



In Kyiv, The Front Is a Phone Call Away

By Izabella Tabarovsky

My conversation with a Ukrainian freelance reporter, Nikolai Vorobiev, at a park across the street from the imposing Cabinet of Ministers building in Kyiv, is interrupted by a call. Nikolai just spent three weeks with the Right Sector Volunteer Ukrainian Corps battalion, known by its Ukrainian acronym DUK, which is fighting against pro-Russian separatists in the East, and is sharing his experiences with me. “It’s a member of DUK’s reconnaissance group,” he says and picks up. “Hello my friend, how are you!” As I listen to Nikolai’s side of the conversation, it dawns on me that the caller is asking him to bring back night vision gear. “Friend, you know it’s expensive... You really need it? Ok, I’ll try to hit up a few businessmen...”

“Just like that?” I ask Nikolai, incredulous. Members of the legendary Dmitry Yarosh battalion call you to ask for night vision gear? I look at him, a kid barely in his 20s – a knot of nerves, rapid speech, his obvious tension exacerbated by the fact that he just ran out of cigarettes and now desperately needs to smoke.

This guy supplies critical equipment to the front?

Seeing the skepticism on my face, Nikolai jumps in to tell me that it’s normal. Anyone whose friends or family are at the front gets calls like this. The General Staff has proven incapable of supplying the fighters and is corrupt, he says. It’s all about working with the people you know and trust. He tells me that the business of supplying the army has been taken over by volunteers who keep close contact with fighters, collect what’s needed, and then deliver the supplies – from helmets to bullet-proof vests, camouflage clothing, night vision scopes, pick-up trucks, and even drones – directly to the front. Journalists especially get flooded by calls from fighters asking for help. They are seen as having connections and therefore particularly capable of helping.

Unconvinced by Nikolai’s story, I try it out on others. Drones? Night vision gear? Don’t volunteers just collect blankets, home-made pies, pickles, *salo*? As

soon as I bring up the question, I notice how the tone of the conversations shifts. Voices get lower. I get a clear sense that we've tapped into something that amounts both to a best-kept and best-known secret. Just about everyone I speak to in Kyiv has played a role in supporting Ukraine's defense effort.

Over a cup of coffee in Kyiv's vibrant Podil district, a mild-mannered scholar tells me how during a trip abroad, the local Ukrainian community handed him some cash and asked him to spend it on the needs of the fighters. He bought much-needed blood-clotting agents, packed his car full of them, added a gasoline-fueled space heater, and drove it all to the front. "We had to drive through some check points, but it went well. The main priority was to drive fast past *zelyonka*," he says, using the Russian-language army slang for trees and bushes along the road that snipers often use for cover. "I didn't tell my wife," he says, "I just told her I went on a business trip."

He adds that the Ukrainians abroad who gave him the money were Russian speakers, emphasizing what many in Ukraine point out today: that whatever divisions there exist, they are not about ethnicity or language; there are plenty of Russian-speaking Ukrainians who are as patriotic about Ukraine as Ukrainian-speaking ones.

Nikolai says that it takes some \$1,500 to outfit a soldier, and some people do just that: they "adopt" a fighter, outfitting him (or her) from head to toe – helmet, bullet-proof vest, camouflage clothing, night vision goggles. "What can you do when the uniform provided by the army burns right on the body?"¹ asks one of my interlocutors. Volunteers have built slat armor,² repaired medical emergency vehicles,³ and purchased guns.⁴

"Irina Bekeshkina, the noted Ukrainian sociologist, estimates that up to 35 percent of Ukrainians have given money to support the army."

Historically, volunteers have always played a role in supporting the front, but that role has typically been auxiliary. In any regular standing army, a soldier can expect to be fed, clothed, and armed by the army, as well as receive protective gear, and first-aid medicine. Volunteers normally mainly concern themselves with delivering the fighters a piece of home: heart-warming cards, children's drawings, favorite foods.

Irina Bekeshkina, the noted Ukrainian sociologist, estimates that up to 35 percent of Ukrainians have given money to support the army – a very high number, in her view.⁵ This number is likely to be even higher in parts of the country where the anti-Russian sentiment has been the strongest. In many ways, volunteers have taken over government functions, supplying, in some unofficial estimates, 70-80 percent of the needs of the Ukrainian fighters.⁶ Some channel the support through trusted volunteer organizations, while others simply band together with friends or do what they can individually.

I ask Georgiy Kasianov, a history professor from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, to give me his perspective on all of this. "What distinguishes this moment from all others," he says, "is that people are prepared to organize, quickly and decisively, for positive action. Maidan was negative action – a protest against something. This is different." In fact, when it comes to supporting the defense effort,

there are no easy distinctions based on language or ethnicity. Russian-speaking Ukrainians have supported the army and enlisted as volunteer fighters just as Ukrainian-speaking ones have.

Inspiring as this level of solidarity and commitment is, one can't help but wonder just how sustainable it is. For one thing, volunteer enthusiasm can ebb and flow. Volunteers at a Kyiv military hospital that I visited tell me that support fell in the wake of the September 5 cease-fire agreement, even though the fighting never really stopped. And as Ukraine focused on its recent parliamentary election, volunteers sent alarm bells through social media, reporting that soldiers, who continued their stand-off in the east, went without basics such as food and water.

There is hope that official military supply channels will improve with the appointment of the new government. A few months ago, President Poroshenko appointed as his special advisor Yuri Biryukov,⁷ who heads "Wings of the Phoenix,"⁸ one of Ukraine's largest volunteer organizations supporting the army. And a number of commanders have now joined the Rada fresh from the front and may help set up a better system. However, the problem of corruption within the military will not go away overnight. Neither will the shortage of financing. It is estimated that an army of Ukraine's size would normally require \$20 billion annually to be battle-ready, while the actual budget since independence has been a maximum of \$1.3 billion.⁹ No amount of volunteer help could make up for such a difference. In a recent brutally honest article, Biryukov outlined the problems facing the army as it enters the winter season.¹⁰

A few days after our initial conversation, Nikolai calls to tell me that there is an ambulance going to the DUK battalion in the next day or two. "The Poles donated it," he tells me and says that he's going with

them. "Want to come? They are going to the DUK camp near Dnipropetrovsk. It's far from the front though," he adds, almost apologetically. I tell him that I'm flying back to Washington the next day and reflect on my mixed feelings: there is both regret at a lost opportunity and relief that I don't actually have to decide whether or not to take the risk.

As I get ready to leave, I ask myself just how long the country will be able to maintain the spirit and enthusiasm that has fueled this effort. The country is broke, and life is getting harder by the day. If the conflict in the East continues to intensify and stretches into a distant future, as many expect it to, will the volunteer structures be able to go the distance?

Even more importantly, will the new faces that have entered the Rada be able to make the changes that would be necessary to reform the military and begin to shift the balance of support away from volunteers? The new Parliament has a strong overall reform mandate, but fulfilling it will not be easy. There is the cautionary story of the reformers who joined the current government earlier this year under the so-called Euromaidan quota but left a few months later: some because they lacked technical knowledge, others because they realized that they were powerless to change things from within the corrupt system they had entered.¹¹ There is no guarantee that a similar fate does not await the incoming group of reformers.

At the same time, if anything inspires real hope in today's Ukraine, it is this phenomenon of solidarity and people's willingness to give their all to support their country. One of my interlocutors, who is finishing his term in the current government, tells me that what needs to happen is for some of the volunteer structures that have emerged since Euromaidan to begin supplanting existing governmental





structures. “These people get sucked into the system, and the system corrupts them. They can’t fight against it,” he says. “But if we replace what exists with these new organizations and empower them, there’ll be change.”

[Some of the names are omitted to protect the privacy and security of the individuals involved. Opinions expressed in this piece are solely the author’s.]

Footnotes

- 1 «Минобороны заказало форму, которая горит и плавится – активисты», Корреспондент.нет, 12 сентября 2014 г. <http://tinyurl.com/padjsj8>
- 2 «Волонтеры за время АТО сделали 290 противокумулятивных экранов для бронетехники по чертежам украинского патриота из Славянска», Цензор.нет, 18 октября, 2014 г., <http://tinyurl.com/mdjhey4>
- 3 «Сестры Перемоги отремонтировали «скорую» Розовского полевого госпиталя и проложат собирать средства на запчасти для техники АТО», Цензор.нет, 18 октября, 2014 г. <http://tinyurl.com/k5zdgyh>
- 4 «Волонтеры группы «Вернись живым» собирают средства на амуницию и снаряжение для защитников Донецкого аэропорта», Цензор.нет, 15 октября, 2014 г. <http://tinyurl.com/lswgnnb>
- 5 «Скепсис и романтизм Украины», Дмитрий Волчек, Радио Свобода, 24 октября, 2014, <http://www.svoboda.mobi/a/26654490.html>
- 6 «Чиновники против добровольцев», Алла Котляр, 28 июля, 2014 г. <http://gazeta.zn.ua/socium/chinovniki-protiv-dobrovolcev-.html>
- 7 «Порошенко назначил волонтера Бирюкова своим советником», Сегодня.ua., 13 августа, 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/kbtwpzj>
- 8 <http://wings-phoenix.org.ua/node/8159>
- 9 “Army in Need: Volunteers Try to Get Supplies to Ukraine’s Forces,” by Charles Recknagel and Merhat Sharipzhan, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, June 6, 2014. <http://www.rferl.mobi/a/ukraine-army-equipment-donations/25413169.html>
- 10 «Юрий Бирюков: популярно про вещевое обеспечение украинской армии», Аргумент, 8 ноября, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kapr6ld>
- 11 “What Went Wrong with EuroMaidan Reformers,” by Olena Tregub, The Kyiv Post, October 16, 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/ptcuvgb>

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