

IMAGINING POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION FOR RESILIENCE IN KYIV WITH INURA

by Olga Kryvets, with special thanks to Constance Carr for consulting and editing

Department of Geography and Spatial Planning (DGEO), University of Luxembourg

“Just when you think this war has taken everything you loved, you meet someone and realize that somehow you still have more to give.” Ruta Sepetys, Salt to the Sea

I and my family are among the millions of Ukrainians who fled the war, leaving their families, their homes, their friends, their beloved jobs, their whole life in search of a safe place. Our life will never be the same as it was before the war.

The past months have presented a multitude of challenges: with the atrocities of Russian troops on one hand, and the incredible kindness of people we met along on our journeys seeking refuge on the other. It is clear that the Kremlin rejects the territorial configurations established after the world wars and wants to eradicate Ukrainians and Ukraine in this process (Hill & Stent, 2022).

“Russia is fighting for a version of Ukrainian existence that is non-consensual and hierarchical, where Ukraine is subservient to Kremlin hegemony and ideology, where Russia decides what is good and evil, and right and wrong, and where Russia has the right to occupy whatever territory of Ukraine it chooses” (Knott, 2022; 2)

At the same time, I have seen that the kind hearts of people all over the world, who support Ukraine and Ukrainians in “fighting for the right to exist and maintain its right to determine what that existence should look like” (Knott, 2022, 2), will end this war. As my family and I seek temporary protection in Luxembourg, we do not know what our future will be, but we can say with certainty that the war in Ukraine is changing not only our future but the world’s. As we reckon with Russia’s aggression, become world experts in confronting Russian dictatorial geotactics, the world is also feeling the heat in terms of food production, energy production/consumption and migration (Hellegers, 2022; Osiča & Černoch,

2022; Osendarp et al., 2022; Pushak et al., 2022; Sturm, 2022; Mykhnenko et al., 2022).

My migration story

Before the full-scale invasion by Russian troops into Ukraine, it had never entered my mind to leave. I had a good life, as Head of the Licensing Department at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and a happy family. However, in March, there was active shelling and fighting near the city of Brovary (20 km from Kyiv) where I was born and lived. Given that I had a 9-month old son (soon to celebrate his first birthday), I decided to flee from the war together with my mother. On March 3rd we headed to Lviv. We then crossed the pedestrian border in Uhryn, Poland, and stayed in a refugee camp for 3 days. After that, we stayed with a young Polish family in Lublin for 5 days, and then we carried on to Spain to stay with family. We stayed there for 2 months. It was very good because my family was close, but there was the difficulty that Spain does not pay any benefits to refugees from Ukraine. So, I sent my CV to different Spanish universities, but there was no response. In April, I saw an open call from the University of Luxembourg for Ukrainian scientists and decided to apply.

And, I got lucky, I received an official letter of invitation from Christian Schulz and Constance (Connie) Carr. Of course, the challenges were serious: moving with a small son and mother to an unfamiliar country where you have no friends, relatives or housing. However, there were two significant advantages - the management and staff at the University of Luxembourg immediately got in touch and set up a grant system of support to Ukrainian scientists. We stayed at Connie’s until longer-term housing was available.

Getting back into urban research

After all the immigration issues were settled, the interesting work in the urban studies team of Connie and Markus began. Specifically, I joined Connie's research team looking at digital cities and large corporations. By this time, it was May 2022, and right before the INURA conference that the whole team was involved with. I was happy to join. INURA was very interesting for a new experience and to share my own. It was very interesting to hear reports from urban scientists, whose works I had only read in scientific journals. I was really inspired by the reports from Ute Lehrer and Philipp Klaus. Mariia Prystupa, a postgraduate student from Kharkiv, and her story about how her landscapes changed after February 24th was also very emotional for me, recalling the excitement and all the events that we experienced too.

In between panel discussions, I talked to the conference participants. At one of the breaks, I met Tammy Wong from Hong Kong, who asked about Ukraine and about the situation that is happening. She talked about Hong Kong, and ultimately she suggested that I also tell the participants about what I know is happening in Ukraine. It is difficult to talk about the war at home, we are living in war, our homes and relatives are under constant shelling. We are all constantly worried and nervous about our relatives and friends. However, the friendly atmosphere of the conference inspired me.

At some point I noticed that the problem of reconstruction of Ukraine had not been addressed. And, although my own personal story is one of mainly of migration, I have family and many friends in Ukraine who are already reconstructing – cleaning up after soldiers have left, surveying and repairing bomb damage, trying to get on with life, and even continuing with building projects that began before the war. This, my dream for a victory for Ukraine, and the rapid restoration and reconstruction of Ukrainian cities, is also a part of my story.

Further, the topic of reconstruction and recovery of Ukraine is a challenge for scientists in many fields of science and for urbanists, in particular. So, I was very happy to learn that this topic not only interested the academic community of INURA, but that members

were also motivated to continue thinking this topic through. Later, after the conference, a circular was emailed around documenting the objectives of this group (shall we call this group Ukrainura?), which are (thank you, Arie!):

- to learn from other cities with a history of post-war or post-disaster reconstruction, and to show which participatory instruments can be used
- to provide a counterweight to large scale projects by commercial real estate companies
- to promote affordable and accessible housing (new or renovated)

The group also proposed to have a thematic panel discussion on the topic of reconstruction and recovery of Ukraine at the next, 31st conference in Zurich, 2023.

The discussions at INURA helped me realize how I really wanted to focus my research. Until the conference, I had a research plan on the topic of gender differences, digital corporations Amazon and Google, and thought about Ukraine. To this end, I also conducted research to find literature sources on this topic. Everything went according to plan. The discussions about Ukraine however, revealed that this topic of recovery is really motivating. The topic of Ukraine caused a certain synergy between all participants of the conference. As a result, we, in the Urban Studies Group at DGEO came up with the idea to do a study on the recovery and reconstruction of Kyiv city and the de-occupied territories of the Kyiv region. We analysed literary sources, built a map of the main actors. And, we continue to work on this research topic. We plan to publish articles on this topic.

Looking forward

When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, we all felt that the war took away our spring, summer, autumn, and eventually our lives. My family and I all found ourselves living in a February 24th, which will not end. It is hard to overstate how the war has so fundamentally changed the lives of so many people: Ukrainians dying on the battlefield, living under enemy missile attacks, turning kindergartens and train stations into “Spaces of Invincibility”

(Пунктнезламності), crafting camouflage for soldiers, surveying missile damage, getting by without light, heating or water, leaving their homes in search of other regions/countries to provide their children with a safe haven and happy childhood. We, Ukrainians, are paying a very high price for the victory we are aiming for together with the entire world that rejects totalitarianism, autocracies, or dictators. Partner countries help in many ways—financially, spreading the message, providing weapons, and sheltering Ukrainian citizens. I, personally, have felt great support from all sorts of people from different countries who I have met on my journey for protection. Even with all the pain and hatred towards the aggressor country that I harbour, all these people rekindled the fire of kindness in my soul. And, in this moment the loneliness dissolves through the common desire to establish peace and create new opportunities.

A year ago, I could never ever have imagined that I would be working and living in Luxembourg today. Every day I cross my fingers for good news from Kyiv. But I am very glad to work in a team of professionals who are inspired and hardworking, and who are not afraid of new challenges and supporting new research topics. In the Urban Studies Group at the Department of Geography & Spatial Planning, I was able to apply for a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Grant, proposing to examine, understand and explain how tech enterprises, big and small, shape reconstruction efforts and contribute to multiple digital urban futures in the East-European headquarter city of Kyiv (RE-DIGICITY). I have also recently joined the Luxembourg Ukrainian Research Network, helping the Faculty's circa 30 new staff members from Ukraine adjust to temporary (but safe and hopeful) life in Luxembourg.

My aim is to keep moving forward, to interact with new people, and to open new horizons of cooperation. I try to do what seemed impossible in the past life. I believe that these cooperations will provide good results, create quality research products, and strengthen the process of knowledge transfer. I very much look forward to

discussing these ideas further in Zurich!!

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In Ukraine, everyday citizens now engage in projects about protection, such as recycling shopping bags into camouflage.

Photo by Olexander Kryvets