

WAR AND ACTIVISM

Russia-Ukraine War Chronicles



INNA TERESHCHENKO

**“We all will have to rethink the core
and essence for the human
coexistence”**

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“Human Stories” is a format where the floor is given to the representatives of civil society who play active role in countering the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

I remember February 24 well, of course, I remember feeling of shock. On the one hand, it was immediately clear what was happening, but on the other hand, for some time there was a feeling that this was not true, and this could not be. I live not far from the airport, so I woke up then from the sounds of rockets. And it so happened that the first person with whom talked that early was one of my colleagues from Russia, and then I thought that I would not want to be in the place of the Russians in this situation.

And then there was such an interesting effect, it seemed that every day was stretching. That each day was not just 24 hours, but a week, because there was a huge level of eventfulness and an attempt to realize it all. But now a normal countdown has already begun, we are already orienting ourselves in time, we say “first week”, “second”, “thirty-seventh day”.

My work before the war was facilitation of groups, trainings, teaching, conducting dialogue projects, for example, “Women's Initiatives for Peace in Donbas”. This is an international project that has been going on for several years and had brought together women, community leaders from different sides of the conflict. We had several meetings before the start of the full-scale invasion, and tension was already in the air.

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With the outbreak of war, all plans for several projects had to be canceled, including training programs in mediation and conflict management. We had a training module scheduled for the second week of the war. Naturally, nothing happened. And this course was very important, it was for mediators in negotiations in large groups. Ukraine has a large community of mediators, but few have the experience and understanding of how to work with a group. And my colleagues and I came up with such a training, with an emphasis on

possible work during the war.

The biggest question for me since the beginning of the war was how will I deal with this as a professional? Because my work has always been about non-violence, about cooperation, networking, and suddenly you find yourself in a situation where your natural reactions are anger and hatred. In the Ukrainian language, this word is "lyut", it's not even so much hatred but rather rage. But then you started to cope with it little by little.

It helped a lot in experiencing the war, not only for me, but for many in the country - a constant "check-in". Not only close people, but also some distant acquaintances, colleagues constantly asked each other how the situation was. Everyone had such a group, and so did I. And even if at some point it could already begin to annoy, but still everyone answered everyone. And I understood for myself that I had to be in shape, also so I would keep this group of mine. A lot of people immediately went into the territorial defense or volunteering, and continue to do so, and it also helps to withstand everything that happens - when you participate in what you can.

Even before the war, I noticed how humor gives people resilience.

We had jokes about the war before February 24, and now there are a lot of them, and this is good, because it helps to master that terrible information that is impossible to master otherwise. This was before Bucha [the discovery of the facts of massacres of civilians by the Russian military in the settlements of the Kyiv region - ed.], and now, after Bucha, this is starting to return, karikatures appear. Humor is one of the important factors, markers of adaptation to difficult conditions. They even made an exhibition of karikatures in Odesa. Or they made a video where the goose runs from room to room all the time with the captions "Air raid" and "Hang out". And all because we had shelling and frequent air raids for several days in a row, sometimes almost without interruption.

The other thing that also helped me to cope was the constant analytics, theorizing, embedding what was happening around me into what I knew about conflicts before. There was a lot of material, I found samples of negotiation techniques, gathered negotiators for green corridors, which, however, were not useful later, and so on.

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Now we have organized the work of conflict management mobile teams: we have prepared memos and assembled groups of professional mediators who work in places where there

are a large number of migrants, and where conflicts and outbreaks of tension are inevitable, simply because people are in a very difficult emotional and psychological state. We have accumulated similar experience during our work since 2014, when we started training specialists in dialogues. Such work will help the IDPs and local residents, and it is also a prevention mechanism, helping to decrease further tension.

If we talk about what will happen next, it is clear that inertia will go. Including after the end of active hostilities. There will be a lot of this hatred, radicalism. And this applies not only to those who were armed. Traditionally, those who were on the front line are less radical than those who were in the rear.

We are in for a very difficult period in this regard. But it is very good that we know what it will be, which means that we can prepare, we need and can work with this. You can even say that we were lucky - before that, we had a decentralization reform, so the regions already have a normal system of self-government and self-organization. And the level of independence and decision-making at the grassroots levels has become completely different, and civil society has the opportunity to make decisions and influence their own lives. This provides a good basis for horizontal links. Since 2014, there have already been these processes: volunteering, which is developing very quickly, training of specialists for psychological rehabilitation, the flow of support for IDPs and other response mechanisms - during this time, these structures have become stronger and gained experience. We did not know then that this was a preparation for such challenges, but now it turns out that this was the case.

And the second thing in which we can say we are lucky is in the way the government behaves. With their policies, the messages they use to communicate with society, it will really help to get out of the state of war. They are now saying very important and correct things for those who are in a state of fear and apprehension. Natural reactions to the acute phase of a military conflict are always radicalization, everything becomes black and white. And the longer the war goes on, the stronger these extremes become. Therefore, it is already important (and these discussions are already underway) to talk about the human stuff, where the world takes on different colors, where there is an escape from guilt and accusation. In general, this is peacekeeping, peacebuilding in the broadest sense, but we do not yet have an established language for this. And it also needs to be created. We, and not only us, also Europe, and even more so Russia, are waiting for a rethinking of parameters that are important and essential for human coexistence. It will be a big and complex process, and we have a lot of work to do.

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