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Scholars For Ukraine

What do you do when you're overseas and you find out that your home country has been invaded? That was the unfathomable question UC Santa Barbara postdoctoral researcher Mariya Romanova was faced with last February when she learned that Russian forces had crossed the border into Ukraine.

"I was shocked," said Romanova, who works in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and at the Quantum Foundry. Her hometown, Kharkiv, near Ukraine's northeastern border with Russia, was among the first to be attacked, with Russian troops firing long-range artillery into the city.

Her next thought? "I had to get my family out of there," she said. And so as invading troops advanced into the country, Romanova focused on getting her mother out of the line of fire. As with many overseas Ukrainians, communication with family back home became a precious lifeline as she saw news of attacks, shelling, destruction and war crimes.

"I felt helpless," she said. "I also felt guilty because I was outside and wasn't there to help."

She wasn't alone. When she attended the March Meeting of the American Physical Society (APS) in Chicago, she encountered other scientists, Ukrainian and Russian, similarly shocked and feeling powerless to do anything about the situation. By the third week of the invasion, about 3 million Ukrainians had fled into neighboring countries — a full blown refugee crisis.

APS had responded swiftly to the news of the invasion, adding a session that provided information about measures it was taking to help Ukrainian members and allowing people to give testimony about how the war was affecting them. Inspired by the desire to help and the solidarity expressed at that meeting, Romanova and some fellow scientists formed Scholars for Ukraine, a nonprofit established to send aid and bolster humanitarian efforts in the war-torn area.

“We are a group of 18 people, both Russian and Ukrainian,” Romanova said of the small organization. “Everyone has a friend or a classmate who has not left Ukraine and is volunteering right now in small organizations.”

Using their trusted connections, the collective of expat Ukrainians and Russians are trying to fill local gaps in humanitarian aid that are not covered by broader efforts. The group includes researchers working at UC Santa Barbara, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Purdue, Vanderbilt, Cornell, Princeton, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Syracuse, Yale, Boston University, MIT and Caltech. They are collaborating with the larger humanitarian organization Nova Ukraine to establish and maintain non-profit status.

Scholars for Ukraine is focused specifically on helping Ukrainians endure the horrors of war by contributing to four local organizations. Station Kharkiv delivers food and medication to residents in Kharkiv’s bomb shelters, while United for Ukraine works to get supplies to healthcare providers in their effort to maintain the health and well-being of people affected by the war. Similarly, Dnipro Fund is raising funds to help local Dnipro healthcare providers treat those wounded in the conflict. New Level, a Rotary Club Branch in Kharkiv, distributes tons of humanitarian aid while funneling the skills of its volunteers toward the needs of the people. All the organizations provide assistance to refugees and displaced individuals.

As of early July, the United Nations reported that at least 12 million Ukrainians have fled their homes, with 5 million fleeing to other countries and 7 million displaced within the country. Romanova’s mother Olga was one of the lucky ones, coming to live in Santa Barbara with her daughter. Still, it wasn’t easy to get her to leave.

“I had to really convince her that she had to leave immediately,” Romanova said, “that she needed to leave everything behind, her entire life.” Others are not so fortunate, or willing to leave. For many people in older generations, their entire world has been their home and their city. Meanwhile, the attacks continue to erode daily life and threaten to cut off communications, especially in smaller towns and

more remote villages.

“My uncle lived in one such small village just next to Kharkiv,” Romanova said. “When the Russian troops arrived near his village, we couldn’t reach him for months because they destroyed all the antennas and there was no connection.” They were on the verge of presuming him dead until they found someone courageous enough to go to the village, which had become part of the Ukrainian front line, and bring her uncle back with them.

With the invasion of Ukraine now entering its sixth month, the humanitarian crisis continues to build; it was the focus of Ukrainian first lady Olena Zelenska’s recent visit to the White House. For her part, Romanova continues to monitor the situation and to remind people that conditions in Ukraine are still critical, while securing aid for relief efforts on the ground. She’s grateful to have her mother, her dog Lada, her colleagues and a way of helping her battered homeland.

“It helps when you can make your little contribution and when you feel that you are involved,” she said. “Sometimes I feel that I don’t do enough … so I tell myself that I’m doing my best, and it really helps when you at least do something, you know?”

About UC Santa Barbara

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