

# The war is making Ukraine stronger and stronger

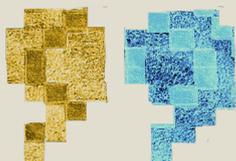


Дитяче харчування, борошно,  
ковдри, подушки –  
Вже у Краматорську

*Smarta*



#Україна Переможе



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The war caught me in the capital city of Ukraine. When the war started in 2014, I was there, too, on a business trip. Back then, Russian separatists were terrorising Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. I managed to come back home only after the towns had been liberated.

On 22 February 2022 I was on my way to an event organised by the Ukrainian Women's Foundation. The day after, everything became clear. On 24 February at 4:45 a.m. I called a taxi to the railway station and decided to go to my son, who was in Lviv. While going through the sleepy city, I was thinking: 'When will I see you again, my lovely Kyiv? Will I ever be back in my Kramatorsk?'

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On the platform of Kyiv central railway station I saw people calling their friends and relatives to tell them that Putin had invaded Ukraine. Some trains were cancelled. I was worried that my train wouldn't come. Trains were late. My train arrived at the platform 5 minutes before moving off. A train attendant asked everyone to show Covid certificates and people started searching for them in their bags and phones. After a couple of days no one will ask for those certificates.

## Family

I'm in Lviv. A flat rented by my son will become my second home for several months. Not only mine. My relatives are arriving in Lviv from Kramatorsk: my husband with our cat, Kosmos, my sister with her granddaughter and a French bulldog, Lucky. Having stayed overnight in the Kyiv metro, my friend's daughter has joined us with a pet pigeon. Also, there were lots of people who stayed overnight at our place on their way. I can't even count how many. A little Noah's Ark. But everything is well-organised here. There is a rota on the fridge to show visitors when its their turn to clean up and cook.

Surely, when my family and I are safe, which is my main priority, I can focus on helping others.

## Volunteering

Volunteering is based on reputation and trust, which don't appear all of a sudden. My first period of volunteering was in the first year of war, 2014–2015. Today, all the contacts in my phone have started to work again. New ones have been added. Contacts of local activists, foundations and charity organisations .

From the first days, I was involved in humanitarian aid distribution.

War logistics looks like this: people go to the west, humanitarian aid to the east. First, we sent some humanitarian aid by train. When trains stopped going there, we sent lorries and vans. We have already sent approximately 40 cargoes of humanitarian aid. Most were sent to Donetsk region, as

well as to people in Dnipro, Kirovohrad and Slobozhanshchyna. Tonnes of food, toiletries, medicines for locals, hospitals and shelters.

## **Evacuation**

Today I'm organised, more or less. Government organisations, call centres and information platforms for refugees and temporarily relocated people are working well these days. In the early days, however, there was chaos. Many evacuation trains came to Lviv, and people got off the trains with the question: 'What's next?' I started receiving requests from my acquaintances – to meet, help, accompany someone, to find a doctor, a wheelchair, etc. Then, people started to pass my phone number and people who didn't know anyone else started calling me.

My colleague, Liubov Maksymovych, has opened a shelter for women with kids, where they can stay for a while. She's become my main support in Lviv. The shelter helped women, we, in turn, helped the shelter. All the women from my family were volunteering there. After that I found other shelters.

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Every time my husband and I were waiting for the train at the station, we were surrounded by scared, confused and exhausted people. In such a condition they weren't able to think straight. So I started talking to them, calming them down and giving them advice on where to go next.

It was most difficult for elderly or disabled people. If volunteers hadn't helped them, they wouldn't have been able to flee or find shelter. I remember helping one woman whose son was in a wheelchair. There were five days full of challenges. Now they are in Munich. I guess disabled people feel more comfortable there. I recall a lady with three kids and 20 dollars in her pocket. They will be helped in Europe but first they have to get there. I helped them and they're fine now.

During the past month, I've managed to help about 400 people. I remember faces and situations, but not names. Although there are some exceptions...

I remember 82-year-old Anzhela Mykolaivna, who looked like a kind fairy. Before she retired, she had worked as a nurse. She lived alone, her daughters had emigrated to Israel but they were trying to get their mom out of Ukraine. An old friend asked me to help this elderly woman to get from Slaviansk to Israel. She was the first link in a chain.... Then it was incredible. Anna, a train guard who has practically lived in a carriage since the beginning of the war, goes in one direction with humanitarian aid, and on the way back she takes people. I carried some boxes of food and medicines to her and asked her if she could transport this elderly lady to Lviv. She managed it. We met her, gave her shelter and food,

planned a route for her, put her on a bus... Then other people appeared... drivers, volunteers... Now Anzhela Mykolaivna is back with her children. She's messaged us that they are praying for Ukraine.

Not everyone has caring relatives, however. My sister Valentyna told me about 91-year-old Raisa Hryhorivna. My sister is head of two homeowners' associations in Kramatorsk. Neighbours, who had found an elderly lady on the floor, had called my sister. It appeared that she had fallen and couldn't stand up by herself. There was nobody to help her because she was alone. Almost all the neighbours had fled. Helping her was a challenge and involved many people. At first we found a shelter for elderly people in Dnipro region, which was willing to take her. The next step was to collect all the necessary documents and applications. Her evacuation was like a quest, involving nearly 50 people who helped to find volunteers, cars, fuel, money. When Raisa finally reached a safe place and was able to walk we rejoiced. Elderly people, like kids, can't be treated like strangers.

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I should mention priorities. I wondered whether it was more important to help one person or many people. Later, I realised there were no any priorities. If a problem arises, I have to help. I don't prioritise problems but try to deal with all of them.

## **Activism**

I'm a temporarily relocated person but that doesn't mean I can take a break from my active public activity, in which I've been involved for more than 20 years. As a co-founder of 'Smarta', a public organisation, and a Donetsk region coordinator of Coalition 1325 I have to do all I can to save the community. Some of us are safe at home. Others are safe but not at home. Despite this, we're in touch. A week after the invasion, the first anti-crisis Coalition meeting took place. I invited a psychologist because all of us needed support. After that we organised four more meetings, at which we took stock, talked about our activities, shared our stories and experiences, offered some help. I started inviting different people to join our meetings. Volunteers, experts and representatives of various state and international organisations.

We already have several examples of cooperation under war conditions. The 'Smarta' organisation, in partnership with colleagues from the Coalition, bought and distributed 500 medical sets to women in Donetsk oblast and to those evacuated to western Ukraine.

Now we're working on renovating the National Action Plan 'Women, peace, safety'.

The Smarta organisation was evacuated from Kramatorsk. I had been worried until everyone left the city, which was under constant shelling for three months. The organisation's main office is in Lviv. Those who are abroad or in other cities work remotely. Smarta is very active now. It continues to protect women's rights and to do some project work. It has even expanded – a new member has joined the organisation.

### **Save the networks**

In my opinion, the networks that have been created by women's organisations and women leaders over recent years have really showed their value. Such networks provide various resources, an opportunity to influence the situation, and like-minded people who are always ready to help. I'm thankful to the following projects: 'Ukrainian women: involved, capable and inexorable', 'Women's voice and leadership', our regional Coalition 1325, the Network of Gender Advisors, the NDI Mentorship Programme. I'd also like to thank my colleagues at the successful women's club, the Women of Ukraine for their charity support and humanitarian aid, which has been sent to the eastern part of Ukraine in order to support relocated women.

Thankfully, all my networks, based on respect and trust, work. I resigned from an industrial company two years ago but even now I can turn to my former colleagues. And I do so if I need to. Anton helped me in Kharkiv, Vadym in Dnipro. Andrii from Lviv shared his warehouse with us, so we had space for our humanitarian aid cargoes and also he helped us when he had some

free time. Our former distribution network has become a humanitarian one.

I'm not surprised by our enemy's actions. Since 2014 I haven't got any illusions. What I am surprised with is our people. They're determined, united, kind, noble, strong and invulnerable.

This is why we'll win!

### ***Liliia Kislitsyna,***

*co-founder and director of public organisation 'Smarta', and coordinator of Coalition 1325 Donetsk region. Kramatorsk - Lviv*