risks for persecution of our team. The criminalisation of public advocacy on LGBT+ issues has deepened the marginalisation of our community and exposed its members to heightened risks of violence, harassment, and exclusion.

We are driven by the conviction that all individuals, irrespective of their SOGIESC, are entitled to equality, dignity, and security under international human rights law. Currently, while we operate in notions of transitional justice when documenting human rights violations in Russia, and while we keep up the fight against the non-democratic regime, it's hard for us to imagine that murky future. Our motivation arises from the urgent need to protect those who are most vulnerable and to ensure that fundamental rights are not contingent on prevailing political or ideological positions. We have built [free support system online](#) where any LGBT+ person and cis women and girls could get legal aid, psychological support and emergency support in the case of persecution or risks of persecution based on SOGIESC.

2. Do you believe your work is contributing to the creation of a more equal, more just or fairer society in which you live? Please give examples for your answer.

We engage actively with different actors within Russian society, however complex and uneasy that is at the moment. We advocate and sternly believe that any vision of a democratic Russia is impossible without inclusion of gender equality and LGBT+ rights. While there is space for one social group to be discriminated against, there will be such spaces opened to discriminate against others, too. We believe that any beneficiary that received help from us brings us closer to a more equal and just society, however, in the context of Russia today, our work looks like the battle with state-driven institutionalized injustice whether the goal is to not let the injustice to be spread and go deeper, in particular, when we talk about LGBT+ persons and their rights.

3 b) If you live in a country where there is very limited space for human rights work, how do you try to create more space to do your work? Please give

examples.

Even though our organization is mentioned in the Supreme Court's decision designating the so-called "international LGBT movement", we continue to work with/for LGBT+ community in Russia. Primarily we have switched our work to online. We continue to monitor and document human rights violations of LGBT+ people in Russia and advocate on the regional and international level as national level advocacy for us is not accessible. However, we continue to provide legal aid and psychological support inside Russia via free our support system online. Moreover, we have put our effort to conduct research on LGBT+ in Russia, antigender movement and domestic violence.

4. Please describe what piece of human rights work you have carried out or contributed to that you are most proud of over the past five years.

All of it, direct assistance, advocacy, documenting human rights violations, research. However, what's most complex and yet most vital for the community that now feels so disconnected and wiped out of the public eye, visibility and awareness campaigns and materials are most vital.

5. Has your work been impacted by funding cuts in the past 12 months? If so, please describe what these cuts have prevented you from being able to do.

Yes, the cuts have substantially affected our work: whereas the demand for assistance increases, NGOs and initiatives assisting LGBT+ people in Russia have faced severe funding cuts this year, and the fallback - assistance requests that now cannot be fulfilled, have fallen onto bigger, more established organizations such as ours which are also experiencing situations of limited funding. Therefore, less and less people have somewhere to turn for help whereas even bigger organizations are now limited in capacity.

6. If your work has been impacted by funding cuts, please describe how you are attempting to mitigate the impact of the cuts.

Whereas we try to re-orient our funding efforts towards raising more private donations, in our circumstances that does little to alleviate the situation as majority of our audience are either located within Russia and have potential risks donating money (criminal responsibility) or leave in exile/migration, often themselves experiencing financial hardship.

7. What is the single biggest risk you face in your work? This could be, for example, financial sustainability, restrictive legislation, a hostile public, physical attack, legal action, criminalisation, unsupportive community/family, media or social media smear campaigns or gendered discrimination (this list is non-exhaustive).

All the listed risks are applicable to us. But mostly, of course, imprisonment for activist and human rights work we do as we have been explicitly mentioned in the Supreme Court decision and well known for Russian law enforcement officers.

8. Do you think international standards on human rights (as contained in Universal Declaration on Human Rights, ICCPR, ICESCR, HRD Declaration, etc.) are still relevant? Please give a reason for your answer.

Yes, international human rights standards remain highly relevant. They embody universal principles of dignity, equality and non-discrimination as reflected in the international human rights treaties. These norms continue to guide and inspire our work and set clear obligations for States.

However, today not every State fulfils its international obligations: either those arising from customary international law or those codified in treaties. We observe that the principle of mutual respect for these norms is increasingly undermined by the current political climate. In particular, the Russian Federation, Belarus, China and several other States have chosen to disregard their commitments, which constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to the effective protection of human rights.

Moreover, the existing international and regional human-rights protection mechanisms, the UN system as well as the Council of Europe, have not solved the fundamental problem of accountability. There is no effective enforcement mechanism to compel States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights on their own territory; these bodies issue recommendations, but *par in parem non habet imperium*—States cannot be compelled by other States to comply. This lack of enforceability allows persistent violations to continue with impunity.

9. Do you think the international human rights mechanisms (for example, UN Treaty Bodies, UN Special Procedures, the UN Human Rights Council, the UPR, the Inter-American Commission and Court on Human Rights, the European Court on Human Rights, the African Commission and Court on Human and Peoples' Rights) are effective in protecting the work of human rights defenders? If yes, please explain why. If no, please state what you believe may be a more effective way to protect human rights defenders?

While the UN Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, the Human Rights Council, the UPR process and regional courts such as the ECtHR provide essential platforms for documenting violations, issuing recommendations and drawing international attention to reprisals against defenders, these mechanisms lack the means to ensure compliance. Their decisions and recommendations are often not implemented by States that deliberately disregard international norms, such as the Russian Federation after its withdrawal from the Council of Europe (or even

before, as the judgments from ECtHR have been partially implemented by Russia). UN treaty bodies' recommendations are not binding.

The core weakness lies in the absence of enforceable accountability. International and regional systems largely rely on voluntary cooperation and political will. Without mechanisms to compel States to implement binding decisions or to impose meaningful consequences for non-compliance, human rights defenders in repressive environments remain exposed to retaliation and persecution.

We believe that strengthening these mechanisms to include clearer enforcement measures—such as political, legal, or targeted economic consequences for systematic non-compliance—would be more effective in ensuring the protection of human rights defenders. Additionally, the establishment of rapid-response protection programmes, humanitarian visas for human rights defenders at risk, coordinated internationally, would be a critical improvement.

10. Do you find the international human rights mechanisms, as outlined above, easy to access? Please give reasons for your answers.

Yes, it is easy.

11 a) Do you believe communications sent by the Special Rapporteur to governments which are alleged to have violated the rights of human rights defenders are an effective means of protection? Please give examples for your answer.

We recognise that communications sent by the Special Rapporteur to governments alleged to have violated the rights of human rights defenders are an important tool for drawing attention to violations and for building an international record of abuses. Such communications can sometimes result in short-term protective effects—such as the release of defenders from detention, the prevention of further reprisals, or increased diplomatic pressure—particularly in States that remain sensitive to their international reputation.

However, in our experience, these communications have had limited protective impact in highly repressive contexts such as the Russian Federation. Following the 2023 designation of the so-called “international LGBT movement” as extremist, and the subsequent targeting of LGBT+ human-rights defenders, we are not aware of any tangible change in government behaviour in response to Special Rapporteur communications (if there was any). Instead, persecution against defenders continues, for details see our joint research with Comingout [“LGBT+ community in Russia in 2024: Human Rights Defenders’ Perspective.”](#)

12. What is the most important message that you would like the Special Rapporteur to bring to the international community about human rights and human rights defenders?

While we protect extremely fragile, vulnerable communities who are currently in isolation and persecuted by their own government, we are also targeted ourselves. If the state reaches us, one by one, there will be no one to turn to for these people for help. Thus, Russian human rights defenders inside and in exile should have an opportunity for humanitarian visas, should have access to funding to continue the work we do for those who are the most vulnerable.