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The power of solidarity: Support for Ukraine

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Executive Director of the Ukraine Library Association, Yaroslava Soshynska, talks to Rob Green about life in Ukraine as Russia wages war on its neighbour, the role of libraries in the country and how moral support is keeping people strong.

On 24 February, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered troops to invade Ukraine – bringing war to Europe for the first time this century.

Ordinary people have been caught up in fighting, bombing and the ensuing horrors that come with war. Thousands of people have been killed or injured as Russia's war machine is widely reported to be attacking civilian targets as well as the Ukraine military. Residents are forced to shelter in underground bunkers in towns and cities across Ukraine and hundreds of thousands of people have fled in search of safety across Ukraine's borders.

Many are staying in the country and joining the fight against Russian forces. Among those still in the country is the Executive Director Ukrainian Library Association, Yaroslava Soshynska. In an exclusive interview with Information Professional she describes life in Ukraine and how libraries and their staff are reacting as war rages around them.

Yaroslava describes her feelings as the reality of war struck, saying: "Despite the fact that the Russian Federation has been waging a hybrid war in Ukraine since

2014, few people were well aware of the threat of a full-scale military invasion. And in the first days of the war, I felt like I was in some kind of virtual reality, appealing to my school memories of Soviet films about World War II and eyewitness narratives of those who fought and those who worked in the rear and knew what is an occupation. So, following the script of the film, after the air strikes at five in the morning, I listened to the news from the Government and the Mayor, collected documents and essentials, audited food and water, and covered the windows with thick paper to disguise from enemy planes.”

Answering questions by email on 3 March, Yaroslava explains that despite the fear and constant attacks on cities and towns, there is a defiance among Ukrainian people. She said: “All Ukrainians understand that this is a war not only for the military – it is really a people’s war in which we defend our families, our homes, our cities, our Ukraine. In addition, we defend our democratic values and rights, freedom and independence.”

Reports coming out of Ukraine have highlighted the damage being done to civilian infrastructure – a number of schools, universities, museums, cathedrals and libraries have reported damage during the first weeks of the war. Yaroslava says that despite the onslaught, many libraries are working to deliver services – targeting resources where they are most needed. She said: “It is horrible, when in 21st century, when people plan to colonise Mars, women and children die in bombs, shells and fires in the centre of Europe in a beautiful country. I will never understand why Russian barbarians are destroying schools, universities, museums, libraries, cathedrals. Probably because they hate educated, free and happy people.

“Libraries in Ukraine are educational spaces where everyone can get new knowledge and skills. Even now, in wartime, Lviv regional library for children conducts online computer and media literacy classes. Lesia Ukrainka Public Library for adults in Kyiv offers online lectures on current issues.

“Libraries in Ukraine are places of safety and freedom, where everyone in need gets free access to information, internet, psychological support, assistance in solving life’s challenges. It is literally about ‘libraries saving lives’, because many libraries are now open as shelters from bombs and shells.

“At present, Ukrainian libraries primarily perform their social function and focus their work on refugees. Here everyone can make copies of documents, get advice on housing and humanitarian aid, get information about the schedule of transport, open hours and addresses of groceries, rules concerning curfew, may warm up, eat, get library therapy, etc.”

She adds: “As far as I know, librarians, having the appropriate instructions, took the necessary measures to preserve valuable book collections. But it is impossible to preserve historical and cultural values if the Russian invaders set out to burn down the city completely, as is currently the case in Kharkiv and Chernihiv.”

International support has been arriving for the ULA, and Yaroslava explains that this moral support has had a positive impact on her and her colleagues working in Ukrainian libraries. She said: “We have received many letters of support from international organisations such as EBLIDA, NAPLE, PUBLIC LIBRARIES 2030, national and special library associations, libraries, cultural institutions, NGOs, and librarians all around the world. We are amazed that libraries and other institutions in different countries have illuminated their buildings with the blue and yellow colours or have raised the Ukrainian flag to express their solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

“Thanks to Nick Poole, Chief Executive, CILIP and his viral tweet, a lot of people learned about Ukrainian Library Association in the most remote cities from Kyiv – and hundreds of warm-hearted people sent us words of support, poems, songs, offered help with the settlement, transferred funds to the National Bank of Ukraine to support the army and humanitarian needs.

“Moral support is extremely important. When you get into a stressful situation, you look for some stability and emotional balance. Serious, well-considered statements by our partners, who are forming a coalition in support of common values, give this stability. And words of support, understanding, empathy, emoji ‘hearts’, ‘hugs’ in the email and social networks – these are the emotions that protect us from the barbarism and violence of war.”

Asked about what practical support could be offered during this time, Yaroslava says the immediate need is to protect civilians, and only governments and security organisations can do that. She says that, for now, libraries will take a back seat, saying: “While we have an acute phase of warfare on the territory of our state – it is not time to talk about the challenges or needs of librarians. We need to talk about the challenges and needs of the country.

“We need to protect the civilians from air strikes, cruise and ballistic missiles, from humanitarian catastrophe, from the brutality of the occupiers. This is a matter for governments and international security organisations, but in a democracy, it is the people who can push them to make decisions. So, we look forward and be very grateful if the progressive world community continues to urge its governments to take quick decisions in support of Ukraine to prevent these terrible human losses.” And even as the war continues, Yaroslava takes comfort in knowing that libraries have a role to play in this war and in, hopefully preventing others. She said: A life based on truth and a life based on a lie are two completely different worlds. Confident people are not afraid of the truth, use critical thinking, that makes them freer and gives a broader worldview. Lazy and cowardly people do not want to think, they are completely satisfied with someone else’s opinion, which is broadcast by the media.

“Ukrainian libraries, together with partners – governmental and non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, non-formal education providers – are doing a lot to develop media literacy of our citizens.”

However, she goes on to criticise Russian library counterparts who failed to condemn the war, saying: “This situation requires librarians to constantly watch for truthful and reliable information. It is extremely important that librarians around the world [use] professional ethics [to] support the fight against misinformation and unite their efforts. We are very sorry that Russian librarians who, in their statement of 2 March separate themselves from the social and political context, did not join this struggle. Then the question arises: are libraries in Russia social institutions? What are their modern functions, apart from collecting, storing, and preserving documentary collections?”

She ends on a defiant and hopeful note for the future.

“Ukrainians have an invincible strength of spirit and together with you, our friends and reliable partners, we will win,” she says, adding: “The Russian occupiers have destroyed and continue to destroy civilian infrastructure in many cities, towns, and villages of Ukraine. But after the victory we will rebuild everything and our libraries will be even more modern and comfortable.”

- This interview was carried out by an email exchange with Yaroslava. CILIP has been in intermittent contact with Yaroslava both before and after the interview, which was conducted in good faith on 3 March. As with any reporting from a war zone, it is difficult to corroborate events without being on the ground, and we would urge readers to be aware of the limitations we have operated under. However we felt it was important to give Yaroslava and the ULA a platform in this instance.