

Blog: RIT Researcher Yuliia Kabanets

On 24th February, I woke up at 7 am from around 10 calls from my mother, friends and partner to find out that Russia is bombing all over my country. Jumping from bed, I ran to take duct tape to put it on the windows so that the glass would not shatter in to my apartment. Most people woke up 2 hours earlier - at 5 am - when the bombings started. I can now joke that I did not because I got used to sleeping during bombs in Donetsk almost 8 years ago.

My friends and I live close to each other, and so we decided to stay together. Th three of us came to my rented apartment, as it is closer to the bomb shelter. I decided that as I cannot fight with a weapon, I will use words as one. I have many friends from all over the world so from the first day, I started writing blog posts and giving comments to media from abroad because it is easy for me to speak English and translate things.

As it was clear that Kyiv was the main goal for Russian occupants, we decided that it was better to leave our home for some time. My friend's parents live in Terponil oblast in Western Ukraine and we decided to go there the next day. To be honest, I did not want to leave and it felt like a betrayal. I do not even know why. The feeling is irrational because in Kyiv I would have to sit in a bomb shelter or in a metro station (they are used as bomb shelters) almost all the time. I would not be able to write or do volunteer work that I can do from here so I think it was the best decision. As Ukrainians now say – do what you can do best, you are most needed there.

That night, 24-25th February, we decided to sleep in the apartment and did not go to the bomb shelter. One of us always stayed awake in order to wake the others up if the air raid sirens would start. I managed to sleep for about two hours. Many people were staying in the metro stations or other bomb shelters overnight. Over the following days, many more people had to spend nights there. The officials also introduced curfew hours for the whole weekend, so people were not allowed to leave their homes or shelters for about two days.

That first day, the curfew in Kyiv was from 10 pm until 7 am. We decided to leave as soon as possible and try to reach the railway station. As soon as I brushed my teeth, the sirens were on, so we took our backpacks with documents and a couple of T-shirts, underwear and socks – and ran to shelter nearby. After waiting for about an hour, we left to go to the metro station. There was an air raid alarm again, so we stayed at the station for a couple of hours.

Finally, we managed to get inside the railway station and saw absolute chaos. Many, many people were trying to get on any train that would go to Western Ukraine. The trains were accepting everyone, not looking at the tickets, and the workers were filling the trains with as many people as possible. We managed to get on the train that was going to Rivne (North-West Ukraine). We did not have any tickets but were lucky to sit – many people were on their feet for the whole 8-hour journey.

In Rivne, we stayed at my friend's relatives' house. From the late evening until morning, we had to go to shelter three times. In those first two days, I slept for a couple of hours and ate only one normal meal – I forced myself to do that because generally cannot eat from stress.

The next day, 26th February, we headed to Ternopil oblast in my friend's father's car. I felt dizzy from being tired. After we arrived, I started feeling survivor's guilt because so many people stayed in Kyiv under shelling and bombs, my mother stays in Pokrovsk, Donetsk oblast, which is next to the occupied territories. Some of my relatives have also stayed in occupied Donetsk, where Russian occupants closed the borders for men a few days before the full-scale Russian invasion all over Ukraine. Russia has also "evacuated" many people from the occupied territories before they started the invasion. That was forced dislocation, I would say deportation, and this is a war crime. Furthermore, the so-called republics force men to go fight with Ukraine on the Russian side. People were taken literally from the street and taken to unknown places. A group of such soldiers was already captured in Ukraine, they all were from the occupied territories, many were teachers and said they went because they were afraid to lose their jobs.

I went to my current location because I knew I am welcome to live here as long as I need to. It is relatively calm, although we go to the bomb shelter (which is a cellar under the building) a few times a day. We joined the local community and helped to make Molotov cocktails and camouflage nets for the territorial defense. I am also writing and translating texts, commenting for the media and interviewing people for a project with war stories from Ukraine. Sometimes I feel extremely overwhelmed by all the information that goes through me every single minute. Then I realise that I am very lucky to I sit in a warm house, am able to sleep in bed under the blanket, can have a hot shower when I want and a warm meal. This became a privilege that many do not have.

I was never as proud to be a Ukrainian as I am during these days. People here are absolutely incredible. I am so grateful and proud of our army that I cannot even begin to word it. Despite some international analytics on how Russia would occupy Ukraine, Kyiv or anything else in a few days, this did not happen. We knew it would not happen because we have something to fight for here – our land, our people and our democracy and freedom.

There are lines and lines of those who sign up for the army and territorial defense. In many places, people are getting refused, as there are too many people at this point. Those who cannot fight, find their place in an info battle with Russia trying to spread the truth over Putin's propaganda. As of now, almost 9,000 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine. Russia have recognised only 500 deaths, they hide the numbers. Ukraine even launched a website to help Russian families find their relatives killed in combat or captured.

People are also volunteering – coordinating purchases from abroad, buying products, delivering them, cooking for the soldiers and territorial defense, making Molotov cocktails, camouflage nets, knitting socks, reporting Russian accounts on social media, collecting war stories and much more.

Disarmed civilians come to the occupants without any weapons. The whole villages go on the roads to stop the tanks – and succeed! In temporarily occupied towns (those that were occupied during this last week), people come and sing the national anthem in front of the tanks. I hope the Western news show it all. I hope everyone sees the courage of our people, while the governments of the Western countries are afraid of Russia. Here, in Ukraine, we are not afraid anymore. We have no choice.