All CCS and Cross-sectoral

Mobile networks are a lifeline for the co-working community of Ukraine

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Vika Zhurbas's story of determination shows that it's possible to maintain creative work through the cultural networks across Europe despite the displacement

Feb. 24, 2022, started like any other day for Vika Zhurbas, an events organizer, and the founder and president of the Ukrainian Coworking Association. But by nightfall, Russia had launched another strike against Ukraine. Vika had resisted calls to leave the country for safety, but this time it was different.

“My husband tried to persuade me several times but I thought we should stay. I even ‘sabotaged’ any option to leave. I wanted to stay home” Vika said in a Zoom interview with the C.U.

And how could she not? Back in 2020, her initiative to give the Kyiv IT Cluster a new legal entity, and to start a coworking association, was met with enthusiasm. Thanks to her inspiration, the invisible network of the tens of thousands of IT professionals and academics had been energized anew. For a couple of years, the network was booming and Vika had successfully maintained the role of the manager, the events organizer, and the mother of three through the pandemic.

On February 25, 2022, as air raid sirens wailed, she made the difficult decision to flee with her family to safety. She took her laptop, her phone -her office from Covid, and a steadfast dedication to her work supporting Ukraine's tech and creative communities. Vika and her husband grabbed their three kids and their car and drove west.

“We traveled for two days, stayed in the Carpathian mountains and when the borders opened we decided to go to Budapest”. Just weeks after Putin's tanks rolled across the Ukrainian border, Vika logged back online from Budapest to organize events for her European partners. Driven by a sense of purpose and normalcy, she steadily resumed her efforts to connect creative, academic, and tech innovators across borders.

"At first I didn't know what was going to happen but the infrastructure and networks were already in place and the Creative Hubs network was supportive," Vika said in a Zoom interview, crediting her rapid adaptation to her close-knit professional community. "My team, documents, social media channels - it was all there ready to go."

COVID, zoom meetings, and war

Being a mother and a manager through the COVID-19 pandemic, Vika had already learned how to be efficient from a distance, through networking online.

"A job for me was something fundamental, it gave me stability emotionally and financially. It was always online and so it is the one that hasn't changed. I was used to working remotely from home, and not seeing the team. So now I'm doing the same thing".

The move from Budapest to Lisbon in Portugal where she currently lives and her children attend school didn't change much regarding her work for a second time! But it was not easy either. "It's like COVID. You remember people were dying away. And then they started dying near us. So it's starting and it's getting closer and closer. It's impossible not to be demoralized. No matter what news you read and what movies you watch. You live in this".

Being an expert in community building, Vika said she hated mobile groups on WhatsApp and Viber. But these communities of professionals, women support groups, and neighbors that took over community gatherings proved to be invaluable.

Whereas online meetings during COVID were seen as a necessary compromise in an otherwise deficient setting, now they changed a lot for the people back home in an essential manner.

They keep the bond by supporting members and each other, a creative lifeline for those who are still behind. "I get to sleep normally and take my kids to school but my fellows back in Kyiv don't. They spend nights in shelters, sleeping anywhere, so our online meetings are like lifelines to them" says Vika.

Through online collaboration, a human web stretched across Europe to uplift Ukrainian creativity amidst the chaos. "It feels like I've expanded from the 'Ukrainian bubble' to a 'bigger bubble' across Europe," says Vika, who now runs her Ukrainian ventures from Portugal.

"Everything revolves around the war now and that is a state of being that I cannot familiarise with. But I found another role. In providing stability for them, being able to plan, strategize and be proactive. To keep a high spirit for them".

Another recognition for this contribution came on July 12, just a few days after we conducted this interview. The Kyiv IT cluster introduces Vika to its audience on Facebook: “Countless projects and initiatives initiated by Victoria have already brought significant results...Her boundless energy and tireless desire to create new opportunities for young talents resonates in the hearts of thousands of people who are under her influence”