

EPALE Podcast

The war in Ukraine and adult education.

A voice from Kyiv

Transcript



Gina Ebner

Hello everyone, welcome to our very special podcast today. My name is Gina Ebner and I am the Secretary-General of the European Association for the Education of Adults, EAEA. And we are very happy to welcome our colleague and board member of the EAEA, Oleg Smirnov, who is currently in Kyiv. This podcast is about the current situation in Kyiv and adult education and the impact on adult education. Oleg, will you introduce yourself and your organisation?

Oleg Smirnov

Hello Gina! I am working currently as the country director of the representative office of DVV International but I also represent our Ukrainian Adult Education Association and one of its members - the Integration and Development Centre for Information and Research.

Gina Ebner

OK, thank you. Obviously, you are doing a lot of good work under normal circumstances, but of course, we all know that currently there are no normal circumstances, so maybe you can tell us what the situation is in Kyiv now? I should say today - the day of taping of this podcast - is the 12th of April. So what is the situation at the moment?

Oleg Smirnov

Frankly speaking, if you come to the city now, uh, you will see a lot of people on the streets, a lot of cars. Although of course there are military people in this city, we are lucky that we do not hear explosions, though we hear air raid sirens from time to time, but just maybe 2/3 times per day now instead of ten, like during the beginning of March. So it is good to see that people started to come back to Kyiv. It is rather a big city with more than 3,000,000 and we heard that half of the population moved to other regions of Ukraine or to other countries. But now during the last maybe two weeks, we see how the city started to leave. I can see its ordinary life, but it is moving.

A lot of people, a lot of shops are opening, even theatres and museums have now started to open and we were like there together with my family members. It was a present from one of our daughters, to be the visitors at the first theatre performance, since the start of the war, which took place last Saturday in the theatre. It was rather short. Just 45 minutes with some preliminary remarks, that in case we hear air raid sirens, we all together all the people in the theatre together with the artists, we have to move to the bomb shelter, but fortunately, it was not interrupted. Yeah, it was great.

Gina Ebner

I can imagine and I have to say I hugely admire the resilience of the people in Ukraine and the willingness to lead lives as normally as possible among the disaster that is going on.

Maybe I can add because Oleg mentioned that people still do cultural activities and so on, we will have an online discussion on EPAL on the 28th of April, on the role of culture (during a crisis). I think that is a very interesting part of showing resilience, of trying to, you know, show your own culture by emphasising art and culture.

Oleg Smirnov

I can add that it is not the only example because, of course, it was a shock during the first weeks and we tried, together in the family, we decided to stay in Kyiv and to find ways to help other people. People that were and are still staying in Kyiv need help because everything was closed. So people needed food and medicines etc. That was more or less the situation and I started doing some volunteering work, as the manager of the adult education institution. With my wife, we started going on short walks around the city and fortunately, we met one woman, a tourist guide, and we decided together with her, to start small tours around the city, just what she knows about architecture. So we started with three people and then we met other people on the streets and people joined us and we had seven excursions during the last three weeks. So people joined us. So it was rather good because it was not just knowing something new about the city, but it was just the communication with other people, how they survive, how they overcome these circumstances.

Gina Ebner

That is absolutely fascinating and a brilliant initiative and that all already brings us to adult education, because obviously what you did is, you know, combining a civic approach and with people you met and other people joining, it has an adult learning aspect to it as well, and so very much a non-formal/informal approach. What is the situation of adult education at the moment? Is anything happening or not? How can you do your work at the moment? Can you do your work at the moment?

Oleg Smirnov

Again, it was a rather big shock at the very beginning. And so our main task, my task as a manager of the adult education institution was to care about my staff, the staff of our office as a non-governmental organisation. So we just communicated with people: how could people behave themselves, whether they decided to go somewhere or to stay in Kyiv. And many people have families, children or seniors, so a lot of people decided to move. But from the very beginning, I should say that, as our Integration and Development Centre worked with teachers, we had a lot of people teach us psychology. It was decided from the very beginning that these people could help others to overcome this first psychological shock. So it was just an initiative of some adult educators to organise a personal consultation in psychological support and then there were several groups organised specially for those people who moved from eastern parts, or from Kyiv or from the small towns around Kyiv to western parts of Ukraine. It was possible to organise online and there were some rather short sessions in art therapy, or just discussions on how people, how adults can or should communicate in this situation with their children. How to describe, to talk with children about the war, about this situation, or what to do in bomb shelters. Where people had to stay for an hour or for two hours. I know some families who were afraid to return to their apartments, so they stayed for several days in bomb shelters. So it was a kind of help for them on how to behave, with their families and children, and how to overcome this first shock.

Then of course we tried to sustain and maintain our communication with our partners and we have partners in almost all the regions of Ukraine. Unfortunately, there are some partner organisations which are now situated on the temporary, I hope, occupied territories in the southern part of Ukraine, like in Melitopol or very close to the wall line in Mykolaiv. So for them, of course, it is difficult, if not impossible to do something. Though it is good that the connection is not interrupted, they still have phone lines working, the Internet is working. So we continue our communication. Other partners also started mainly with psychological courses, but also with the courses on first

aid, premedical, so before, professional doctors come - such short courses on what people should do, how to help other people. So these were the first maybe two directions of activities.

Well, one more. Our partner in Nikopol had sewing machines, as they usually provided courses on tailoring and sewing. They also decided to stay in Nikopol, although their city is very close to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station, which was occupied. Very close. I think they were very courageous because they stayed there. They organised more groups of these tailoring and sewing courses. And they started to sew medical bags, balaclavas and underwear for these groups of territorial protection and territorial defence.

Gina Ebner

That all sounds incredibly creative and helpful. I am very glad to hear that because it really shows the strength of civil society and, as I said earlier, the resilience.

On a completely different level, things still moved forward for adult education. We were talking a couple of weeks ago and you told me about a law in adult education - which was still adopted in the first week of the war. Could you say a few words about that?

Oleg Smirnov

It was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers and submitted to the Parliamentary Committee and there are now two drafts of the law, which are registered by the Parliamentary Committee. This one, submitted by the Cabinet of Ministers, for which we were involved in the discussions during the last almost four years: it was a very long process and difficult process. This draft fails to tackle, in our opinion as people working in adult education, a lot of issues on management structures and on how adult education should be managed on the national level. It lacks the funds and the budgeting for adult education. But together with the other partners of the Ukrainian Adult Education Association, we tried to follow the developments and then to submit another draft for this law. It was a peculiar situation as the alternative draft should be submitted and registered by the Parliamentary Committee within two weeks after the submission and registration of the first one.

The first one was registered on the 14th of February, so we had only two weeks for this submission. Fortunately, we were successful because we submitted it just within a week. Then, the war started on the 23rd. So in communication with parliamentarians, it is great that they managed to register this alternative draft on the 28th of February, just within this two-weeks period. It was the 5th day of the war on the territory of Ukraine and the troops were very close to Kyiv at that time. It is great that our Parliament continued its activities. We communicated with people, deputies and they managed to do it. We hope, as it was mentioned in our preliminary discussions, that we will bring this alternative draft forward, and that we will have support among parliamentarians, so that there should be funds delivered for adult education in Ukraine. We really hope that in the near future, there will be a possibility for these people, deputies and the Education Committee, to involve other deputies in discussions, and maybe to approve it in the next month.

Gina Ebner

Thank you. I mean, I have to say, this is one of the most inspiring examples of government work to still give a priority to adult education. And, well, I made a mistake earlier. The law was obviously not yet adopted, but the draft was registered. This is, I think, also a very good sign for the future of adult education in Ukraine because it is part of what adult education should do and what the situation is. So thank you for that explanation.

I wanted to move to a different topic - and we have been in contact about that - we, the EAEA Board and other colleagues in the adult education community and you, we were sending you information about the situation in other countries and, as you mentioned earlier when you talked about your colleagues who are close to the war zone, it is important to have a connection. We had discussions about the Western reaction to the situation in Ukraine and to tell you about the solidarity, the initiatives, and I can say adult education has been quite involved by volunteering, opening their rooms, their buildings, organising courses for refugees and so on. There has been an enormous wave of solidarity with Ukraine across Europe, but of course, you need to know that! So what are your expectations for help and support? Maybe first from the adult education community: what can we do in order to support you?

Oleg Smirnov

It is a good question and, really, we felt this support from the first day. As adult educators, we were connected with many other organisations around the world. Being part of the team of the Integration and Development Centre, the organisation which will celebrate its 25th anniversary this year, we were involved mainly in peace and intercultural education for many years in Crimea, Ukraine. We had a lot of connections with other organisations around the world, working in peace education, being a member of several networks of such organisations. So we felt this support, we felt the professional support. However, it is difficult to talk about peace education now. For me, it is a really strange situation, when we made so many efforts during many years, decades, in citizenship education, peace education or tolerance education in our country and at our borders, in neighbouring countries.

Now, that is another result of educational programmes: we were lucky to hear a lot of support from other countries during the first days and weeks, and we had a lot of communications. It was at first mainly psychological support for our teachers and educators. We felt that we have to stay here and do something. Of course, it was good to have these informational channels for supplying information. People in other countries, reacted very quickly: they approached governments, they approached municipalities, they organised volunteering groups, helped refugees etc. Now, just after almost two months, one and a half-month there is some other understanding or maybe shift in this first reaction and some discussions on how this help should be organised. This is also interesting, on Friday we had an online discussion. It was a more than two-hour discussion: where we invited our partners from different regions of Ukraine and there were representatives of German Volkshochschulen (folk high schools) from different regions of Germany. It was a kind of support, for us, just to see familiar faces, because many of our partners they were on several study tours to Germany. It was good to feel this support, but it was an interesting discussion because we talked about what kind of challenges our German colleagues face now working with Ukrainian refugees, which are not 'usual' refugees, to whom they are used to during the last years because they feel that these are well-educated people. They feel very safe and sure in the digital world. They are very interested in what is going on in Ukraine and they want to return. They are mainly women with children or with seniors, and they are going to return to Ukraine. So the question was whether we should, in Germany, speak about integration and provide our ordinary integration courses, or just a kind of communication, some hospitality for people, provide places for communication where people could break stereotypes about refugees. It was rather a sincere talk about what kind of stereotypes Germans had about Ukrainians and what kind of work should be provided. There were several initiatives voiced on how to support each other, not only among our

partners but also how our network can support German partners in their work and in the communication with refugees in German cities.

There are rather good initiatives. We are lucky to have such examples like sister cities, in Ukraine and Germany. For example, Sumy, which is very close to the Russian border, just 37 kilometres, which was one of the first cities captured and blocked by Russian troops on their way to Kyiv. This is a sister city of a small city, Celle, in Germany. Some people from Sumy moved to Celle and the colleagues in Celle now say they have in their small city more than 100 Ukrainians, for a local population of around 50,000. So they had more than 1000 newcomers coming over several weeks.

There has been constant communication between adult education centres in Sumy and Folkshochschule (folk high school) Celle on how to organise the life of Ukrainians staying in Celle, so this is rather a good example which can be explored later.

Gina Ebner

As I said, it is absolutely fascinating how adult education can come in, and not only work in a war situation, but also, in a way, in fostering connections with other colleagues abroad. Another thing I was thinking about is that we can learn an enormous amount from the people of Ukraine. The resilience we see is enormous. The civil society, the engagement, the artistic engagement... We do see regular performances and also actions against the war against the Putin regime, forms of artistic expression, and so on. Hopefully, we will have the opportunity to learn from that. I will now try to conclude. You have mentioned there are a lot of other things that we can still consider. I already mentioned that on the 28th there will be an online discussion about art and culture in a situation of war. We very much look forward to that. We will maybe consider looking also at other examples.

Oleg, thank you so much. It has been absolutely fascinating. Of course, we all hope from the bottom of our hearts that the situation gets better, and that you will return to a situation of peace and independence. But, as you have said, peace education and conflict resolution do not work in a situation like that, because it is not you that needs to do that, but the other side - and that is not to be expected. So, thank you so much and I hope you will join us soon for more information. Oleg continues to join the EAEA board for discussions and feedback via email: we are very happy that you remain in touch with us, and we hope that we will be able to see each other, maybe also in Kyiv, in the future. Thank you and I hope to talk to you soon.

Oleg Smirnov

Thank you, Gina. We really hope to host our next meetings in Ukraine. We are planning a big event in Lviv in autumn this year. We still hope that the war will be finished by then, and there will be possibilities for people to come, maybe not in Kyiv, but at least to Ukraine for these future meetings. Thank you for your support and solidarity. I hope that, together with the Ukrainian army, we adult educators win, and that we will continue our cooperation, communication and mutual support. Thank you.

Gina Ebner

Thank you very much. Thank you for joining our podcast and let us all hope that the situation improves.