Connor Doak, Callum Doyle

Interview with Evgeny Pisemskiy: LGBTQ+ Activist

Evgeny Pisemskiy is an LGBTQ+ activist from Russia, where was the director of an LGBTQ+ organization that was declared a foreign agent. He had to flee Russia and now lives in the UK where he continues his activism supporting the LGBTQ+ community in Russia and abroad. The interview below was conducted in July 2022.

Interview by Connor Doak and Callum Doyle. Translation by Callum Doyle and Matilda Hicklin.

* * *

Callum: Why, when, and how did you become an activist?

Evgeny: It's a very long story. It all started when I went to a HIV organization. In 2000 I found out that I was HIV positive. Back then there was no internet or really any sort of information on HIV. And for a while I lived with the belief that in just a few years I would die. Then, just as the internet was becoming popular, I got chatting with other HIV positive people and they told me about a peer support group for people living with HIV, where they would meet up and socialize. Although I found it absolutely terrifying, I decided to attend these meetings. The story of my activism began the very moment I arrived there. For around six months, I listened and watched these people. They seemed very strange to me, because I believed I was going to die whilst they had all sorts of life plans. I found it all a little odd. But I then came to realize that HIV wouldn't kill me. In fact, it was a source of strength. Through this organization, it was possible to learn about HIV and help other people living with it.

Connor: Could you say a bit more about this sense of hope? What prompted this sudden desire to carry on living?

Evgeny: Well, first and foremost, I saw people who weren't going to die. They had children. They were planning to study at university and mapping out their careers. More generally, I also now had access to information on HIV. I found out that it was no longer a deadly disease and there were HIV medications, although these weren't available yet in

DOI: 10.25430/2281-6992/v11-017

Russia. But it was possible to get this medication and live my life to the fullest. I remember that the story of Greg Louganis really inspired me. He was a three-time champion of Olympic diving, openly gay and openly HIV positive. I read his story about how he had already lived with HIV for around 15 years: he wasn't going to die and he was an openly gay HIV positive man. This was a real-life example that life with HIV was possible. The combination of all these experiences truly changed my life. I used to go to the AIDS centres, which were these special medical institutions for people living with HIV. It was this separate healthcare system that people with HIV could go to for treatment. Of course, activism had been around for a long time. In the UK, HIV patients were treated through the NHS, but Russia devised a whole separate system for HIV patients due to the huge amount of discrimination and stigma. Doctors believed that HIV positive people would be safer if they were separate and that's why they established this divided healthcare system. But we were talking about activism, and it was this story of Louganis, an openly gay and openly HIV positive man, that had a positive impact on me.

Connor: Did you ever get a chance to meet Louganis in person?

Evgeny: In fact, I did, many years later. It just so happens that in my life I always tend to meet the people I want to meet. At some point, I was given Elton John's book *Love is the Cure* as a gift. The person who gave it to me said, 'Zhenya, I hope you read this in English and end up meeting him one day because he's hugely inspiring and did a lot to stop the AIDS epidemic.' I've met Elton John four times and he signed his book for me. And since I always end up meeting the people I want to meet, I also met Greg Louganis. He came to Russia, I think, in 2018 and he was making a film about his life. The organizers of the film festival invited me, and I was so ecstatic that I was going to meet the person whose story had motivated and inspired me. I have a great story about our meeting. In his film, Greg Louganis gives one of his Olympic medals to his trainer. Back then one of the NGOs in Russia had invited me to take part in a half-marathon that would include people living with HIV, and this event was going to demonstrate that people living with HIV are just as healthy as everyone else and can do anything they want to. I essentially trained for four months completely from scratch, and I ran the half marathon and finished with a good time. So, at this meeting I gave

away my own medal, too, as a kind of symbol of my achievements. Everyone there was on cloud nine. It was awesome.

Connor: Could you tell us more about the peer support group? What did this group offer you that the government or doctors couldn't?

Evgeny: Well, human beings are extremely social creatures. It's very important for people to have examples of others, just like how it's important to feel safe and feel like you belong. Every peer support group is effectively founded upon some sort of mutual assistance. What I mean by this is that someone really understands another's problems because they have gone through similar things themselves and therefore they know the best way to help. The group I was part of was called Positive and its founder was Nikolai Nedzel'skii, who has now sadly passed away. I'd say that he was the most famous HIV activist in Russia, and he raised a whole generation of Russian activists. For a long time at the start of the AIDS epidemic he interned and studied in the USA. He was very close friends with one LGBTQ+ and HIV activist, Cleve Jones, who created the AIDS Quilt movement and was an associate of Harvey Milk. Nikolai was a very important person in my life and, above all, he was the first openly gay person I ever saw. In a nutshell, I was surrounded by people whom I trusted, and I felt safe.

Connor: And, from there, what led you to activism? How did it happen?

Evgeny: If I'm being honest, HIV dramatically changed my life. I had really always wanted to be a doctor but because I was bad at Russian I failed to get into medical school twice. I failed my Russian exam so I went to study at a technical college. First a vocational school, then a technical college and then an institute. HIV meant that I started to focus on healthcare issues and I began to be involved in what I had wanted to from the start. HIV shaped my life in many ways. Firstly, I sometimes joke that I'm a victim of propaganda, but in a good way. Going to the organization and receiving help for my HIV was my turning point. I was infected with HIV through drug use, not sex, and when I went to this gay organization, it was essentially that: a gay organization. I saw gay people in the flesh and, apart from the fact that I was going through a process after finding out about my HIV status, another very important process started within me. I started to accept my sexuality. I

saw myself initially as bisexual, and then after some time I realized that I was gay and wasn't bisexual at all.

Essentially, HIV was, for me, a kind of trigger that set my life on an entirely different course. To start with, I was able to start working in the field that I wanted to be in, and after half a year in the organization there was training for volunteers. It was very serious training, there was stiff competition to get in, there were exams, and a large percentage of people failed. To be honest, it was the first time I encountered such a high standard of care. The way it works is that the organization invites you to be a volunteer and then provides you with lots of resources. But if you don't pass the exams, or get the answers wrong, then they simply won't let you be a volunteer.

I remember how stressed everyone was. I remember how many people cried when they didn't make it. Thank God, I passed the exam and for about three years I worked as a volunteer on the HIV helpline. The organization had a site, which was quite well known, called aids.ru, but unfortunately it no longer exists. This site inspired me to make Parni Plus (Guys Plus), a website and media organization for the LGBTQ+ community. Essentially, I copied the model that Nikolai had taken from America and told us about. I saw how it could be used to inform and teach others and I used this to create my own organization. I saw it as an epidemic of people exchanging their skills to help one another, and I think I managed to do the same. It works as follows: one person gives information to another person, and this continues creating an ever-growing movement. After I started working as a volunteer, they began to notice my efforts. And after a while, they offered me a job and I had to accept. At that time I had been working as an engineer but I didn't particularly enjoy it. They offered me a position working for the magazine *Steps* [Shagi], a journal for HIV positive people. And there was another magazine *Round Table* [Kruglyi Stol] for HIV specialists. I worked extensively in the sphere of HIV and was kind of becoming a specialist. I was also studying a lot and after a while I started to work on my own projects on sex work in Moscow. At that time there were more than 100,000 sex workers in Moscow, working on the streets. It was very easy to go to certain places by car and pick a girl and pay for services.

Connor: Remind us, what year was this?

Evgeny: I think it was the early 2000s, maybe around 2003, 2005, 2006. I was working in one of the largest HIV organizations and I had lots of opportunities to learn, and so I invested in myself.

Connor: And tell us more about your own organization, Parni Plus, and how it was founded?

Evgeny: To get there, let me say a bit more about my volunteering and my job. As I said, in the best way possible, I was a victim of propaganda. I started to work in a group in which there were openly gay people, and it really helped me to accept my own sexual orientation. And after a while, I found a husband, and my work helped me do this. If I recall correctly, our first date was when I invited him to see me at work, at my volunteering job. It made a big impression on him because it was a very cool organization. I invited him and he was very interested in it. Well, regarding my organizations, the one that was registered was Phoenix Plus. Parni Plus is one of Phoenix's projects. We founded Phoenix Plus on 6 June 2006: 06/06/06. I'm not joking, it's really six-six-six. We ended up founding it because our whole team in the previous organization had been sacked. It was awful. My husband and I had just bought an apartment in Orel.

We stayed in Orel, and I was interested in seeing what it would be like to live in a small city. It was there that I founded the organization. At first, I created a peer support group for people with HIV. And as I've already said, with all this experience I already had, I was able to draw on it and develop the organization in this provincial town. We quickly registered and became the leading organization in our region. In Russia we have federal districts, and we were the leading organization in our district, which included Moscow and 16 regions. We got started up pretty fast. We created a network of mutual assistance services in Orel, which consisted of a self-help group, consultations, social support, and working with the AIDS centre. We started to implement the same plan across all the regions. We went to every city and figured out how we would work with the AIDS centres and hold seminars for people with HIV. Then we invited the most dynamic people to come to Orel for training seminars. We taught them, assisted them in registering organizations and helped them to get their initial funding. I worked on this for around three years. This job was probably my first achievement which I was extremely proud of. There's an award in HIV services that's

called the Red Ribbon Award, a kind of Oscar for working with HIV/AIDS.

Connor: Is it a global award?

Evgeny: Yes, it is a UN Development Award. UNDP established this award, but I can't remember how the nomination works. But at that time around 600 organizations from all over the world had submitted applications for the award. We were included in this 600 and only ten won the award. We were the first Russian organization to win the award, and this really mobilized communities affected by HIV. It was an extremely touching moment. I have another story that I'd love to tell you. The first time I went abroad was to Thailand. Every two years they hold an enormous global HIV conference, and I was invited. It turned out to be the most popular conference they had ever held, with 40,000 people in attendance. I really didn't expect that the application would be accepted. I went to the conference, but I felt like a spare part.

Connor: Explain what you mean by that.

Evgeny: I just didn't feel like a part of the community. To me it was a sort of trauma, you know. It really affected me because I went to this conference and saw 45,000 people and I thought they were so awesome; they were all chatting to each other about their cool projects. It was very inspiring. But I didn't feel like I belonged to this group.

Connor: Why not?

Evgeny: I didn't feel as though I had any sort of great things to offer. Back then I didn't have any of my own projects. I was a hired specialist, and there was also a language barrier. But most importantly, I was just a rookie, new to it all. After all, this was a conference filled with specialists from all over the world. Basically, I felt hurt somehow: I don't know how to describe it. 'Hurt' isn't quite the right word. But I just wanted to become a part of this group. Two years passed, and then we received this prize. My co-workers opened the conference, which was in Mexico that year. I sat in this massive hall of 20,000 people and I cried because I felt this tremendous honour.

Connor: How did you feel in that moment?

Evgeny: I felt that I was part of this huge community offering help, and that we couldn't be doing anything better. It's really inspiring when what you do gets noticed. You start to acquaint yourself with other organizations and you understand the importance of the things you are doing.

Connor: When you first set up the organization, did you have issues with the Russian government or did that come later? How did this state-sponsored homophobia develop?

Evgeny: We got set up in 2006 and the problems first started to arise in 2014.

Connor: Up until that point, did the financing come from the government?

Evgeny: Yes, there was government funding. Generally, I'd say that in Russia, when the government doesn't get involved in your business, it's a very good thing. For a long time, they didn't bother us and even helped us a little bit. They gave us some dump of a building and we repaired it. We set up an office there and the rent was cheap. It was under Medvedev that this much-vaunted nationwide healthcare project began. During this time, we received government funding, which was of course absolutely great.

However, at that time, we weren't positioned as specifically as a gay organization. And then – it must have been around 2014 – our board got together when we found ourselves in a rather unpleasant situation, but this was completely normal for organizations involved in this line of work. We had we helped lots of organizations to get set up and had supported them financially. After some time, they started to criticize us, saying that we don't do such and such, and so on. Essentially, we realized that we had achieved what we wanted in this area and we made the decision that we would rebrand and start to work with gay people, with HIV positive gay people.

Connor: So, if I understand correctly, on the one hand your organization actively decided to work with specifically gay people, but at the

same time the government was becoming stricter towards LGBTQ+ people.

Evgeny: Absolutely right. And I have to say that every action creates a reaction. If the law had never come about, maybe we would have never rebranded.

Others might have done the opposite, became more homophobic in line with the government, and distance themselves from the LGBTQ+ community.

And that's how it turned out. Unfortunately, most organizations working with gay people began to conceal their work and not show it for what it really was. This even happened to purely gay organizations, who now made out that they were working with everybody. As an activist, this repulses me. I think that if you work in this area, you don't only work to survive but you also need to somehow embody your mission. And I believe that in non-profit organizations people don't work for money. So, when you start compromising yourself for the sake of the government, it means that you have completely failed your mission. One of the missions of NGOs is to change the government so that it is more aware of the community your NGO represents. Well, there are different strategies. Some people conform. On the contrary, our mission is precisely what drives us, and we need to step up our work in this respect.

Connor: In 2013, the Russian Federation adopted the so-called 'anti-gay law', against the 'propaganda of non-traditional relationships'. How did Russia reach this point?

Evgeny: In fact, I think that the research shows that attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people were becoming more accepting overall. Every year there was a small improvement, with more people having positive attitudes towards gay people.

Connor: Up until 2013?

Evgeny: Around that time, there were many significant historical changes, related to Putin's attempt to set limits on civil society. This issue is closely linked to homophobia. Putin had a very simple way to

strengthen his position in the public eye. Even though attitudes towards gay people had improved, they were still generally negative. Putin's use of homophobia helped him to mobilize his electorate and strengthen his position with the public. And that's why I think this began. I'm not really an analyst….

Connor: We aren't asking for you to offer the perspective of an analyst. But you lived through this time, and you saw with your own eyes as a person, organizer, and activist how public opinion changed. Do you think some base level of hostility towards LGBTQ+ people exists in Russian society? Is it a government creation or did it exist already before this point?

Evgeny: Of course, it already existed and there is a considerable history here: homosexuality had been illegal. This story cannot be erased from Russian history. You could say that in the beginning of the USSR, attitudes towards homosexuality were rather progressive. I don't know, I don't feel as though I am an expert in this area. In general, homosexuality was accepted during the 1920s. And I believe that some activists came to visit Russia. Then, around 1933, homosexuality was made illegal as part of the criminal code, and this brought with it other opportunities for repression. This story is well-established. I think a similar thing happened in Fascist Germany. It's a familiar story, one of the oldest tricks in the book. Do you want to quickly mobilize a society? Do you want to build a platform based on opposition to LGBTQ+ people? Here, you can start with the gays.

Connor: This new wave of homophobia coincides with the annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In your opinion, is there a connection between foreign policy and state-sponsored homophobia in Putin's Russia?

Evgeny: Of course, there absolutely is. The decriminalization of sex between men was not an achievement of the Russian LGBTQ+ community, even though LGBTQ+ activists had been working on this. They themselves said that it was because it was very important for Russia in the 1990s to be part of the Council of Europe and abolishing the anti-sodomy law was just one of the required conditions to join. Therefore, unlike in the USA and most European countries where LGBTQ+ activists reached this point independently, Russian activists didn't. Rather,

the abolition was presented as some sort of gift for Russian society since it was an essential requirement to be a part of Europe. I also want to talk about the link between homophobia, state-sponsored homophobia, and the events in Crimea. I think that for a long time Putin wanted to make Russia part of Europe. Even now I still can't decide if he really is homophobic, or if he's a pragmatic politician wielding homophobia as an instrument in his fight for power. I personally… Well, I can't recall everything that he has said, as it varies a lot at different points in time. I myself, as an LGBTQ+ activist, can't say that he has said any nice things, but he has generally defended basic human rights and said that all people are entitled to equal rights, including gay people.

Therefore, I can't say whether Putin is homophobic or not. I just don't know. I do know that he is an experienced politician and a very pragmatic one. If there wasn't this war, I could easily see him meeting Sir Elton John, who's desperate to meet him. If they did, Elton John would tell him, very pleasantly and naively, that accepting gay people is worthwhile, and there's no harm in it. And then Putin would do some sort of PR act and say, 'Really!? Go on then, let's abolish the law. We must get closer to European values.' I wholeheartedly believe this because, at the end of the day, I see Putin as a professional politician. With the situation in Crimea, it was easy to see how public opinion was being capitalized on. Russia is distancing itself from European values, those common global values that condemn the invasion of another country. And Russia is distancing itself from LGBTQ+ rights, which are bound up with European values. Clearly, homophobia is one of Putin's instruments used to gain power.

Connor: Could you now tell us a bit about how all of this affected your organization, and about how you left Russia?

Evgeny: We lived in a time when all the changes that happened were barely noticeable. They were like screws being tightened very slowly. Putin did this perfectly: if it is done too abruptly, it can cause everyone to riot. But when it's done gradually, tightening its grasp from different angles, there is no single moment where someone wakes up and realizes what's going on. No one speaks out and says, 'This isn't on, you just can't do this. Let's all go out on the street and protest.' So, in terms of everything that happened with my organization, all the changes hap-

pened gradually over time. It all started with an inspection from the Office of the Public Prosecutor and the Ministry of Justice. They were legally allowed to inspect our organization. The Prosecutor's Office could invent any kind of pretext to inspect us. The crux of these inspections was always the same: they would recommend that we change our constitution. And, of course, to frighten us.

Back then in 2014 some organizations were already considered foreign agents. It was common knowledge that any organization that held European values could potentially be considered a foreign agent. This meant that every inspection they advised us to change something in our constitution. They said that they understood that according to our constitution we could engage in public protest, and we were in receipt of foreign funding. Together, these indicators implied we were a foreign agent. We agreed to change the constitution according to what they wanted, but they kept tightening the screws on us. Unfortunately, as it happened, our constitution does not hold as much significance as those of Western organizations. In Russia it's perfectly acceptable to write a constitution which contains nothing of substance and can be easily twisted. Therefore, we changed everything, and basically made our constitution spineless with nothing concrete in it. It worked for a while.

Of course, among other things, those politicians who were inciting hatred against LGBTQ+ people heavily influenced what happened to our organization. I think that one clear example of hatred being stirred up was the death of one guy, Vladislav Tornovoi. He was just drinking with his friends and somehow one of them found out he was gay, and they killed him. It was an extremely brutal murder; they beat him with a stone to the head and did other awful things to his body. And since we were providing direct services to homosexual people, we saw that people were becoming more and more scared to seek help. In general, I had seen this for a long time regarding healthcare. This propaganda law and the statements of the politicians really hindered our work. I think this was when I realized that this was now the next chapter in the story of the organization, when we started to associate ourselves with LGBTQ+ organizations and position ourselves as one. We developed an agenda that is linked to human rights, because it had become clear that the most important part of our work was not only giving out condoms and lube or telling people how to defend themselves and how to live with HIV.

Rather, it became clear that if we didn't change this legislation, and if we didn't combat this so-called propaganda law then all our work would be for nothing. Because people who need help, who fear going to medical establishments and being tested for HIV, stigmatize themselves. Our work was altogether much more important than just giving people condoms. We needed to protest and counteract this legislation and the statements of politicians. So essentially this political homophobia completely changed what our organization was about. The more government pressure on LGBTQ+ people, the more we focused on the issue of reducing discrimination of any kind. Our work, which revolved around changing the situation in Russia, is what got us recognized as a foreign agent. We are a healthcare and sexual healthcare organization. One way or another this is directly linked to politics, and we were always engaged in some form of politics. So, I guess that was the indication to the government that we were receiving foreign money and were influencing politics. Of course, we said to them that we are involved in healthcare and not in politics. But to be honest, we were involved in politics. Gay organizations all over the world are engaged in politics because unfortunately gay issues are still political ones.

Connor: Please tell us about your decision to leave Russia.

Evgeny: Well, we should begin the story by saying that I'm a workaholic and I love my job. At this point of my life, work was really starting to eat up my life and became the largest and most meaningful part of it. It had become important than my family and even more important than my relationship with myself. My job was paramount to me. Despite being with my husband for ten years, we talked about how I wanted to leave the country; not to get away from the bad stuff, but more to try something new. Although in part it was because everything was getting worse in some way or another.

What happened next is an extremely sad story. I played an awful prank on my husband. Here's what happened. It began when some people decided to start an art project. More specifically, they wrote a short letter, about three or four paragraphs. It was from supposedly the housing bureau and addressed to the residents of a block of flats. The letter said: 'In relation to the law regarding homosexual propaganda, we ask you to be careful with your children as there are homosexuals living in our

building. Please be vigilant. We are going to have preventative talks with them but keep your guard up.' So that was the gist of the letter, and it was written in that sort of language that is very convincing. Even as an LGBTQ+ activist, I read it and thought maybe it was true, you know?

But then I realized that it was absolutely ridiculous. So I decided to joke about it, and I went on the internet and printed out a copy of this letter to hang on our door. I stuck it on our door and took a photograph of it. I went to the shops, and when I got back, I showed it to my husband and said: 'Look what's on all the front doors.' When he read it, I saw fear in his eyes, and he said to me: 'Did you take this photo?' Then I saw that my prank wasn't funny at all. You can't imagine how scary it is to see fear in the eyes of the person that you love most in the entire world. He was in a state of extreme fear and panic. All he said to me was: 'Did you take this picture?' It was such a painful gut-wrenching feeling, and I thought to myself that while my husband isn't an activist, we are on the same side. However, he knows how I live my life, and he is more clued up than other LGBTQ+ people. But despite all this, he was, and is, terrified. For me this was a turning point. I realized that I didn't want him to experience fear, or me to experience fear. But the problem was that he didn't want to leave, and he has never been very decisive. Yet I feel that any sane person, any LGBTQ+ person, should simply get up and leave the country.

For me, I lived in my own world, where work had become the most important thing. Therefore, I kept saying to myself, 'Look, I've got this interesting project at the moment, once it finishes, then I'll leave, because there will be no more work.' However, my workload only increased. The projects spark your interest, and you become like a drug addict. You're a work in progress yourself, and you want to complete more and more projects. The situation worsens and you want to change it. Nothing seems that dangerous yet. That's exactly how it worked for many years. And it worked well like that. For me, an extremely important episode in my life, just as important as accepting my HIV status and my sexuality, was this emotional burnout I experienced. It was when my work ran me down and I started to turn to alcohol and then drugs. I soon gathered that I was destroying myself. Since I had already had drug problems, I understood my situation quickly enough and sought help. I knew where to go and, broadly speaking, there was no issue

finding help. I went to the psychologist, and to this day I still speak with him. I think that he helped me to learn how to look after myself and how to think about my own safety, because I had never thought about this before. Maybe it was just my Russian happy-go-lucky attitude, or thinking that whatever will be, will be. Like: 'They've not killed you yet, so it's all ok.' This element of my safety was tied up with how we had recently been classified as a foreign agent, and the thought that they would shut us down and persecution would follow.

Therefore, I had already started to learn a new language. I thought that I'd go to Germany, and so I started to learn German. But then because of Covid I wasn't able to get a German visa. The plan was that I would only leave as a last resort. In that, I needed to be prepared and learn a language and have a visa for when things became dangerous. At any moment, I would be able to take my things and leave. This was also a very important period in my life since I had grown apart somewhat from my husband, who didn't want to even talk about the possibility of leaving. Once I realized that I didn't mind being alone, I could start to prepare myself. Then, as it so happens, a journalist came to my work who was an immigrant in the UK and had sought asylum from Belarus. In actual fact, I left for the UK just when the Russian government started to contact, threaten, and ask my co-workers to sign a document that indicated that I was involved in the inappropriate use of funds. It was a document connecting me to financial fraud. One of my co-workers phoned me and she said that she had met with the authorities, and they asked a lot of questions about me and intimidated her, saying she would have problems if she didn't comply. Basically, she signed a document that testified against me, and said that she was extremely worried for herself and for me.

Then the same thing happened with another co-worker. He said that he had also met with the authorities, and they had terrified him as well. He didn't tell them anything, but he was scared. This phone call really frightened me. I had just managed to pick up the phone as he rang me whilst we were getting ready to go on holiday, and we already had plane tickets booked. We were going to Egypt. Over the period of three hours, I decided that I needed to leave Russia. Then, a couple of days later, they visited my house and the organization, in order to leave a summons requesting me.

There was another moment which made leaving an easy decision. On the one hand, my work with my organization concerns sexual health, and that was more or less safe. On the other hand, my work with the website concerned LGBTQ+ rights. Due to the so-called propaganda law, I had to try to differentiate between the two, because the site would draw attention to the organization, and this was why we were labelled foreign agents in the end. As the chief editor of the website, I was threatened constantly. This started with letters, but then my mailbox was defaced, and the danger felt very close to home. At moments like this, you have to come face to face with reality. So, there were lots of events that coincided at this time.

I could even say that my last year in Russia felt like I was in some sort of film. Everything that happened doesn't really happen in real life, but rather in a Hollywood film. In 2018, the British government, through the embassy in Russia, had a grant programme which supported NGOs. Our volunteer wrote an application for the support and development of one of our projects which was based on Russian LGBTQ+ history. We wrote an application, but it wasn't successful, and we forgot all about it. But in 2022, this story resurfaced in an article in the Russian state media. This article claimed that the UK was financing organizations that were undermining the sovereignty of the Russian Federation. The applications of several organizations were published by the state media, and mine was on the list. I guess it was some sort of cyber attack where they took all this information which was meant to be private and published it. After this, we began to receive threats again. There were threats from all sides, and I didn't know who or what I should be most scared of.

Connor: Could you tell us about the psychological impacts of all these threats?

Evgeny: Well, I can divide this into two parts. Firstly, I was just emotionally burnt out and essentially, I started to self-destruct. I mentally couldn't deal with it all. When you work and have to deal with constant setbacks, and in the background there are threats and other complications which you ignore, everything really starts to take its toll. I simply didn't realize this. Luckily, I was experienced in social support and un-

derstood that I was in trouble. I quickly got help and was already in the process of seeing a psychologist. I then started to really see all these threats which hadn't worried me before. Over the next year, or eighteen months, I started to feel afraid, because suddenly my psychologist made me appreciate that these threats were real. You simply get used to the fact that this danger is the backdrop of your life, and you never think about any of it seriously.

Connor: And how do you feel now that you're living in England?

Evgeny: Of course, it was a very difficult step for me. Deciding to leave that is. I love Russia. I wish I could love Russia. Russia is a massive European country with huge potential. Although now I'm saying 'I love my country,' it seems to me that I can only say that in the past tense. Maybe, maybe…

Connor: Some people think that their country no longer exists. That is, the Russia they once knew.

Evgeny: I would probably agree with this idea. I'll explain why. I've already decided to leave and now, I don't have to put up with it anymore. I could've still stayed, risked everything, and continued my work. Maybe they would've put me in jail? Maybe I would've received some sort of fine? They are just threats. It doesn't happen overnight. Putin drags things out. I simply realized that I want to live for myself. I understood that my youthful hopes of change and optimism weren't going to happen in the next ten years. There was this realization that it'll never happen. Even if Putin goes, nothing will change because it takes a long time to alter opinions in Russia. For me, taking my leave from Russia was like some kind of moral right.

Callum: What does the future hold for you?

Evgeny: Yesterday I spoke with my friend, a very, very famous LGBTQ+ activist called Timofei Sozaev. He asked me how I was, and I replied that I was 10 out of 10. He said, 'You really are euphoric, aren't you?' When I came to England, I kind of knew that European values put people and their welfare first, and this was similar to my own beliefs, and the community work that I did in Russia. Here in the UK I became a client, receiving support rather than giving it, and I gained an under-

standing of the structure of the government. I realized I didn't have any fear of the future. I know that if I study to get a job, everything will turn out ok. So, when you ask me what the future holds, I don't even know myself. I just know everything will be ok. What happens in the future depends on me. Maybe I could start to do academic work? Maybe I will go pick apples. It's not important. What's important is that I am already here, in a safe environment. There's a government that defends my basic human rights and social rights, and I'll pay taxes and live in this state of harmony.

Connor: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Evgeny: Just about the idea of mutual self-help. If someone helps me, I really want to help them too. It gives me enormous pleasure. Besides the fact I enjoy helping, it's a very smart strategy as it helps with self-improvement. When you help people, then they help you and you learn something. It works very well. As soon as I arrived in the UK, it became very important for me to surround myself with people who are going through, or have already been through, the asylum process, or have moved here for their own reasons. Now I find myself involved in some sort of process which I'm not enjoying very much. My friends and I have created a chat where we message and help each other out, as the system for helping migrants in UK is very complicated and there is lots of information to deal with. You need to have someone who's also just arrived in the UK. Our group has already met up several times. We've met in person and we raise money to help each other. We've decided we want to create a migrant organization, and if I'm honest, I already have some experience with developing communities in Russia. I was never able to do it properly. Now I realize that I have the experience: from my activism and from my self-care, in that I should put myself first. I am surrounded by lots of friends, which is very important.

Connor: That's great.

Evgeny: We decided to create an organization called Queerdom. Maybe it will be a continuation of my work, I don't know. What I do know is that in Russia I dealt a lot with people who weren't ready to seek help. It is quite a different society from the UK, and over there people find it a lot more difficult to seek help. When you're working with the gay community, it's often awkward when you try to help and be welcoming.

People haven't yet realized that they need the support. It is a completely different kind of work. I think that if I was employed in the UK as a social worker, I would be an asset, because I didn't only provide assistance in Russia, but I also made people who needed help realize that they needed it. I don't know. I feel as though it's hard to explain.

Connor: I understand.

Evgeny: I've realized from talking with other immigrants that they need communication. Seeing these people as clients, not friends, has made me realize this. I never felt anything similar in Russia. People just need to meet once a week, chat a little and help one another. The life I'm leading now is awesome. Thank you.

Connor: Thank you so much, we have been chatting for almost two hours.