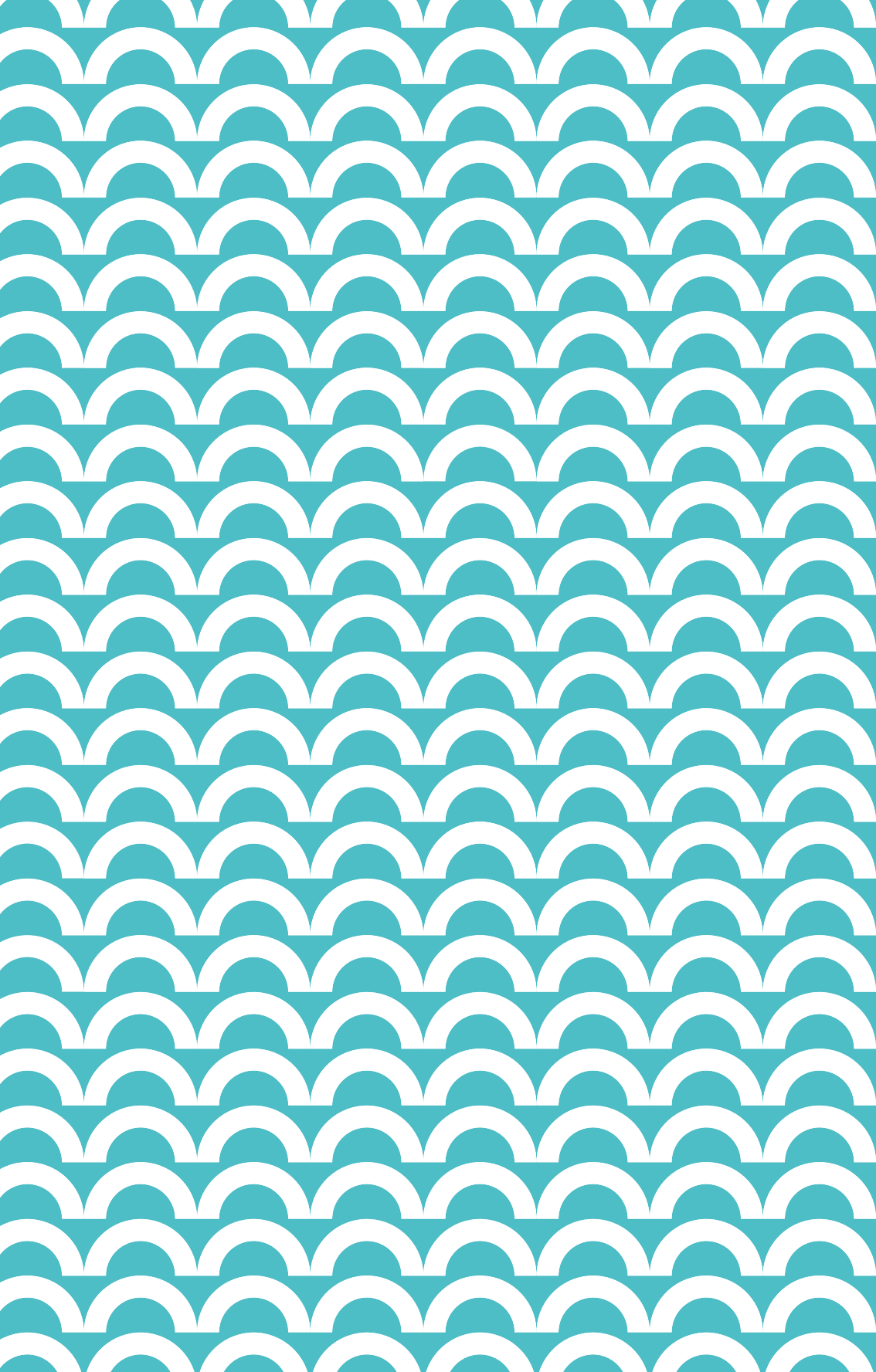


Stories of people  
who refuse  
to surrender  
to despair

# FRIDAY LETTER





# FOREWORD

Four years have passed since this war began, and in that time, Ukraine has not only battled for its independence and survival but has also grown and reshaped itself in remarkable ways.

We are carrying twice the weight in impossible circumstances. Yet as 2022 slips further into the past, the early days of this journey grow hazier, making it all the more vital to capture these memories before they vanish.

This idea sparked a partnership between The Ukrainians Media and East Europe Foundation (EEF): how do we honor the journey the Foundation's team has already taken? How do we share the stories of those who found the courage to press on, again and again?

We conducted 14 interviews with the Foundation's team, exploring their memories, experiences, and sources of strength. In every conversation, the "Friday letter" surfaced as a common thread.

The Friday letter is a tradition that originated in the Foundation's corporate culture during the pandemic. Every Friday, the organization's president, Victor Liakh, sends a letter to the team, discussing the week's key events, achievements, and plans, and, most importantly, thanking them all and reminding them of the value of each and every one.

Everyone we spoke with at the Foundation described these letters as a lifeline to normalcy. They offer a quiet hope that, no matter what unfolds, a letter will arrive at week's end.

So let this serve as another Friday letter, crafted together by the teams at East Europe Foundation and The Ukrainians Media.

We invite you to discover the stories of people who refuse to let hope slip away. These are tales of change sparked in the heart of a nation at war, and of lives uplifted by the Foundation's unwavering support.

As stated in the letter dated March 4, 2022: "In difficult times, it is important to stand together, communicate, and support one another." May this letter bring you comfort and hope as well.

Olha Perekhrest,  
The Ukrainians Media

# WHAT THE FOUNDATION VALUES MOST ABOUT

FREEDOM TO ACT • TEAM SUPPORT  
MAKING COMMUNITIES BETTER •  
EVERYONE INSPIRES • OPPORTUNITY  
A FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT • A SENSE  
TRUST • TEAMWORK • RESULTS •  
DEVELOPMENT • OPPORTUNITY TO  
HUMANITY • GOVERNMENT PARTNER  
WE CAN WORK FROM ANYWHERE  
DO OUR BEST BECAUSE WE EARN  
IMPACT • A TEAM WITH BIG AMBITIONS  
HELP THE COUNTRY • HELP THAT  
ONGOING GUIDANCE AND COMPLIMENT  
COMMUNITIES • ATMOSPHERE •  
SENSE OF BELONGING • COFFEE  
CREATIVITY • COMMUNITY • SHARE  
TO TURN CHALLENGES INTO ACHIEVEMENT  
CARING • CLARITY • MUTUAL RESPECT  
RESULTS • STABILITY • WHAT I VALUE  
ABLE TO HELP PEOPLE

# ON TEAM THEIR WORK

PORT • SHARED VALUES •  
A FANTASTIC TEAM WHERE  
INITIATIVES FOR GROWTH •  
SENSE OF SOCIAL IMPACT •  
• REAL CHANGE • CONTINUOUS  
TO LEARN NEW THINGS •  
OWNERS WHO CARE • FLEXIBILITY •  
E IN THE WORLD AND WILL  
ON TRUST • VALUE-ADDED AND  
TIONS • IDEAS THAT TRULY  
IT ISN'T JUST FOR SHOW •  
COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR  
DEEPENING EXPERTISE •  
BREAKS TOGETHER •  
RED VALUES • ABILITY  
ACCOMPLISHMENTS • SCALE •  
RESPECT • PHENOMENAL  
VALUE MOST IS BEING

# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh

**Sent:** May 2022

**To:** EEF-ALL

**Subject:** Friday Letter: News from these challenging times, but we're all doing a great job!

Hello, friends!

As the week wraps up, Ukraine's Eurovision victory lifts our spirits, and Vyshyvanka Day brings us together in a virtual tapestry of team photos. No matter where we are, our shared commitment to supporting Ukraine and those in need keeps us united.

As always, our days were filled with partner meetings, emails, and challenging negotiations. Yet amid all these tasks, space was made for news that strengthens our faith in people and gives us the will to keep moving forward.

We've released an interim report on the Shelter Project covering results from February 24 through May 2022. I look at our achievements, and I'm incredibly proud of you! During this time, we helped set up 30 shelters for IDPs, delivered 217 tons of humanitarian aid to 15 regions, and supported 11 local civil society organizations.

At the Lviv train station, a dedicated team of 600 psychologists, doctors, and volunteers offers daily comfort and care to those fleeing combat zones. Together, we've reached 65,000 people with our support.

My gratitude extends to every member of our team. Truly, each and every one of you at the Foundation has played a vital role.

Sofiia Sakalosh, Serhii Hunko, Oksana Kyrychuk, Nataliia Piskokha, Ivan Kopychenko, Dariia Radzikovska, Olha Riabukha, Katia Chernohorenko — every single person who received, coordinated, and distributed humanitarian aid.

This also includes Olga Moloko, Tetyana Mazur, Halyna Rybalko, Lesia Shovkova, Maryna Gopko, Maryna Pypko, Diana Standratiuk, and Olesia Savka — those who supported our work with our partner organizations on the ground.

Financial and administrative team members who ensured the accounting and reporting of donations, the issuance of grants, and their administration: Serhii Solovko, Olga Rachynska, Maryna Pypko, Yuliya Hrytsenko, Olena Svyrydovska.

Thank you to the communications team for preparing the informational materials and the report: Viktoriia Gladchenko, Olha Milianovych, and Katia Chubuk. The report turned out great — be sure to read it if you haven't yet.

Exciting changes are ahead for the Shelter Project as we welcome more institutional donors, ensuring we can keep supporting Ukraine and its people.

That's all for now. Thank you once again for your dedication. With each Friday, we move closer to peace and victory.

Take care!

Sincerely,  
Victor





# SHELTER. WILD, ORDERLY, LIFE-SAVING

Text: Iuliia Surkova

Illustrations: Maryna Kizilova

Fight, flight, freeze — three classic stress responses identified by psychologists worldwide.

“But during the war, Ukrainians came up with a fourth one,” said Olga. “It’s ‘help!’”

Olga Moloko has lived this reaction firsthand. For her and her colleagues, ‘help’ was not just a word but a lifeline during the endless months of war. She remembers February 24, 2022, now sitting beneath a yellow-and-blue painting that echoed the Ukrainian flag, sunlight pouring into a bright Kyiv office. Beyond the windows of the old city center, life surged on as the workday began.

Today, Olga heads the Humanitarian Aid and Recovery Cluster at East Europe Foundation. A cluster that grew out of emergency rescue and aid programs for Ukrainians launched in the first days of the invasion.

“Tens of thousands of people were fleeing the front lines,” said Olga. “Rockets were flying across every region of the country. No one knew how long this would last.”

“In the first days of the war, thousands of people spent days on the road,” said Tetyana Mazur, Head of Project Management Office (PMO) at East Europe Foundation. “We wanted to do everything we could to help. To give people a little comfort: a place where they could sleep on clean sheets, wash clothes, rest, and breathe a sigh of relief. We grabbed onto everything we could. That’s how it all began.”

Back then, the Foundation’s team had no idea that their frantic efforts to create makeshift shelters would blossom into a sweeping humanitarian mission that would reach almost every corner of the country. There was no room for hesitation — only action.

“Everyone was under stress back then,” said Tetyana. “No one was thinking in terms of grand strategies; it was a state of emergency. We transported trucks of humanitarian aid, provided medicines, food, and psychological support. We coordinated, raised funds, and distributed aid.”

Four years into the war, the need for humanitarian aid remains as urgent as ever. But now, the Foundation’s team delivers it with hard-earned expertise, swift precision, and unceasing empathy.

## RAPID RESPONSE

Olga remembers the beginning of 2022 in vivid detail — and not just because of the invasion. She wasn’t working at the time, having taken maternity leave, but she would occasionally see alarming messages in her work chat groups. Everyone around her was talking about what no one wanted to believe: a major war was coming to Ukraine.

“When missiles started flying toward Kyiv, my oldest child was three and a half

years old, and my youngest wasn't even six months old," says Olia. "We left for Lutsk, where my parents were sheltering two other families. So, there were eleven of us in one house. You could say we had our own shelter."

Olia looks back on that time with both anxiety and warmth. She watched as Lutsk locals reached out to the displaced, whether on the street or in hair salons, offering shelter or warm clothing. Their kindness moved her to action, prompting her to return to what she did best. Between caring for her children, Olia threw herself back into the Foundation's work: searching for funds, donors, and partners. The organization's roots in helping displaced people stretched back to the early days of the war in eastern Ukraine, when their first contacts with volunteer organizations were established.

"Of course, as early as 2014–2015, we already had programs to support displaced persons and provide psychological assistance," said Olga. "But those were more like isolated initiatives rather than large-scale humanitarian programs. We also supplied medical equipment to hospitals treating military personnel and veterans."

A sudden smile lights up Olia's face as she remembers the hospital staff who still send her holiday greetings from places where the Foundation delivered equipment. Their messages remind her that they are not forgotten, and that the equipment continues to serve its purpose.

The team's experience during the war in the east offered a glimpse of the challenges ahead. Yet nothing could have prepared them for the overwhelming reality of a full-scale invasion.

"Most of our areas of focus required changes due to the full-scale war. For example, on the community engagement platform, reporting air raid alerts became a priority, rather than collecting electronic petitions," said Olga. "We started working in a sort of emergency mode. We raised funds wherever we could. We reached out to everyone — to our regular partners and to organizations we had crossed paths with in the past. We launched a crowdfunding campaign, which was unusual for us. We simply seized every opportunity."





Tetyana shares that the Foundation once thrived on carefully planned funding programs, complete with strict timelines, clear goals, and detailed reports. After February 24, everything changed. They had to become flexible, adapting to chaos and uncertainty. Amid the uncertainty, this new, “wartime” style of work felt a bit chaotic for everyone. Thus, the program for transit shelters for refugees, called “Shelter,” acquired an unofficial nickname “Wild” (because it emerged spontaneously, almost overnight, because at that time there was still a lack of understanding of how to work with humanitarian projects, and because rules had to be implemented and tested on the fly).

“‘Wild Shelter’ is an internal name. It started out as a half-joke, but it perfectly captured the state we were all in at the time,” explains Tetyana Mazur.

Tetyana was there from the very beginning of the Shelter Project. She confides that as she helped Ukrainians who had lost everything, the project ended up saving her, too.

“Being able to work, to be useful, to feel that we’re actually making a difference — that gave me the strength to get through the first days of the war. And it became the motivation to stay in the country, not to leave, to be close to my family,” said Tetyana. “It was the right decision. I got a new program and a strong team, and they were very supportive. So, of course, the project had an impact on all of us and on the Foundation as a whole.”

Many people from the Foundation joined the humanitarian efforts. Partner organizations that had previously collaborated with the team also responded to the call: “Who can help, and in what way?”

Friends of the Foundation, both long-time collaborators and new supporters, responded immediately, reflecting the organization’s strong reputation at the time. In those first chaotic days of war, the Foundation’s rapid organization and outreach became a vital lifeline for partners, donors, and grantees.

They joined in purchasing kettles, slow cookers, and washing machines; organized the delivery of medicines, food, and clothing; and set up logistics — doing countless vital tasks simultaneously.

**“Wild Shelter”  
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that moment**

“The Shelter Project began when we started awarding grants to partner organizations that were helping people who had been on the road for three to five days,” said Tetyana. “So that a person fleeing the war could stop, sleep in a clean bed, eat a hot meal, and feel safe.”

Tetyana recalls that shelters sometimes sprang up in the most unlikely places. One memory stands out: a medieval church in Shumsk, Ternopil region, where, despite the war, a sense of peace lingered.

## EVERY APPLICATION IS A CRY FOR HELP

In the summer of 2022, only months after the Russian full-scale invasion to Ukraine began, East Europe Foundation established partnerships with leading international donors. With support from France and Denmark, and a new partnership with the UN by June, the Foundation unlocked doors to broader aid and faced a wave of new challenges.

The Foundation began searching for organizations across Ukraine to support communities affected by the war. 350 applications were submitted for a competition in which only 20 winners could be selected.

“These were mostly de-occupied communities or those that had suffered greatly during the first months of the war,” said Olia. “Every application simply screamed of some urgent need. It was an extremely difficult decision.”

During the competition, she and her colleagues conducted dozens of interviews with the finalist organizations. Each day, they had five or six video calls, each one unveiling raw, unfiltered stories of human resilience.

“We could see through the screen just how much these communities’ lives had been turned upside down and how desperately they wanted to help their people,” says Olia. “I remember an organization from the Kharkiv region: their village head had been killed, some people remained under occupation, while others managed to leave. And a woman from a local organization, who had previously worked on parks

and playgrounds, began to look after the community residents. She submitted an application, took care of the displaced people, and eventually, their community received funding for humanitarian aid.”

## NEARLY 100 %

By autumn 2022, as the shock of war faded into daily reality, the Foundation moved from urgent action to a more thoughtful, structured approach in humanitarian work. What began as a simple transit shelter program, Shelter soon blossomed into a cornerstone of our mission.

Most of the Foundation’s staff involved in the initiative were able to return to Kyiv that fall. With renewed energy, the initiative took off. But as we scaled up, we also had to tackle very minor, yet no less important, issues. Like the story with the plastic containers, Olia recalls:

“This might sound strange, but we had a very long back-and-forth with a partner regarding the standard set of non-food items we were distributing in frontline communities. The kits included pots, bedding, household goods... We asked them to add food containers. Because in the frontline communities of the Kharkiv region, there were (and still are) many abandoned homes, and mice had proliferated, eating everything they could. People received food kits, but had nowhere to store them. So, the local organization that received a grant from us under the program requested to supply such containers. We explained to the donor that this was a real local need. And we managed to give people what they really needed.”

What seemed like a minor detail turned out to be deeply meaningful. It proved that even large organizations could truly hear the voices of those they serve. Soon, requests for shovels and farming tools followed, echoing the needs of frontline communities.

“The Russians took people’s shovels and pitchforks — everything that could be used to dig trenches. In short, they looted buildings, taking everything. People were left with a patch of land but without a single tool,” says Olia.

To deliver these simple yet essential items, such as shovels or containers, EEF often had to modify and streamline complex bureaucratic procedures, adapting the rules of the game. Shelter Project was no longer just a support system for partners. It became a catalyst for our own transformation, teaching us how to truly run humanitarian programs.

Tetyana agrees: while supporting hundreds of partners, the Foundation itself was transformed and strengthened. In helping others, Shelter also rescued the Foundation, giving the team purpose during those tense early months and proving to international partners that Ukrainian organizations could thrive even in wartime.

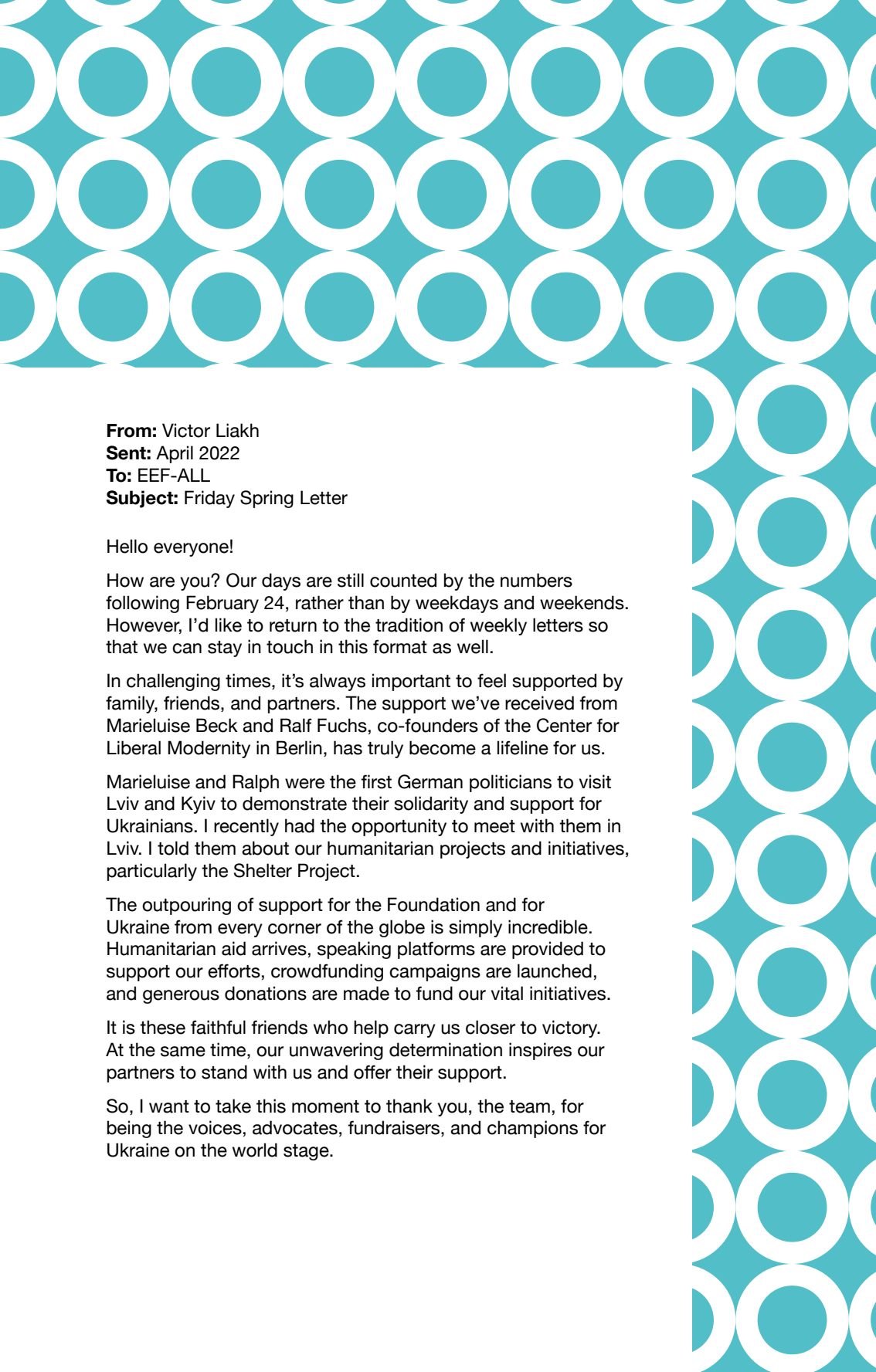
“Humanitarian programs helped us all stay engaged. During the first two months of the full-scale invasion, we worked non-stop just to stay afloat,” said Tetyana. “And by the third month, we were already tackling major programs. We were implementing 300+ grants simultaneously and achieved 96% completion! When we started, we thought that even 70% would be a great result. So, this exceeded all expectations.”

Now, everyone who worked in the Shelter Project sees how it boosted the Foundation’s reputation and broadened what it could achieve. Yet, as Olia reflects on the past four years, she admits that none of this was on anyone’s mind at the time.

“Shelter” happened completely naturally. We simply couldn’t have acted any other way or taken on something else,” said Tetiana. “It seemed that, aside from providing aid, there were simply no other options. And we went down this path. I think it was the right one.”

**This Project has elevated  
the Foundation’s reputation  
and unlocked new possibilities  
for its growth and impact**

# FRIDAY LETTER



**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** April 2022  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Spring Letter

Hello everyone!

How are you? Our days are still counted by the numbers following February 24, rather than by weekdays and weekends. However, I'd like to return to the tradition of weekly letters so that we can stay in touch in this format as well.

In challenging times, it's always important to feel supported by family, friends, and partners. The support we've received from Marieluise Beck and Ralf Fuchs, co-founders of the Center for Liberal Modernity in Berlin, has truly become a lifeline for us.

Marieluise and Ralph were the first German politicians to visit Lviv and Kyiv to demonstrate their solidarity and support for Ukrainians. I recently had the opportunity to meet with them in Lviv. I told them about our humanitarian projects and initiatives, particularly the Shelter Project.

The outpouring of support for the Foundation and for Ukraine from every corner of the globe is simply incredible. Humanitarian aid arrives, speaking platforms are provided to support our efforts, crowdfunding campaigns are launched, and generous donations are made to fund our vital initiatives.

It is these faithful friends who help carry us closer to victory. At the same time, our unwavering determination inspires our partners to stand with us and offer their support.

So, I want to take this moment to thank you, the team, for being the voices, advocates, fundraisers, and champions for Ukraine on the world stage.

Thank you to Vladlena Ozhydryanova, who prepared two important documents: the Humanitarian Appeal and the Childcare Appeal, which sparked a wave of interest and negotiations from potential donors.

We quickly formed a fundraising team that works daily on project proposals. Thank you to Liuba Margolina, Yuliia Kyrylova, Nataliia Slynko, Serhii Solovko, Viktoriia Gladchenko, and Lesia Shovkova.

I also thank those who use public platforms to tell the world the truth about how we are fighting: Ilona Khmeleva, Serhii Karelin, Olesia Savka — every single person who goes on air themselves or coordinates this work.

I would also like to give special recognition to our financial, administrative, and IT departments. While we are engaged in advocacy work, our colleagues ensure the smooth operation of our systems, the timely payment of salaries, and much more. Serhii Solovko, Olena Svyrydovska, Oksana Dovha, Alla Kleshchuk, Yuliya Grytsenko, Iryna Safonova, Mariia Sokolova, Anna Levytska, Serhiy Cherednichenko, Kostia Hrybinnyk — thank you!

In moments of hardship, true friends and partners do not fade away; they are the first to step forward. It is heartening to know EEF is surrounded by people like this.

Let's stay in touch!

Sincerely,  
Victor





# MARIELOUISE BECK

For many years, the Center for Liberal Modernity has partnered with East Europe Foundation to implement a project in Ukraine aimed at strengthening interparliamentary dialogue and supporting European integration. Over the course of the program, the partners have organized hundreds of bilateral and multilateral meetings and dozens of international study visits. These activities have included expert discussions, thematic conferences, roundtables, and working trips that have deepened mutual understanding and cooperation.



Co-founder of the  
Center for Liberal  
Modernity

### **Do you remember how your cooperation with Ukraine began?**

My husband — who was then president of the Heinrich Böll Foundation — and me, being member of parliament both had contacts to Kyjiv long before the events of 2014. The partnership began from both sides: the Böll Foundation, which closely cooperates with civil society organizations, and our side — the political wing within parliament.

What I remember most vividly is the Maidan. I was there very often during the Revolution of Dignity — through those terrible nights — thanks to colleagues from the Böll Foundation, who had an office in Kyiv. That's how our closer cooperation with Ukraine began.

Later, in 2017, we founded the Centre for Liberal Modernity (Zentrum Liberale Moderne). It was before the full-scale invasion, but it was already clear that the “Minsk agreements” weren't working. We created this analytical center, held seminars on the EU free trade area, and began looking for partners. At that time, there was a

widespread expectation that Ukraine was on a fast track toward EU membership.

The topic of the free trade area was in great demand and technically quite complex, especially for new members of parliament who entered the Verkhovna Rada after the elections. Most of them were well educated but lacked parliamentary experience. I could understand that — as someone who joined the Green Party in its early days, when we first entered parliament in 1983. We were also a group of newcomers learning how everything worked.

So our idea was to share our experience with all Ukrainian MPs, especially the new ones, as they advanced on their path toward the EU.

**What key transformations has Ukraine undergone on this path to the EU? What are the most significant changes you have seen in Ukrainian society?**

Perhaps “transformation” isn’t quite the word I’d start with. I would rather say that Ukraine has clearly set its course westward — and it was the people who showed that by demanding fair and free elections.

I remember being in Ukraine during the first presidential elections after the Maidan — I believe I was there as an observer. I had never seen so many people voting with such passion. The lines outside schools and polling stations were enormous. It was deeply moving.

At that moment, many people probably didn’t realize that returning to the democratic path would bring new hardships, and that progress would be much slower than expected.

But if we do speak about transformation, one moment made a strong impression on me. We were in Kharkiv. Even then, many civilians were helping those at the front. I remember stopping at a restaurant where we first met Serhiy Zhadan. The restaurant was run by a woman whose husband delivered food to soldiers at the front — meals they prepared together.

Later, we rented a bus and continued further east. On the road, two police officers

stopped us, claiming we had exceeded the speed limit (we hadn't) and demanded a fine. Our driver — the woman's husband — took out his phone and began filming the officers: "You want money? Then let's talk. But I think those days are over."

That wasn't about signing an agreement with Brussels. It was about everyday life — people who had stopped being afraid. And that was crucial. The entire system of corruption is built on fear. That moment was incredibly meaningful. It showed that the desire for change and freedom came from within society itself.

**What can both sides — Ukraine and Europe — do to advance European transformation and help Ukraine finally join the EU, even if the road is still long?**

I think those of us who are true friends of Ukraine are deeply frustrated — not with you, but with how ineffective the EU has become. Some member states behave almost like Russian proxies and can block progress from within.

Of course, we all understand that opening the first chapter of accession talks would be an incredibly important signal — one that Ukraine urgently needs right now to feel that all this suffering hasn't been in vain. But instead, we see hesitation — not only in the military sphere but also politically and institutionally.

**You have devoted much of your work to building dialogue — creating bridges between politicians, countries, and organizations. How can we preserve the value of understanding and cooperation for a shared goal in a world increasingly poisoned by populism, propaganda, and post-truth?**

If we look at Ukraine and the United States — or more broadly, the West — we can see something striking. The country that was once seen as a guarantor of freedom and democracy is now moving down

a path where political communication is increasingly filled with hatred. We need to communicate. We need to talk. In democracies communication is crucial. There is no other way to achieve understanding.

**How do you keep hope alive? How do you continue to believe that things can still get better?**

No one knows whether Ukraine — or any of us — will ultimately succeed. That has not yet been decided. And sometimes, when there is so much bad news and so many setbacks, it's hard to stay optimistic. So I try to ask the question differently: what's the alternative?

Because it's not just about whether Ukraine can become part of the so-called Western world, whatever that may mean. We all understand: if Ukraine is handed over to Putin, his aggression won't stop there.

In our societies, we see how both the far right and the far left exploit this issue in very simplistic ways. It's easy to campaign on slogans like: "Pensions aren't rising, food is more expensive, and the government is still sending money to Ukraine? Are you out of your mind?" It's a simple but deeply flawed logic.

That's the challenge for democracies: elections are held every four years, budgets must pass through parliament, and today's opposition can become tomorrow's majority. So if we keep repeating, "This is about helping Ukraine," — that won't be enough. Ukraine is fighting the fight for our freedom. We are not helping Ukraine — they are helping us. Look at Sweden, Finland and the Baltic States. They understood that Putin will not stop at Ukraine if the West does not stop him successfully. He will head for more. Maybe not in two years, maybe in five — but he will not stop.

We really must be concerned about how Russian propaganda and hybrid operations are strengthening pro-Russian forces — both right-wing and left-wing — within our own countries.

**In Ukraine, as a society and as citizens, we understand well what needs to be done at home: modernizing institutions, building transparency, overcoming corruption. These remain huge challenges. But Europe also needs modernization — and many Western intellectuals are saying this openly. Can Ukraine somehow help Europe in this process?**

Yes, it can — if we stop burying our heads in the sand.

I would tell my colleagues in the West: if you think there is no alternative, then realize that the only truly battle-ready army in Europe today is the Ukrainian one. Our own armies are not prepared to fight. We lack industrial capacity, manufacturing facilities, production lines. We buy our military equipment from the U.S. — and we don't even know how long that will last. One day, the US government might simply say: "We need it ourselves now."

It's not only that Trump could pressure Ukraine — he can pressure the entire EU. So yes, we are in a state of deep uncertainty. And if, in this situation, Ukrainians are forced into a "negotiated outcome" — say, a divided country — it would be a catastrophe.

If we were truly rational — genuinely rational — we would have to fear two developments in case of a Russian victory. The fact that Russia would gain the hands over the Ukrainian army. It is the only modern and experienced one within Europe. And there would be millions of Ukrainian refugees who do not want to live under Russian occupation.

**As you said, much comes down to fear. But fear can be overcome through new connections.**

Organizations like the East Europe Foundation and Zentrum Liberale Moderne — how do you see the role of such partnerships in driving change? Is it mainly about joining forces to get the work done, or do these partnerships serve an even greater purpose?

Ultimately, it's about societies getting to know one another. That's crucial.

I was born in 1952, so I still remember the prejudices Nazi Germany spread about Ukrainians during World War II. The Nazis exterminated the Jewish population and they forced Ukrainians into slave labor, denying them rights, equality, respect, and dignity.

Not only the SS but also part of the Wehrmacht committed horrific war crimes in Ukraine. But many of them came home and went on to have respectable careers. In my home region of Bremen, there were police battalions linked to the SS. One of their leaders even became the head of Bremen's criminal police for 20 years.

So many of those prejudices persisted. When, in 1998, visa liberalization for Ukrainians was discussed, the opposition commented in a very ugly way. Now there would be hundreds of Ukrainian prostitutes and car thieves entering Germany. I have always felt it was essential to counter those stereotypes.

It was — and still is — important to show how modern and dynamic Ukrainian society truly is. For example, in Dnipro, I once met a young Ukrainian chef cook who had returned from New York to open his own restaurant. I never had such a super meal like in this place. In Odesa, we organized concerts with Bremen's largest choir and Odesa's philharmonic orchestra — and later, this Ukrainian orchestra came to Bremen and the choir and the orchestra performed in Bremen.

Simple encounters between people — getting to know one another — are decisive. Civil society organizations and analytical centers like the East Europe Foundation and Zentrum Liberale Moderne can then work on broader issues, but it all starts with people talking to each other.

**What three key values, in your view, unite people from Germany and Ukraine?**

I'd love to say freedom, but I hesitate — because I don't think people in Germany fully appreciate its value.

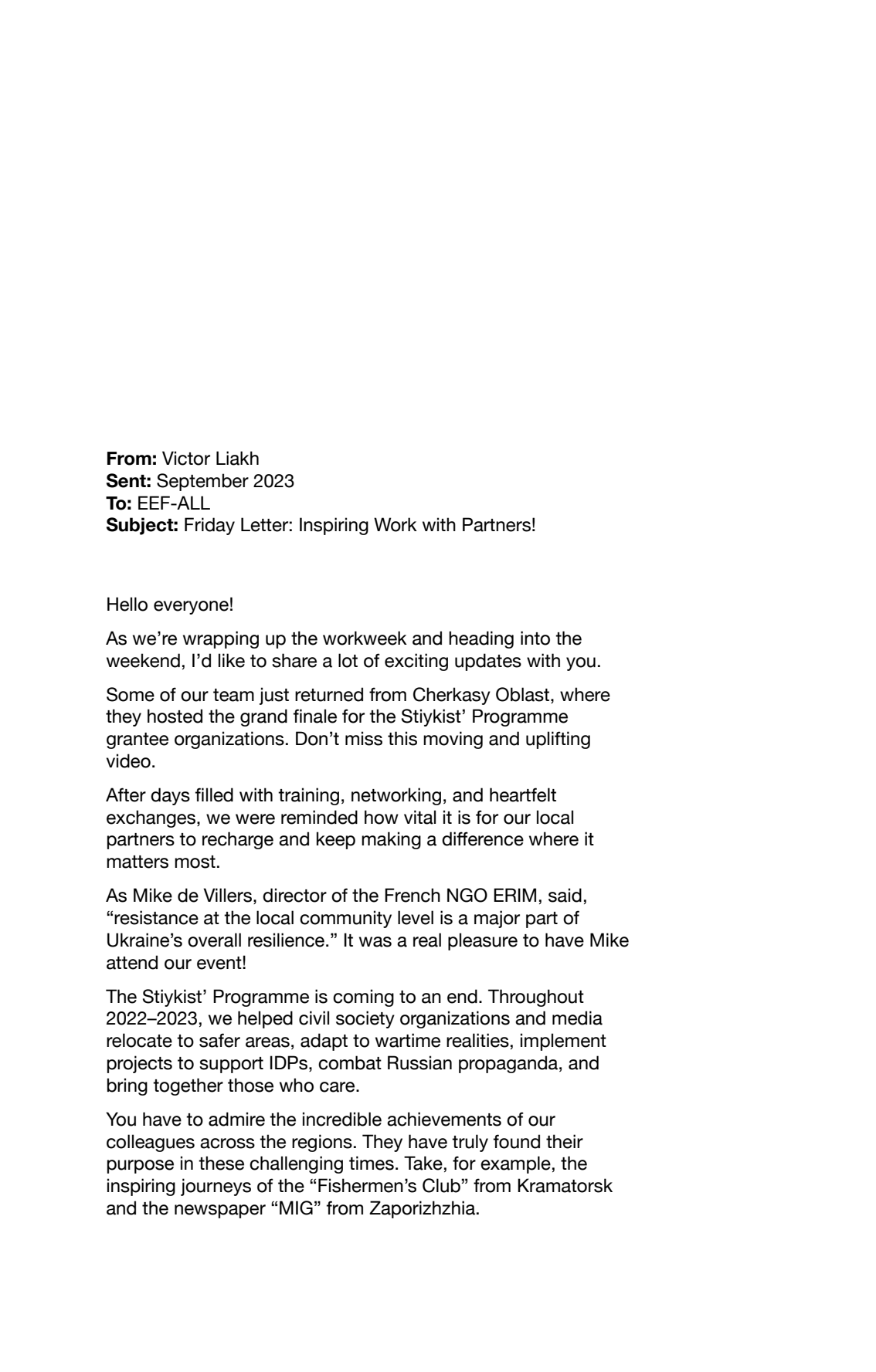
In Germany, the strongest aspiration seems to be security. Of course, Ukrainians also want security, but in a completely different sense. In Germany, it's mostly about social security — protection from poverty, unemployment, or economic instability. So security exists in both societies, but it means very different things.

The longing for freedom I think is stronger in Ukraine than in Germany, because Ukrainians must fight for it — whereas in Germany, we've taken it for granted for far too long.

And the third value is inclusion. Inclusion is again a challenge in Germany when it comes to Jewish people. There is a gap between political elites who publicly condemn antisemitism and the reality — where Jewish children often attend schools behind high fences, with police cars parked outside synagogues. I have never seen such a need in Ukraine. Your sense of inclusion seems stronger, at least regarding the Jewish population.

So, considering the enormous challenges Ukraine has faced over the years, Ukrainians are often more aware of these values than we are. In Germany, we've taken them for granted for too long — and only now are we beginning to wake up. I just hope we wake up in time.

# FRIDAY LETTER



**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** September 2023  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Letter: Inspiring Work with Partners!

Hello everyone!

As we're wrapping up the workweek and heading into the weekend, I'd like to share a lot of exciting updates with you.

Some of our team just returned from Cherkasy Oblast, where they hosted the grand finale for the Stiykist' Programme grantee organizations. Don't miss this moving and uplifting video.

After days filled with training, networking, and heartfelt exchanges, we were reminded how vital it is for our local partners to recharge and keep making a difference where it matters most.

As Mike de Villers, director of the French NGO ERIM, said, "resistance at the local community level is a major part of Ukraine's overall resilience." It was a real pleasure to have Mike attend our event!

The Stiykist' Programme is coming to an end. Throughout 2022–2023, we helped civil society organizations and media relocate to safer areas, adapt to wartime realities, implement projects to support IDPs, combat Russian propaganda, and bring together those who care.

You have to admire the incredible achievements of our colleagues across the regions. They have truly found their purpose in these challenging times. Take, for example, the inspiring journeys of the "Fishermen's Club" from Kramatorsk and the newspaper "MIG" from Zaporizhzhia.

They also managed to train communities welcoming new residents uprooted from their homes — conducting workshops and creating spaces for discussion and the exchange of experiences, lessons learned, successes, and challenges regarding the adaptation and integration of internally displaced persons.

We've launched five free online courses — covering psychological resilience, cybersecurity, fighting disinformation, supporting IDPs, and monitoring and evaluation for civil society organizations — all available anytime on the Zrozumilo! Online educational platform.

Our support for civil society organizations is as comprehensive as ever. We offer grants and help our partners grow stronger, empowering them to persevere through challenging times. I would like to thank the teams behind various programs, where our key priority was to strengthen and support the civil society sector.

My heartfelt thanks go out to the Stiykist' Programme team: Vira Nedzvedska, Yuliia Smahliukova, and Anna Sarana; the Capable and Resistant Program team: Yuliia Kyrlova, Lesia Shovkova, Yuliia Smahliukova, Anna Sarana, and Liudmyla Lukianova; and the Phoenix Project: Resilient Ukraine in the Time of War team: Olga Voitovych, Valeriia Khodina, Diana Standratiuk, and Maryna Gopko. I am deeply grateful to Olha Rachynska, Oksana Medvedenko, and Oksana Polishchuk for their strong support of our grantees. Special thanks as well to Olha Milianovych and Marta Konyk for their outstanding communications work on these programs.

You're all doing an amazing job!

That's all from me for now, friends. Wishing you all the best!  
Take care!

Sincerely,  
Victor





# GIVING A PERSON A FISHING ROD

Text: Yuliia Surkova  
Photos: Pavlo Pavlov

Ihor Tyslenko carefully lays out his fishing gear. He takes each item out of a separate compartment — hooks, floats, sinkers, and bait. The 41-year-old man pulls the compartments out of a camouflage backpack bearing the insignia “Military Intelligence of Ukraine.” This backpack has seen the scorched, occupied villages of the Kharkiv Oblast, explosions, battles, and blood from wounds during the Ukrainian counteroffensive. But today, Ihor is not a scout, but a fisherman. The tourniquets and tactical goggles in his backpack have been replaced with artificial-colored fish lures.

For Vadym Voropai, returning to fishing became part of his return to civilian life



The "Fishermen's Club," NGO started in the Donetsk Oblast by real fishermen, believes that to really help someone, it's better to give them a fishing rod than to do everything for them





**Shared talks, activities,  
and moments bring you  
out of the dark depths  
of memories. That is where  
you start to come back  
to life, one step at a time**



Fishing competitions for veterans help provide a place for mental relaxation



Ihor has had nine concussions and tried therapy several times.

“My last psychologist nearly lost his mind,” said Ihor. “Psychotherapists can’t handle me.”

The man smiles slyly, wearing a T-shirt that reads: “I live on my God-given land.” Yet it would be wrong to say that the former scout isn’t taking care of his mental health.

“This is my therapy. I calm myself down, I bring myself back to life,” says Igor Tyslenko as he squints against the bright sun shining off the pond in Obukhiv near Kyiv.

Around him, in the quiet and calm, several dozen men, some wearing camouflage, are setting up their fishing rods and nets. Officially, a sport fishing competition for veterans called “The Circle of the Unbreakable” will start soon. But really, this is how their therapy begins.

## YOU, NATURE, AND THE ONE WHO GETS YOUR JOKES

The “Circle of the Unbreakable” fishing competition is held with help from the public organization “Fishermen’s Club of Ukraine” for veterans of the Russia’s war against Ukraine all over the country. Today, Kyiv Oblast is hosting them. So, on a hot August Saturday at a pond in Obukhiv, 30 men are competing to catch the biggest fish.

The fishing is slow and not very good. There are almost no big fish, and the small crucian carp keep slipping off the hooks. Only a bright redfin splashes in the participants’ nets. So, every catch turns into a joke.

“Hey, guys, I caught a frog.”

“Well, of course, you’re a sapper.”

Men’s laughter rolls across the pond. The soldiers also call the Soviet OZM-72 anti-personnel mine, which pops up during detonation, a “frog.”

“I’m already pulling out my tenth red-tailed one. I’m on a roll today.”

“Yeah, we know you’re on a roll, you’ve got four kids.”

Another burst of laughter. The men, who have spent the last three years in the fiercest sectors of the front, feel at home here. They’re not at war, but they’re still among their own.

“The main thing that brings us together at events like this is that there are people here who understand your jokes, jokes that civilians often don’t get,” says the slim, fit 39-year-old Vadym Voropai. “Here, there are people you like being with, and at the same time, there’s nature and peace.”

He has a perfect military bearing. You notice that first, and only then, the cane he leans on.

Before the war, Vadym was the commercial director of a construction company and went deep-sea fishing with his best friend every Friday. Fishing left his life for almost three years. And the friend Vadym had fished with for 30 years, sadly, is gone forever. He was killed in Klishchiivka, a small village in Donetsk Oblast known for terrible battles. Vadym himself was badly hurt there. He got out of the battlefield with two tourniquets on his legs, crawling on his hands alone. He carried a grenade to blow himself up and avoid being captured.

“I was in places in Klishchiivka and Bakhmut where, forget about fishing — you couldn’t even go to the toilet and had to take pills to go two days without going,” said Vadym. “It took me a very long time to get back to fishing and normal life. I had a long recovery because both my legs were broken. It wasn’t until more than a year after my injury that I could just walk up to a body of water. And little by little, I started fishing again.”

Before the war, Vadym caught a 32-kilogram catfish while fishing underwater. He pulled it in with a rope, just like Santiago in “The Old Man and the Sea.” But now his life feels more like Hemingway’s war stories.

A man who, both in war and in life, is used to giving it his all, won today’s competition. But after the awards ceremony, he talks with his comrades not about fishing, but about veteran support projects.

“War has changed us forever. But there are things we can control, and one is how we heal from what we’ve been through. Many guys shut down after coming back from the front. But that silence is dangerous,” says Vadym. “In that silence, thoughts come that pull you down. That’s why it’s important to join these meetings and outings, because here you see you’re not alone.



Valerii Maluka is one of the competition participants. He has served in the military since before the full-scale Russian invasion

Shared talks, activities, and time pull you out of dark memories and deep sadness. That's how you start to come back to life, step by step.”

Vadym says this and releases his biggest catch of the day into the water. A school of small, shimmering fish darts off in all directions. Not a single one sinks to the bottom.

Since it started, the "Fishermen's Club" has been working with veterans to build communities together



## NOT JUST FISHING

The public organization “Fishermen’s Club of Ukraine,” which hosts competitions for veterans, was founded several years ago in Donetsk Oblast. It was 2018: Kramatorsk, though affected by the war, was still an active industrial city surrounded by lakes and rivers. A group of fishermen who wanted to protect wildlife and promote the “catch and release” idea came together to hold a competition. And that’s where it all began.

“The anglers didn’t come alone. They came with their families: in-laws, god-parents, wives, children. And we had to entertain everyone,” says Yuliia Borysova, one of the NGO’s founders, laughing at the fond memories.

Yuliia is a community activist from Druzhkivka in Donetsk Oblast. Cheerful and active, her life is all about volunteering and fishing. So, back then in Kramatorsk, to keep people entertained, Yuliia started finding community groups to run games, workshops, yoga classes, or art lessons during the competitions. And also, private businesses that would sell food and drinks. That’s how the competitions became festivals.

A year later, a local association for people with disabilities asked the club to hold a competition for its members. Then came Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and Joint Forces Operation veterans, who started the “Defenders and Children” event. At that time, veterans of the war in eastern Ukraine taught fishing to children from orphanages and boarding schools. After that, the club decided to open a free sport-fishing school for children. That’s how the festivals grew into a social project.

“At the children’s festivals, we saw that mostly moms bring the kids to the activities. Dads are hardly involved at all,” said Yuliia. “Our director, Yaroslav Boiko, was deeply moved by this, and he decided we needed to create a parenting school to promote gender equality. That’s how we started TATO Hub (Dad’s Hub). We began holding events, talks, and workshops for families there. Young people and local volunteers joined in.”



So, the social project grew into a large and active community group. Over four years, the “Fishermen’s Club” became more than just a group with shared interests. By early 2022, they were monitoring the health of the region’s lakes and rivers, combating illegal fishing, supporting children’s development, encouraging youth volunteering, and organizing fun activities for veterans. And at the same time, they never forgot where they started.

“At the end of February 2022, the water bodies near Kramatorsk had just frozen over,” said Yuliia. “We were planning a winter fishing festival. We already had gifts ready and partners invited. We were supposed to start on February 24. But instead of an awards ceremony, explosions and evacuation awaited us that day.”

## SAVING THOSE WHO SAVE

From the start of the Russian full-scale invasion to Ukraine, the NGO’s whole life, growth, and usual activities stopped. The nonprofit group switched to “emergency response” mode.

By noon on February 24, the team had arranged buses to evacuate civilians from eastern Ukraine and, within a few days, had delivered food, water, clothes, hygiene kits, and everything else needed to the frontline area. So, the group that started as a hobby became a strong volunteer groups on the front lines in the east.

“We evacuated thousands of people and delivered tons of humanitarian aid,” said the NGO founder. “We even used passenger cars from Ukrzaliznytsia to bring aid. In the first months of the full-scale war, we gave out about 15,000 tons of aid to over 600,000 people in Donetsk Oblast. We worked without stopping.”

The core team of the “Fishermen’s Club” moved to Khmelnytskyi to coordinate operations from a safe location and to receive and resettle displaced persons, many of whom had been swept across western Ukraine. But Yuliia remained in Kramatorsk until the very end. And eventually, she made the difficult decision to leave for her children’s sake.

**“Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime.”**

“When the events in Bucha came to light, it was a shock to me, revealing the true hell of the Russian occupation,” said Yuliia. “I have two children, my own teenage son, 14 years old, and a 19-year-old niece in my care, the daughter of my sister who died. I realized I had to get them out of the front lines.”

In Kramatorsk, the NGO lost some of its equipment and documentation because of the war. But members of the organization set up several branches in Lviv, Uzhhorod, and Khmelnytskyi, as a massive wave of evacuees flowed through these cities. The entire year of 2022 passed at a frantic pace, and attempts were made to save as many people as possible.

“It felt like we were burning out,” says Ms. Borysova. “We were always chasing after people, helping them, but the values that were part of the Club’s mission were fading in the chaos of war.”

That’s when Club members learned that, under the Stiykist’ Programme of East Europe Foundation, they could send in a project proposal to help develop their organization. Since summer 2022, the Foundation had been giving grants to support civil society organizations. The Stiykist’ Programme was started to support CSOs and media during the war.

Organization took a chance: they applied and got a grant. Their project focused on moving the organization and holding events to help displaced people adjust and keep their mental health.


“We were so happy when we got the funding,” said Yuliia. “I just couldn’t believe we’d finally found a team interested not only in evacuation but also in our growth. I was excited that we could work on important projects, focus on mental health, and keep growing.”

Thanks to the funding, the “Fishermen’s Club” started new projects in Khmelnytskyi. A grant of 750,000 UAH helped them rent an office, launch youth programs, and host a series of training sessions, workshops, and excursions for displaced people.

“Working with EEF was very easy. The grant also gave us trainings. We’ve grown a lot while working with the Foundation,” says Yuliia.

**Now my son runs with me toward the water. This is what calms me, what brings me back to life.**





Fishing has become a common activity for veterans and activists, parents, and their children

She adds: “The main value of the Stiykist’ Programme was that it helped the Club see itself from the outside, recognize its strengths, remember its core values, and move forward.” So, the old saying, “Give a man a fish, and he will be full for a day. Give a man a fishing rod, and he will be full for a lifetime,” worked out for the fishermen themselves.

## BACK TO THE ROOTS

Today, the “Fishermen’s Club” has over a thousand members. Their offices operate in the west, east, and center of the country. And this year, the organization naturally began returning to its roots, hosting fishing competitions. But, as always, not just sports events, but ones with a social component: for veterans, displaced persons, and everyone who needs warmth, support, rest, and peace.

Ihor, a former scout, learned to fish back when he was just starting to walk. For him, fishing is a state of serenity that he felt as a child alongside his father on the shore of a pond in the Kirovohrad Oblast. The war and his injuries robbed him of this source of peace.

“My dad is no longer with us,” says Ihor. “Many of my friends have died. It was hard for me to return to civilian life. It took half a year before I gradually started getting back into it, going fishing. Now my son runs to the pond with me. This is what calms me, what brings me back to life.”

Ihor smiles and skillfully casts his fishing rod. Now all his attention is focused on the red dot of the fishing float; thoughts of war fade away.

# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** November 2024  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Letter — Celebrating Our Awesome Results

Hello, friends!

The Friday Letter is already in your inboxes, which means there are nice get-togethers, walks through the autumn city, and relaxation ahead. So here are the highlights of the week!

Our two-year journey with the Phoenix Project: Resilient Ukraine in the Time of War has reached its finale. With 38 civil society organizations joining forces, we began by exploring the public sector landscape and CSO needs, then shaped our efforts to meet those challenges head-on. From grants and training to courses and an acceleration program, the Phoenix Project was a whirlwind of activity and impact.

We are especially grateful to this Project for fueling the Foundation's own growth, providing resources that empowered our department leaders to plan and implement many important activities.

I would like to extend a special thank you to Nataliia Slynko, Tetyana Mazur, Diana Standratyuk, Valeria Khodina, and Inna Tsaruk for the program on developing project management skills at EEF. Not many organizations in the sector can boast of working according to PMI standards. I am pleased that we are fostering this culture within our organization and among our partner organizations.

A big thank you to the operations department — Serhii Solovko, Olena Svyrydovska, Serhii Cherednichenko, Svitlana Kravchenko, and Pavlo Golovachov — for driving improvements in our policies, procedures, and IT systems. With the launch of the PeopleForce platform, we can now automate, unify, and streamline countless HR processes. It is hard to imagine how we managed before!

I am also grateful to the communications department — Viktoriia Gladchenko, Olha Milianovych, and Inna Tsaruk — for creating a dynamic and valuable program that sharpened our team's communication skills, strengthened internal connections, and inspired new corporate initiatives.

A big shout-out as well to colleagues from across departments and programs who joined forces to develop and test our soon-to-be-launched Grant Portal. Special thanks to Serhii Cherednichenko, Halyna Rybalko, Maksym Stelmakh, Maryna Gopko, Sofiia Boinitska, Oksana Medvedenko, Oksana Polishchuk, Oleksandra Didyk, and everyone else who contributed!

I'm proud of us! Take care of yourselves.

Sincerely,  
Victor



# MIKE DE VILLIERS

ERIM is a French non-governmental organization (Equal Rights and Independent Media, formerly known as IREX Europe).

In 2022, ERIM received funding from the European Union for a major project, Emergency Support of Ukraine. In turn, ERIM provided funding to a consortium of Ukrainian and international organizations, including East Europe Foundation. In Ukraine, this program became known as Resilience and focused on supporting civil society organizations and the media.



Director of ERIM

**Do you remember how your work with  
EEF began?**

It was actually a bit ironic. We had worked in Ukraine for a long time but stopped around 2014, mainly because stronger organizations stepped in.

Then, when the full-scale invasion began, the European Commission reached out to us asking whether we could help Ukrainian organizations. To be honest, my first reaction was: “We’re probably not the best option for this, because we’ve fallen a bit behind on Ukraine.” There were other candidates who had continued working actively in Ukraine the entire time we hadn’t been there, even in 2022. But it was explained to us that everyone was overwhelmed and that help was urgently needed. So, we agreed.

We were a bit surprised, because we thought there were many organizations

that could help Ukraine. Given the scale of emergency assistance required, an organization like ours — able to manage grants and provide support to NGOs and media — was needed. That's how it all began. Later, we started working with EEF in particular, and eventually built relationships with all the beneficiaries. It was an incredible experience — one that, unfortunately, arose from the full-scale invasion and the urgent needs on the ground.

**Looking back on all these years of working in and with Ukraine, what part of that experience has been the most significant for you — not only professionally, but also personally?**

For me, what stands out is the opportunity to witness firsthand the extraordinary resilience of Ukrainian civil society. In France and other Western countries, we often read in newspapers or hear from experts that Ukraine's civil society is one of the key reasons the country has been able to resist Russian aggression for so long. Of course, the military effort and soldiers' courage are crucial, but civil society is the foundation that has held everything together.

I remember one trip with Vira Nedzvedska and Victor Liakh — we visited a local cultural center where people of all ages were making camouflage nets. Children, adults, older people — everyone was working together. I was deeply moved by that level of dedication and cooperation.

**You've visited many cities and towns across Ukraine — from Odesa to Yahidne in Chernihiv Oblast. Many of these places have endured extremely difficult experiences during the war. Are there any stories or encounters that you remember most vividly?**

There are so many that it's hard to choose, but I would highlight three.

The first is a couple from Lviv who were sourcing and delivering medical supplies to

hospitals near the front line. We only met the husband because his wife was out on a delivery trip. They were around 40–45 years old, financially secure, both with medical backgrounds. Their son was studying in the U.S., and they could have easily left Ukraine. But they stayed — and that courage left a deep impression on me.

The second is a man from Donetsk, about my age — perhaps that's why I remember him so well. He had lost everything but was determined to start anew. He established a business center in a new city — with a beautiful park and an annual festival — and was working to rebuild trade connections. Meeting him and seeing his energy and determination to rebuild life was truly inspiring.

The third is two women who survived occupation. Three months after their town was liberated, they founded a women's shelter and a local community center to provide psychosocial support to people who had experienced trauma. Their resilience and dedication to helping others deeply moved me.

**Over the years of war, we've heard countless stories of communities and individuals doing incredible things. Yet much of this would not have been possible without assistance — including financial support — from partners and donors. One example is the Stiykist' Programme, made possible through ERIM. From your professional point of view, what kind of support is truly effective and creates lasting impact?**

From the perspective of an organization like ERIM, the most important thing is to work closely with local partners to understand people's real needs.

In my view, the most effective support is core funding that allows organizations to use resources where they are genuinely needed. For example, during the war, instead of focusing on training or capacity-building programs, we quickly provided grants for generators when Russian strikes caused power outages and heating problems.

It was crucial that aid could be delivered immediately. So, there isn't a single program that guarantees impact. What matters is listening carefully to local partners and beneficiaries, trusting their expertise, and responding quickly and flexibly to changing needs. Sticking rigidly to a pre-designed program regardless of local realities is a mistake. If you are adaptive, your support will have a longer-lasting effect.

**So, in short: it's about adaptability and trust in people on the ground?**

From EEF perspective, it was slightly different, because it had a more comprehensive approach: listening closely to local needs while also maintaining a focus on training and capacity building.

We discussed a lot how to determine what kind of training and capacity-building would be most effective — especially in a postwar context — to ensure there would be enough qualified people for large-scale reconstruction. This also included ensuring that reconstruction funds would be used effectively and not wasted.

So, in fact, both approaches are necessary: immediate, flexible support to meet urgent needs — and long-term planning to build capacity for the future.

**The kind of cooperation you describe seems impossible without trust among all the actors involved — NGOs, local communities, international partners, and organizations. In your view, what helps build that trust? Does it emerge naturally in critical situations, or must it be nurtured?**

That's a complex question. I think the first step is to meet in person and work closely and intensively together.

Because of security restrictions, I was the only member of my team who could travel to Ukraine. But my colleagues worked tirelessly behind the scenes — managing contracts, reporting, redrafting agreements

several times as the situation kept changing. What was remarkable was everyone's attitude: nobody complained. Ukrainian civil society was entirely focused on getting things done, not on lamenting the challenges. The Ukrainian team was deeply committed to its mission — and that dedication quickly earned my team's trust.

For me personally, trust was built through meeting people like Vira, Victor, Yuliya, Marta, and others — and working side by side with them.

**You mentioned 2014. What changes have you observed in Ukraine since then?**

It's like night and day — though it's difficult to compare, because it's before the war and during the war.

By 2014, Ukraine had already made significant progress compared to 2008. You could see how the country had flourished — vibrant cultural life in cities, new restaurants and bars opening, young people active and engaged. Economically, the country was also moving forward. The professionalism and motivation of people were striking — from journalists to civil society representatives, from medical professionals to entrepreneurs. They were smart, driven, and dedicated to their communities.

Honestly, if the invasion hadn't happened and Ukraine had been able to continue its development, it might now be catching up with Poland, which made huge progress after joining the EU.

Ukraine was on a very promising path — and I believe it can return to it.

**Thinking about the European context and your work in various countries promoting freedom of expression and human rights — how does the Ukrainian context differ from those experiences? And what can Ukraine learn from the world, given how different its circumstances are?**

There's a lot to learn in both directions. But I think the biggest lesson for Ukraine — assuming the war ends in Ukrainian victory and continued independence, which we all hope for — is not to relax and not to take democracy for granted. The country will still face many challenges we see in France, the UK, Germany, and, unfortunately, the U.S. The threat to democracy is enormous, and the consequences of its collapse are catastrophic. Autocracy is on the rise worldwide.

The key lesson for Ukraine is not to let its guard down once the war ends. Sustaining democracy and good governance requires constant effort, to prevent the rise of oligarchic or other forms of authoritarian rule.

The threats aren't only external. Many organized forces from other countries, including the U.S., are working to undermine democratic systems. That's exactly why organizations like ERIM exist — to counteract that.

**And what can the world learn from Ukraine?**

Sadly, not enough people are learning these lessons — unfortunately. But the lessons Ukraine offers are clear: strength of character, courage, resilience, and determination to fight for one's values and freedom. Some people do learn from this, some are inspired by it. For instance, I have a friend from Scotland who's retired and planning to volunteer in Ukraine to help. People like him are deeply moved and motivated by your experience.

But the main lesson — that it takes courage to defend democracy and freedom — hasn't been heard loudly enough.

Perhaps it resonates in Armenia and Moldova or inspires young people in Georgia. But in other countries like Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan, that message doesn't come through as strongly.

Historian Timothy Snyder recently said that "democracy is a daily practice." Right now, Ukraine is fighting for democracy, because Russia represents everything opposed to our values. It's literally a matter of survival. That's why we have no choice but to fight.

Exactly — but people in Europe should also be concerned. Democracy is not automatically stable, even if they grew up believing it was.

**You've had many interactions with Ukrainian partners. What do you value most in them and in how they continue their work during the war?**

I think what I value most is the people themselves. Sometimes I regret not keeping in more regular contact and not being able to travel to Ukraine easily. But I can go as a private individual, and I hope I'll have the chance to return when possible.

I deeply value the human connection and the exchange of experiences. I treasure the memories of shared trips with Vira, Victor, and Yuliya — and the friendship that grew from that. I hope I can call it friendship.

# FRIDAY LETTER



**From:** Victor Liakh

**Sent:** November 2022

**To:** EEF-ALL

**Subject:** A letter summarizing a difficult week, but one filled with gratitude!

Hello, friends!

This week in Ukraine has tested us all: many colleagues are still facing days without electricity, internet, water, or heat. Yet, together, we keep holding on.

A quick reminder: our office at 96 Saksahanskoho Street remains a bright spot, with electricity and internet. We've added a multicooker, toaster, and sandwich maker to our kitchen, and after this week, a washing machine and dryer are next on our wish list. We are truly building our own Office of Resilience.

Despite the circumstances, the work continues. Together with Serhii Hunko, we visited Chernihiv Oblast. We plan to expand our presence there as part of the EGAP Program. On the way, we visited one of our grantees from Yagidne.

The company "Ukrprodprom-Eko" produces soybean oil and meal. This is one of more than 300 businesses that, with our support, received financial assistance to resume operations during the war.

Director Yuriy Mutskiy and his deputy Dmytro Petrov described the horrors of the occupation. When the Russians reached them, they killed the guard and destroyed all production facilities. Almost nothing remained of the business that had exported products to Poland and the Baltic states and provided jobs for 20 people.

Yet, this is ultimately a story of perseverance. In just three months, Yurii and his team rebuilt the roof, launched a new production line, and brought the business back to life. Our grant helped them buy raw materials. Now, seven people from Yagidne have jobs again, and exports to Poland and Estonia are back on track.

Our microgrant program for businesses is very special and operationally complex. As with many of our other programs, the grant component, along with the financial, administrative, and programmatic support for grantees, is an extremely responsible and important task. Therefore, I would like to conclude this letter by thanking the team, in particular our financial and grant specialists. Tetyana Mazur, Olha Rachynska, Oksana Medvedenko, Yanina Roik, Tetiana Kucheruk, Valentyna Derhachova, Viktoriia Gryshchenko, Maryna Kudelia — our deepest gratitude to you for this extraordinary work. For the first time, we are simultaneously managing over 300 grants and working with a new category of beneficiaries, most of whom are experiencing grant support for the first time.

The leaders of “Ukrprodrom-Eco” said that thanks to us, their team has come to believe in programs involving the state and international donors and is now actively seeking out new opportunities.

We do more than provide funding; we help restore hope. That is truly priceless.

Thank you for your work, and please take care of yourselves!

Sincerely,  
Victor





# BREAD FOR CHERNIHIV

Text: Vira Kuryko

Photos: Valentyna Polishchuk



Writer Vira Kuryko spent the first weeks of the big war in her hometown of Chernihiv. Back then, it was hard to think about what would happen next. Instead, she could focus on simple things like bread, which had taken on new value.

In 2025, Vira visited Chernihiv Bakery Number 2, where she met people who cared for the flour and ovens even while bombs were falling.



Chernihiv Bakery Number 2 — the main producer of bread for the entire region



## Are they still baking bread here? Then everything will definitely be okay

### 1.

It was maybe the seventh or eighth day of the full-scale war and the third day of bombings, both at night and during the day. Chernihiv translator Viktoriia doesn't question where this bread came from — or its carefully sliced half. She breaks the white loaf in two: one piece for her older, ten-year-old son, the other for her eight-year-old. She shares the rest with us.

Volodia, a school music teacher and close family friend who brought these half-loaves, refuses to take any himself — he still has the other half for his family. Last time he brought smoked salmon, some chocolate candies, and a package of very expensive Italian pasta. This showed that the store shelves were empty; only special treats remained, which could now be bought at any price. Soon, there would be nowhere left to spend money. And now he had brought bread that was still warm.

It was so warm that we wondered where it came from. Volodia explained it was fresh from the factory. Water shortages had already started in Chernihiv; electricity was only on for a few hours, but the gas was still working as usual.

"From the factory? Are they still baking bread here? Then everything will definitely be all right," said Viktoriia and took a bite of her crust.

Warm bread amid constant fear and the sound of planes felt out of place. The Russian army was about to surround Chernihiv, and here we were, right in the middle, sharing bread fresh from an oven that was still working.

"I wanted to say I don't really like white bread — I prefer dark bread — but during the war, that felt wrong, so politely I took a bite, though I only swallowed the sweet tea," said Viktoriia. "Then suddenly, I realized this was the best bread I had ever tasted. Looking at the white crust, I wondered why Grandma always baked only white bread."

About ten days later, the Russians fired a Grad rocket at the bread line right near Viktoriia's house. Twenty people waiting for bread were killed. There were about a hundred people in the line.

## 2.

“In my mind, baking bread looks like this,” I laugh, feeling shy. “A small bowl, Grandma covers the dough with a towel, it rests, then she puts it in the oven and takes out the finished loaf. But today, it’s clearly not like that. Can you explain how it really happens?”

“You’re partly right,” says Olha Zaika, director of Chernihiv Bakery Number 2. She speaks of bread as if it were a person — no, a child — with pride. She still remembers her first shift: at a bakery in Poltava Oblast, wearing gloves, she caught hot loaves and stacked them in boxes.

We’ve just broken open a raisin loaf that burns your fingers.

“Today, there are home mini-ovens: you pour in the ingredients and wait for the bread to be ready,” says Olha. “But here, everything is more complicated. We still work with technologies that are hundreds of years old. It’s just on a different scale.”

So, we talk about bread as if it were a living thing. It all starts with the raw ingredients: flour, salt, sugar, eggs, yeast, oil, and so on. In the sourdough section — the first stage of birth: flour meets water and sourdough starter. Then comes the kneading — the dough is twisted by large metal machines, like giant hands. Next comes the poetry of the process: the divider measures out pieces, the rounder forms balls, and the pre-proofing box gives the bread a few minutes of quiet. The sheeter rolls the dough into thin sheets and twists them into rolls — this is how a loaf is born.

The loaves rise in the proofing chamber, gaining weight and a firm shape. When they’re ready, they’re moved to a massive, tunnel-like oven. You could walk along it for minutes, peering into the small windows. At first, the loaves are as white as milk. Later, they turn yellow, like chicks. In the end, they come out golden and crispy, exactly the kind we’re used to.



**OIha Zaika, director of Chernihiv Bakery Number 2, has dedicated her life to bread and to the people who make it**



# So, we talk about bread as if it were a living thing

Since 2022, the bakery had always kept plenty of flour and other ingredients, so they have never had to stop working



## 3.

Now they always have enough to last a month-long siege.

Back then, the war caught them by surprise, as it did many others. They didn't keep large stocks of flour and raw materials, because that's their usual rhythm: every day the trucks deliver, and the ovens consume. That February brought a harsh realization: if supplies stopped, they could bake bread at their usual average daily volume for two weeks, but what then? Some ingredients came from parts of Chernihiv Oblast that were now rapidly being occupied.

Olha knew people would need bread. Bread, salt, water, and you can survive. So, the ovens had to keep working, and someone wearing gloves had to catch the hot loaves at the end. The military came first that day and asked for a few days' supply. We gave it to them. Soon after, the head doctor of the Chernihiv maternity hospital came by herself. She had many families in her shelter, full of women and children.

"Olena Mykhailivna," the doctor said, "can we have some fresh bread today... I came myself; we're not waiting for someone to bring it to us."

As the doctor's car sped down the empty road, Olha realized that this doctor was certainly not the last — dozens more would arrive soon. If only dozens.



## 4.

At first, the bakery was operating on all three lines. There was electricity, there was water, the explosions were distant, the shock of the first days was still strong, and everyone was working with more dedication than ever. But the days passed, and Russian planes began arriving more and more frequently, dropping massive bombs from their bomb racks. Dozens of other shells, whose names no one knew at the time, fell on the city.

The bakery produces about 20 tons of various types of bread and rolls per day





First, the Russians hit the bakery's administrative building. After that, many workers took off their gloves and left the city. Olha understood everyone. She kept saying, "Your life comes first." But a handful of people stayed. Some didn't want to leave, and others couldn't. About thirty workers, three times fewer than usual.

Olha kept reminding everyone about the shelter under the pastry section. But those who stayed kept working. "Olena Mykhailivna, do you understand how vital bread is?" a worker asked her one day. Olha froze. "I understand," she replied. With bread, every minute counts.

During the siege of the city, the factory didn't bake bread for just one day. It was the day before that Volodia brought us that priceless half-loaf. Supplies were dwindling, and delivering them was becoming more dangerous. People had gone into hiding;

**Every  
minute  
counts  
when  
it comes  
to bread**

Baking bread needs a big team working together smoothly, like a well-practiced group



the market stalls were empty. There was enough bread, but no one came to get it.

But by the next day, everything was up and running again. Volunteers arrived, and utility services brought water, which had to be pumped up to the third floor through a hose from a large tank.

Meanwhile, bread was delivered to stores, but people could also come to the bakery. Sellers waited for the bread while holding other goods — milk, candy, and sausage. A real “hand-to-hand” market appeared. People traded, swapped, and bargained at the loading dock.

In March, Chernihiv became a city of cyclists — gasoline was hard to find. And there were even horses on the streets. One community near Chernihiv, on the front lines, came to get bread by horse-drawn cart. Just like, probably, in 1896, when a mechanized bakery opened in the city, starting the bread factory’s history.

When the Russians were driven out of the Chernihiv Oblast, the bakery ovens began to fire up one after another. And normality returned when someone finally said aloud: “So, when do we start thinking about Easter Bread?” Usually, bakers start preparing for it in January.

Thanks to the new oven, the bakery has the opportunity to experiment more and explore new possibilities



## 5.

Everything is busy here. You have to shout to be heard. You get lost in the hallways and, for a moment, feel like the warm bread being made. Today, everything is working as usual. Bread moves through three hot tunnels, slowly turning golden. A white loaf is the fastest and easiest to bake, so in wartime, it really is the best bread.

When the director first saw the announcement about grants from East Europe Foundation, she hesitated: they hadn't done anything like this before, and the competition was only for a few regions. Olha wasn't sure if they could get it. But she still called the economists to a meeting. They decided to buy an electric oven, which uses much less energy than their usual gas ovens. And, unlike gas ovens, it doesn't release CO<sub>2</sub>.

"The goal was to replace their oven with a more energy-efficient, modernized, new one," says Oksana Medvedenko, Grants and Contracts Manager at East Europe Foundation. "When we announced the call for proposals for the Power Up program, we understood that businesses have a different experience working with grants than civil society organizations. But the Chernihiv Bread Factory №2 was very proactive and motivated, so it started and finished first."

In the end, the bakery got its oven.

"Business is still business; it's important for it to sustain itself through investments. But by supporting the business, we also indirectly support the community. Especially if it's a municipal enterprise. Plus, if they grow their business, it provides jobs for people in that community," says Program Manager Yuliia Smahliukova.

**“Because the tastiest bread is fresh, right?” Olha states this as a fact rather than asking a question**

Olha loves trying new things. It's important to her not just to bake bread but also to find new ways to deliver it. They created a system: baking and delivering bread in paper bags just as people come home from work. They use the new electric oven for this too. It helps them work faster: they put one batch in the rotary oven and use the new one to bake the evening delivery batch more quickly.

“Because the tastiest bread is fresh, right?” Olha states rather than asks.

Despite the war, the smell of bread fills the air in Chernihiv every morning. Here, they believe this will continue



# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh

**Sent:** September 2023

**To:** EEF-ALL

**Subject:** Inspiring Friday: Impressive Results, the Future, and Ukraine's Digital Transformation

Hello, friends!

As another week wraps up, I am excited to share some inspiring updates and wish you a truly wonderful weekend ahead.

Let me begin with truly exciting news: this week, the Ministry of Digital Transformation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) signed a landmark agreement.

Switzerland is allocating 58,7 million francs to provide systemic support for Ukraine's digitalization. This is yet another vote of confidence in Ukraine, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, and in us, East Europe Foundation, which has been implementing the EGAP Program since 2015.

This enables us to continue driving quality changes in many sectors, such as healthcare reform, social policy, education, humanitarian demining, housing and utilities, government statistics, and more.

It also means bringing digital transformation to every corner of the country, ensuring everyone can access easy-to-use online services and e-participation tools, no matter their community, gender, age, or abilities.

This brings Ukraine closer to being recognized not just as Europe's "digital tiger," but as a global leader. Even amid war, Ukraine's spirit fuels bold, innovative projects.

Nearly a decade of teamwork has led to remarkable milestones: 20 million Ukrainians using our initiatives, groundbreaking changes in education, the world's first online marriage, the fastest business registration, over 60 e-services, energy-independent service centers, and STEM labs. The list of achievements could go on and on.

Once again, thank you to Deputy Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov for his leadership and vision. To the Swiss government, for your faith in Ukraine and your trust in us as partners. And once again, I am proud of the EGAP Program team, without whom these results would have been impossible.

I won't hesitate to name each of you here: Olena Saienko, Yuliia Zaplavna, Serhii Hunko, Sasha Radchenko, Sofiia Sakalosh, Oksana Kyrychuk, Nataliia Piskokha, Yevhen Zakharchenko (Zhenya, we thank you for your service in the armed forces of Ukraine and are waiting for you to come home!), Dariia Radzikovska, Yevhen Kovtun, Masha Sokolova, Kateryna Borysenko, Yana Smahula, Viktoriia Didashko, Yuliia Shymanska, Iryna Stasiuk, Maksym Stelmakh, Yuliia Masliana, Inna Skliar, Tetiana Smakohrai, Olena Lichmanenko, Sofiia Boinitska, Viktoriia Paitsun, Yuliia Zakharchuk, Dariia Skoblikova, as well as a few more names of those who worked with us earlier — Pavlo Radchenko, Serhii Karelin, Kateryna Chernohorenko, Iryna Kalynovska, Kateryna Chubuk, Hanna Perepilka, Diana Nikiforuk, Anzhelika Zboroshenko — to all of you, thank you so much.

I am truly inspired by your dedication, colleagues!

Sincerely,  
Victor





# DIGITALIZATION: HOW IT'S CHANGING US

Thanks to the EGAP Program, Ukraine is not only creating digital tools and services but is also changing for the better.

## How Digitalization Is Changing Reforms

**ILONA POSTEMSKA**

Senior National  
Programme Officer, SDC,  
the Swiss Embassy  
in Ukraine at the Swiss  
Embassy in Ukraine

I joined the Swiss Embassy's cooperation program in 2011. Our projects were already supporting decentralization in cities and rural communities. However, reforms had stalled, centralization had returned, and the government was disconnected from society. Despite this, Ukraine had a strong IT community, and some cities were introducing innovations to improve public services. This prompted me to explore digitalization more closely.

Some international projects had already begun digitalization initiatives. My goal was to develop a comprehensive program that

Photo: Viacheslav Ratynskyi



viewed digitalization as a means to empower citizens and enhance government transparency and accountability. The program's name reflects this purpose: E-Governance for Accountability and Participation Program.

We developed the program, but administrative procedures delayed the international tender until 2014. As a result, the program launched at a pivotal moment for Ukraine. East Europe Foundation won the tender, which was notable since few Ukrainian organizations could then compete with international consulting firms. Our partnership began at that point.

**When EGAP launched in 2015, we became involved in all major reforms. The program's timing was ideal, as demand for government accountability was high. Had it been launched earlier, it likely would not have succeeded**

When EGAP launched in 2015, we became involved in all major reforms. The program's timing was ideal, as demand for government accountability was high. Had it been launched earlier, it likely would not have succeeded.

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When our Swiss colleagues visit Ukraine, they say, “Wow, your digital transformation is really impressive! We can only dream of something like that.”

Digitalization enables more comprehensive reforms. This project is important to the Swiss government, as Switzerland supports Ukraine’s reform efforts, democratic governance, and sustainable development.

At EGAP, we do not simply develop platforms or tools; we help implement turnkey reforms. Each program delivers a comprehensive solution and full support for our partners, including ministries and local or regional authorities. The digital product is only one aspect. Our team, in collaboration with government partners, reviews all business processes, assists in drafting regulations, identifies opportunities for improvement, develops the final solution, trains users, and conducts communication campaigns to inform citizens about new services.

Digital education is a major focus of our work, as new services require users to have sufficient digital skills.

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Despite the technological changes that have taken place since the program began, our goal remains the same: accountable government and active citizen participation in decision-making. As part of this effort, we are building cooperation in various areas.

Switzerland is recognized for its flexibility and adaptability as a donor. When full-scale invasion began, we quickly shifted to urgent support by restoring internet access, establishing Resilience Hubs in Administrative Service Centers, installing solar panels and charging stations, and implementing local alert systems. Such endeavors drive innovation and enhance government accountability, ensuring transparent, high-quality services for citizens. Such projects also strengthen community unity and resilience.

We collaborate with the government to implement nationwide reforms across multiple sectors. Our work in diverse regions and communities gives the program a clear understanding of the country’s needs. The leadership of East Europe Foundation is essential to our coordinated efforts. Regional coordinators, who live locally and contribute unique expertise, actively share their experiences and add significant value to the program.

It is very important that the program is developed in Ukraine with a sense of context, implemented by a team that lives in Ukraine, breathes the same air as the smallest communities, and feels the vibe of society — this yields a completely different result.

It is essential that the program be developed in Ukraine, with the local context in mind, and implemented by a team based in the country.

# It is essential that the program be developed in Ukraine, with the local context in mind, and implemented by a team based in the country

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The final phase of the Program is currently underway. We are confident that we will help implement many of the systemic reforms we have undertaken. These are major projects, such as the reform of the State Statistics Service and improvements to management systems in the health care and social policy sectors.

Ukraine's digital transformation will continue beyond the EGAP Program. We have helped establish a strong foundation, and the Ministry of Digital Transformation remains a key driver of progress. This foundation will make it easier to further refine systems and approaches.

At this stage, our focus is on transferring our work to local stakeholders. We are actively collaborating with regional development agencies to share our achievements and products, ensuring they can continue supporting communities in digital development after our involvement ends.

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The first phase of our Program had a budget of 4,5 million francs. We are now in the third phase, and our budget is 58,6 million francs.

At the outset, we did not anticipate reaching this scale. The Program demonstrates Ukraine's ability to implement systemic reforms and manage significant partner aid efficiently.

The establishment of the Ministry of Digital Transformation marked a significant shift. Previously, we collaborated with the State Agency for E-Governance. As a ministry led by the First Deputy

Prime Minister, it has a greater capacity to influence policy. The ministry and its team have driven dynamic progress in this field, making it a key asset for Ukraine's reform and development, particularly during the challenges of war.

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No other country where Swiss cooperation programs operate has an initiative comparable to EGAP. Implementing such a program requires a deep understanding of societal needs, which are often less clearly defined in other contexts.

For example, Switzerland is widely regarded as the gold standard of direct democracy. In some communities, citizens still vote by a show of hands in the town square, and everyone understands their influence through referendums. Public services are delivered effectively in traditional formats, so there is no pressing need for radical digital reforms.

In Ukraine, socio-political processes are closely connected to digital platforms and social media. Ukrainians actively use these channels to express their views, thereby making digital democracy widely accepted. The digitization of public services has significantly improved interactions between the state and citizens. This progress makes a return to previous practices unlikely and motivates the government to continue pursuing innovation and service improvement.

Ukraine's digitalization will continue after the EGAP Program concludes. We have helped establish a strong foundation.

**Ukraine's digitalization  
will continue after the  
EGAP Program concludes.  
We have helped establish  
a strong foundation**

# How Digitalization Is Transforming the State

Photo: Danylo Pavlov



**MYKHAILO FEDOROV**

First Deputy Prime  
Minister, Minister of Digital  
Transformation of Ukraine

From the outset, our mission has been to create the world's most user-friendly digital state for citizens and businesses. We began by analyzing the challenges citizens encounter, recognizing that a government's primary role is to address these issues. When problems are resolved, public trust in the state increases, which positively influences government decision-making.

We believe the state should operate seamlessly, providing services automatically while supporting citizens in meeting their obligations. Mutual trust between the state and citizens is essential, and digital tools like Diia are designed to foster this relationship.

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Before the full-scale invasion, we prepared our digital infrastructure. We launched Diia, a mobile app and portal, as well as Diia.Engine to accelerate registry digitization. We also introduced Trembita, which enables data exchange between all core registries and Diia.

As a result of this preparation, we have launched more new services since the invasion than before. However, crises do impact the pace of transformation. The progress we achieved in three years could take other countries two decades.

**Mutual trust between the state and citizens is essential, and digital tools such as Diia should help foster this relationship of trust**

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Ukraine's digital transformation is succeeding because we apply startup principles. This enables us to work quickly, adapt easily, and build strong partnerships, as demonstrated by the Diia and Mriia projects.

Our rapid growth is supported by Switzerland and the EGAP Program, implemented by East Europe Foundation. Switzerland is now one of our largest donors, and together we have launched many digital services.

We do more than attract funding; we build mutually beneficial partnerships. We create shared assets, demonstrate rapid transformation, solve problems, and serve as an example for supporting governments. In doing so, we show that similar progress is possible elsewhere.

Ukraine has achieved a high level of digitalization and adaptability to digital services. We aim to make all services accessible online, while also preparing infrastructure for future services. Many of today's most successful digital services did not exist before we began developing them. Our partners are prepared to engage with emerging opportunities. For them, Ukraine serves as a testing ground to observe digital transformation in action. This readiness is why we receive support when introducing urgent new services.

## **Our partners are ready to work with a future that doesn't yet exist**

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Our goal extends beyond providing services; we aim to foster a social culture. We are considering tools that allow individuals to view their tax contributions, followed by the introduction of direct e-democracy services.

For example, we are collaborating with East Europe Foundation to launch the eDumka project, a social network for direct e-democracy. This platform will enable citizens to discuss local issues, such as infrastructure needs, that require attention from authorities.

# The digital transformation process has no end. After all, the essence of transformation is to constantly change

This initiative goes beyond petitions. We aim to elevate the project so that, through gamification and city rankings based on problem-solving effectiveness, participation increases to a level that compels government response.

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It is difficult to predict the younger generation's expectations of government. Their online communication styles are already evolving rapidly, so we must be prepared to respond quickly to their needs.

Our priority is to collect high-quality data that can inform effective management decisions.

Children growing up in a digital society will be able to bridge communication between users, citizens, and the state. We are committed to understanding and preparing this generation for the future. This commitment drives the launch of, which enables real-time insights into children's experiences.

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Digital transformation is an ongoing process, defined by continuous change. As technology shapes our present, we are preparing children for a future that has yet to be defined.

The future of democracy depends on how governments manage this transformation and respond to citizens' needs. The most effective response is to anticipate and prevent problems.

# How Digitalization Is Transforming Our Community

Photo: Kostiantyn Chernichkin



## OLENA SHVYDKA

Head of the Ivanivka  
Territorial Community

Since April 2022, our community has focused on rebuilding with the goal of creating a safer, more comfortable environment where every resident has opportunities for self-fulfillment.

During the occupation, our Administrative Service Center, village council, and village offices were destroyed or severely damaged, and many documents were lost. After de-occupation, I realized that if our records had been digitized, we could have begun recovery and provided social services more quickly, even outside our community.



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My staff is always open to innovation. When I became chair of the village council in 2011, my first initiative was to introduce Internet access, as I have always supported new advancements.

We began by creating a registry of damaged and destroyed property to launch e-Recovery. We then introduced participatory budgeting, the Svoi chatbot, and joined the DREAM program, which is essential for reconstruction. We have also implemented electronic document management and queue systems, and are using the SIDAR system to monitor humanitarian aid for residential infrastructure restoration.

**My team is always willing to open their minds to new ideas. When I became chair of the village council in 2011, my first step was to provide Internet access, reflecting my commitment to innovation.**

# I believe digitalization simplifies life for everyone, including both young people and the elderly.

It was crucial to restore the Administrative Service Center, which had ceased operations following the occupation. With support from the Swiss-Ukrainian EGAP Program, implemented by East Europe Foundation, we were able to restore 100% of the administrative services at the Diiia.Center of the Ivanivska community as early as the first half of 2023.

The program also enabled us to install a solar power plant at the ASC, ensuring energy independence. As a result, ASC services remain available at all times, regardless of power grid disruptions.

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All these initiatives aim to make life as easy as possible for community residents and to make government services more accessible and transparent. I believe that digitalization is about making people's lives easier — not just for young people, but for the elderly as well. Of course, not everyone will use all the services. But everyone uses at least one service.

For example, a suitcase-based mobile service unit provided to our ASC allows us to support those most in need. Our specialists regularly visit remote areas of the community, often assisting elderly residents whose homes have been damaged by the war. Since they cannot travel to the Administrative Service Center, our team visits them with the field service kit and helps complete paperwork for the eRecovery program.

The suitcase-based service kit is about human dignity. It's about the fact that every community member, regardless of where they live or their condition, has the right to support and attention. And we will continue this work, because bringing services closer to people is our mission and our duty to the community.

## As we continue to learn, our children are already growing up in a digital environment.

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A new level of communication between the community and the Administrative Service Center helped create a smart call center. It automates call processing and enables rapid distribution of inquiries. Thanks to this, our specialists respond promptly to questions, provide consultations, and remind people about completed administrative services and ready documents. In turn, people can receive an automated response regarding the Center's hours of operation and the required documents for a specific service.

This creates transparency, clarity, and predictability in communication. People feel that they are being heard, that their request isn't getting lost, and that the response isn't delayed. And that is precisely what builds trust. When a resident calls the ASC and knows they will receive a professional response, that they will be spoken to politely, and that their question won't be lost — a completely different level of relationship forms between the government and citizens.

We also aim to install video cameras in social service facilities and public spaces, with footage transmitted to a central server managed by the community police officer. This large-scale safety project relies on digitalization.

We also plan to digitize all community documents to establish a digital archive.

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Although reading has declined in our community, we chose to keep the libraries open. Thanks to the EGAP Program, our central library director became a digital ambassador, traveling monthly to remote villages to teach digital literacy to older adults. Residents are pleased to see Oksana Vasylyivna, and participants learn to pay for utilities, use e-prescriptions, and navigate online resources.

Digitalization makes technology accessible, understandable, and practical.

As we continue to learn, our children are growing up in a digital environment. Students at Anysiv Lyceum now have access to a robotics class through the EGAP Program, allowing them to create and engage with technology directly. For many, this is their first opportunity to work with modern technologies, see immediate results, and feel empowered as creators rather than just consumers.

This is important, as these children may remain in the community, join the local government, and implement their ideas.

**We are a smart community  
that has grown stronger  
through adversity and  
remains committed to  
continuous improvement**

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I envision our community in the coming years as successful and thriving, where everyone enjoys opportunities, comfortable living conditions, and a high quality of life.

We are a smart community that has grown stronger through adversity and remains committed to continuous improvement. We will keep evolving, learning, and adopting new tools to enhance the quality of life for all.

# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** November 2023  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Letter: We're Proud of Our Impressive Results

Hello everyone!

Friday evening has arrived, and as we wind down from another bustling week, it's time to pause and reflect on what we've accomplished. Here are some of the standout moments.

Veronika Chechotkina presented the Foundation's experience in raising mine safety awareness at a conference at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining.

Veronika highlighted our information campaign, the creation of digital tools, and our teamwork with the State Emergency Service of Ukraine. It fills me with pride to see our expertise and stories from Ukraine resonate on the world stage.

Our journey in civil protection is a story worth telling on its own, and I am deeply grateful to everyone who made it possible. Let me share just a few highlights.

Our mine safety awareness campaign, which we implemented together with the State Emergency Service of Ukraine as part of the "Watch your step!" Program, reached over eight million Ukrainians and won six international awards: "silver" and "bronze" from the Effie Awards Ukraine, three "gold" Digital Impact Awards, and "silver" at the Kyiv International Advertising Festival.

We supported the development of the "Demining Ukraine" application, which allows users to quickly report the discovery of mines or shells to specialists, track dangerous zones on an interactive map, learn about different types of explosive ordnance, and even become a deminer.

The online course "Watch Your Step! Watch Where You're Going!" set a Ukrainian record for the number of participants (530,000 — just imagine!), and the song "Watch Where You're Going" has already garnered over a million views on YouTube!

We trained explosive ordnance disposal experts, introduced safety classes for children, launched themed educational games, and brought "Landmine Safety Week" to northern cities. Our efforts have truly reached far and wide.

Thank you to Veronika Chechotkina, Viktoriia Gladchenko, Ivanna Pavliuk, Liudmyla Lukianova, and Kristina Sobko for these achievements.

Sincerely,  
Victor



# BETWEEN A STEP AND AN EXPLOSION

Text: Yuliia Surkova  
Photos: Danylo Antoniuk

Today, Ukraine stands as the most heavily mined country on the planet. By spring 2025, nearly a quarter of our land remains perilous. No nation could face such a challenge alone. Our only path forward is to reach out to friends and partners for help.

The “Watch Your Step!” Program, launched by East Europe Foundation in the big war’s first year with support from DanChurchAid, is one step toward reclaiming safety for Ukrainian soil. Police officers, forest rangers, and territorial defense fighters from across the country — from Chernihiv’s forests to Kherson’s wide steppes — came together for training. For three days, State Emergency Service instructors showed them how to spot explosive threats and recognize danger before they strike.

Here are the stories of those who moved from uncertainty to confidence — people who learned not just to watch their own step, but to guide others safely as well.

In 2025, paramedic Serhii Fontanii qualified as a deminer. He is one of those who entered the field of demining thanks to Natalia Kirkina, a graduate of the "Watch Your Step!" program.



According to statistics, a single deminer can clear 15–25 m<sup>2</sup> per day, depending on the terrain and the concentration of explosives





Training new specialists and using modern technologies can help accelerate the demining process in Ukraine



**IHOR KORZHENSKYI**

There are no such things as former mine clearance experts, but I never thought my country would one day be at war and that I would have to refresh my professional skills in retirement. My friend Valerii and I are deminers. We studied together, served together, and then founded a security company together. When full-scale war broke out, we were already over 55, but we couldn't just sit quietly at home. We decided to help with our knowledge and hands to expand our scope of work and engage in demining.

I found myself on an explosive identification course in Pereiaslav: lectures, hands-on drills, and young State Emergency Service instructors who seemed to know every fuse and bolt by heart. Watching them, I was struck by their expertise — true professionals of a new era. It felt like stepping back into my youth, back to school, but this time the stakes were real, the munitions new, and the responsibility heavier. What moved me most was seeing people of every age and background come together, united by a desire to help.

After training, I returned to my home community in Kyiv Oblast. My first call took me to a garden where an old F-1 grenade from World War II had surfaced. The next was deep in the forest, where a woman picking mushrooms discovered a modern mortar shell. These moments marked a turning point for me. Our company soon earned certification in seven humanitarian demining processes, from public awareness to clearing waterways.

We started from scratch, and now we have a team of about ten people. Among them is a young woman, Anastasiia, who's a diver and a dog handler. I ask her, "Aren't you afraid?" and she replies, "No. If not me, then who?"

Our team is made up of former mine-clearance experts, each with their own story. One colleague has defused thousands of explosive devices. We use a small robotic system to find cluster munitions in fields, and drones to map the magnetic fields of lakes.

If you want to understand how divers work, go into a room, turn off the lights, and try to find something there. That's how water demining works. Here, only a tactical approach works, meaning we search half a hectare of the lake by hand. It's long, slow, and meticulous work.

We do more than clear mines; we teach and inform. More than 500 children have heard our message: "Don't go near it, don't touch it, call 101." I remember once, while explaining tripwires, a child raised a hand and asked, "Do you know that if there's a tripwire, there's a mine somewhere nearby?" Moments like that remind me why our work matters.

When people hear the word "sapper," they imagine a steel helmet and dry instructions. For me, it is about an inner light inside that never fades. If not us, then who? Our motivation is simple: when people ask, we can't say no. Most of our work is done for free — checking fields and beaches. Communities aren't always able to pay for this, but everyone deserves to walk, swim, and live in safety, no matter the cost.

I often say that deminers are surgeons of the earth. It may sound grand, but our land and waters truly need people who are unafraid to heal them.

## NATALIIA KIRKINA

I had already fled my home once before, escaping the war in Luhansk in 2014. I built a new life and joined the Irpin police, slowly piecing things together. But fate has a way of circling back. It led me to serve with the police again in Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk Oblast. That is where I found myself on the morning of February 24, 2022, helping locals evacuate. I can still hear the rumble of evacuation trains carrying stressed adults and frightened children into the unknown.

In March 2022, after many years of service, I retired. My family and I moved to Irpin. My husband joined the municipal guard, and I could not sit idle either. The liberated city was littered with shells, debris, and tripwires. Returning home was dangerous as every step carried risk.



Natalia Kirkina knows from personal experience how a once-safe home can turn into a dangerous trap. So, she helps others find and defuse these traps

A group of volunteers came together — those were not soldiers or deminers, just people who could not watch children play near unexploded shells. We drove through the city, collecting anything dangerous we found. Soon, we realized we needed more knowledge. Two friends and I joined a training course run by East Europe Foundation. Of the 30 participants, only two were women. Instructors led us into the forest, revealing the hidden traps of war among the pines. I remember catching a string between the trees — my heart dropped, then a loud bang. It was only a demonstration, but the fear was real. That training taught me to treasure every moment when the ground beneath my feet is safe. Sometimes, a single misstep can cost a life.

After the training, we founded the Humanitarian Demining Foundation in Irpin. My official role is occupational safety engineer. Over time, I learned not only to identify mines, but also how to clear them.

People often wonder why I chose to become a mine clearance expert. It's because of my father: he grew up in the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II. As a little boy, he found a grenade fuse that exploded and injured his arm. He lived with that injury for

I dream of a future where these stories fade into distant memories, and the forest floor bursts with mushrooms, not hidden tripwires

Everyone needs to know how to identify explosive objects, especially in regions that were under occupation or where Russian troops entered



the rest of his life. Now, I watch history echo through new generations.

My team and I work in Irpin and beyond, traveling to nearby towns. Once, a woman spotted a hole on her doorstep and froze in fear. Inside was a shell that, by some miracle, had not exploded. One more step and she could have been killed. Another family, returning after de-occupation, noticed handprints on a dusty children's piano. When we lifted the lid, we found a tripwire. It's terrifying to imagine what would have happened if a child had pressed even a single key. This horrible thought still haunts my sleep.

The most frightening part is how ordinary these dangers appear. I recall teaching schoolchildren about hazardous objects, showing them slides. Suddenly, a boy raised his hand and said he had something similar on his bookshelf at home. We hurried to his house and found a combat detonator nestled among his books.

Some people think we need to teach children to be careful, but even adults in the de-occupied territories aren't afraid to go into the woods to pick mushrooms, saying, "Our dog ran through there, so it must be safe." But while looking for mushrooms, you might find a tripwire. I won't set foot in the woods again, and I ask others not to go to places that bear the scars of war.

We are all learning to live amid constant danger, but vigilance can save us. The full-scale war has been going on for almost four years, but we are still finding World War II shells. Every demining mission is dangerous, but we understand that we bear the responsibility for the lives we save.

I hold onto the hope that one day these stories will fade into memory, and the forests will offer only mushrooms, not hidden dangers.



During the training, the State Emergency Service demonstrated what traps, tripwires, and various explosive devices might look like





**ANDRII TSYGANOK**

I'm from Kyiv. I graduated from the university's military department, so I received training and was commissioned as a reserve officer. However, I chose a civilian profession: I worked as a martial arts coach, teaching children judo: how to fall, get up after a strike, and not give in to fear. Unexpectedly, it was discipline that came in handy for me on the front lines.

After the full-scale war began, I joined the territorial defense. I understood that I wanted to be useful to the country, and also that knowledge of ammunition could save lives. That's how I ended up in a course on identifying explosive objects. When the course began, they told us right away: "You are not bomb disposal experts; we won't be teaching you how to clear mines. You are simply people with more knowledge than the rest. You'll be able to recognize various types of ammunition." The instructors taught us the theory, then took us into the woods to show us firsthand what traps look like and where mines are most often hidden.

Though I am not a deminer, I have handled explosive ordnance across different fronts. Now, I command a small, independent long-range strike company. We scout, often using drones to hit enemy positions deep behind their lines. The lessons I have learned have repeatedly saved us: my comrades and I have found unexploded shells and called in the experts. The most vital rule is simple: if you are not an explosives technician, do not touch, do not approach, and do not even consider handling unknown objects. The enemy sets traps, mines supply routes, and drops small munitions from UAVs. Those most at risk are the people on the ground, such as farmers, residents of de-occupied towns and villages. They must remember the basics: do not touch, mark the spot, and alert the State Emergency Service.

Knowledge is the antidote to fear. The more you understand, the more calmly and clearly you can face any challenge.



*In addition to Igor, Nataliia, and Andrii, more than 300 people have learned to identify explosive objects. And although not all of them became bomb disposal experts, this knowledge and these skills will stay with them forever and may one day save a life. The "Watch Your Step!" program has reached over eight million Ukrainians through educational tours, an online course, and public service announcements.*

*For this work, the Foundation received six international awards, including two Effie Ukraine awards, recognizing its work in marketing communications in Ukraine. This once again confirms the initiative's effectiveness and importance: awareness truly saves lives.*

## Knowledge can overcome any fear



# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** April 2025  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** News, Events, the Weekend, and Lots of Easter Cakes

Hi, everyone!

Ahead of Easter, hope and brightness are in the air. Let's hold onto that spirit, come together, and welcome uplifting news and cherished moments with those we love. Finish up your work, unwind, and before you head off, enjoy this serving of our good Friday news.

Our friends at NGO "Lampa" recently shared some inspiring news online. Through the "Together for Support" program, they have created 27 shelters in schools and kindergartens throughout Chernihiv Oblast, allowing children and teachers to continue learning even when air-raid sirens sound. Sadly, these alarms are all too common and often last for hours in the region.

It fills me with pride to see us, alongside our partners, building safe and welcoming spaces where children can keep learning, even when life is anything but ordinary.

Even in the midst of war, Ukrainian children deserve a joyful, vibrant childhood and adolescence filled with learning and friendship. Thanks to school shelters, in-person classes continue, bringing comfort to both kids and their families.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Safe School team over the years: Olga Moloko, Oleh Masniak, Olha Rachynska, Oksana Medvedenko, Svitlana Sydoruk, Halyna Rybalko, Alina Kozhushko, Viktoriia Gladchenko, Kristina Sobko, Veronika Chechotkina, and Maryna Tereshchuk.

That's all for now. April 21 is a "day off" at the EEF! Put off work calls, meetings, and planning, because I have a task for you — enjoy your Easter cakes, soak up some positivity, and spend time with family and loved ones.

Take care of yourselves!

Sincerely,  
Victor



# FROM DUST TO LIGHT

The Journey of Ukrainian School Shelters

Text: Daria Svystukha  
Illustration: Maryna Kizilova

The old school basement is thick with the scent of damp and dust. Stale air presses beneath the low ceilings. Somewhere, water drips, and every foot-step sends echoes rippling through the gloom.

Before February 2022, most Ukrainian basements were little more than cluttered storerooms. Anything unwanted upstairs found its way down here: battered bookcases, broken desks and chairs, stacks of forgotten textbooks. People rarely lingered, slipping in just long enough to abandon another box. Then the war arrived, and these neglected spaces became lifelines — school basements transformed into shelters.

Teachers, parents, and children eagerly worked together to overhaul the basements. They removed piles of junk, scrubbed and whitewashed the walls, and brought in benches or mattresses. Each task was carried out quickly, fueled by the urgent hope of getting through the next round of shelling.

In the spring of 2022, a kindergarten in Chernihiv cleared out its storage room of old furniture and turned it into a makeshift dormitory. As the city endured a partial siege, dozens found refuge here. They cooked meals for themselves and the soldiers at checkpoints, hunted for fuel, and kept their phones alive with car batteries.

At a Kyiv high school in Obolon, the basement had served as a shooting range for the past 40 years or so, but for the most part, it had been gathering dust. The school's principal, Yevhen Poliakov, makes no secret of the fact that the school's shelter has turned into a storage shed. So, when it was actually needed in 2022, it took a week just to clear out the trash. At first, they did the basics; they set up

**But time  
passed,  
and the war  
continued.  
The temporary  
solutions  
gradually  
stopped  
working**

benches, but there were no facilities for the children: no ventilation, no restrooms. There wasn't even proper lighting.

This shelter became one of those requiring urgent repairs. Joint work began in late October 2022 — together, they agreed on a plan and started the renovation.

The roar of drills and the rumble of hammers echoed through the basement even during blackouts. We managed to complete everything planned: we installed a second emergency exit, renovated the hallway, restrooms, classrooms, and a space with a projector. Thanks to this refurbishment, we were able to expand the “usable” area of the basement. East Europe Foundation helped with equipment, board games, and heaters.

“We removed partitions, cut openings, ran wiring, and installed an exhaust fan,” said Yevhen Poliakov. “Every wire, every switch, they’re all new. And we did it properly. The children are happy. Now, during air raid alerts, the children aren’t stressed here. Not once has a single child cried, saying they want their mom because they’re scared.”

To avoid leaving the walls simply white, they decided to decorate them first with murals featuring Ukrainian symbols. Then the students took up the paint and brushes — the walls were adorned with Patron the dog, The Swallow’s Nest, “Mriia,” Motherland, and other images. During air raid alerts, the younger and middle grades entertain themselves by singing, playing board games, watching cartoons, or working with a psychologist. But most importantly, high school students do not stop studying.

After all, while it initially seemed that we just had to wait out the air raid in the shelter, it eventually became clear: air raid alerts are here to stay. If we stop studying every time a siren sounds, is that really education? That is why comfort has become a necessity.

In Kharkiv, students now attend school deep underground in metro stations. Passages and lobbies have become classrooms, complete with ventilation, heating, and lighting. Play areas, psychologists, and medical staff are available on site, and

school buses bring children to these underground schools.

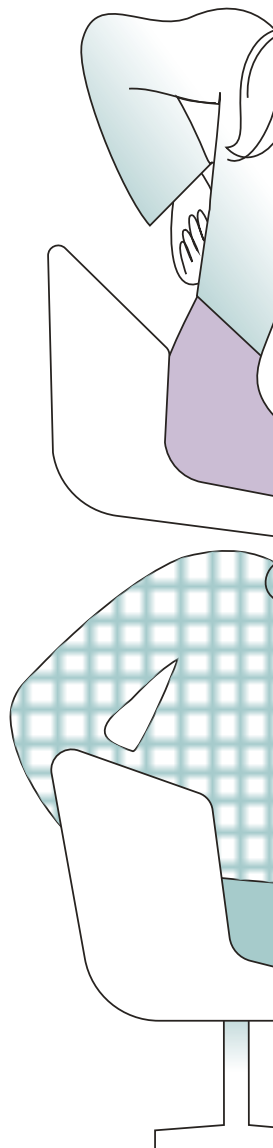
In total, over two thousand children attend the metro school. Nineteen modern classrooms have been created for them, some of which were equipped by East Europe Foundation. Even the rumbling of the train wheels cannot muffle the children's voices.

## LEARNING UNDERGROUND

The Safe School Program has reached 93 educational institutions in eight regions of Ukraine — in Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytskyi, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Odesa Oblasts, as well as in Kharkiv and Dnipro, where air raid sirens sound almost daily. Factors such as basement capacity and the number of students requiring shelter were taken into account. The team aimed to ensure that the word “shelter” would no longer be associated with a basement but would instead become a safe, well-lit space. In total, the Program provided shelters for over 34,000 students and more than 4,200 teachers.

Creating such shelters requires balancing state building codes, safety requirements, educational needs, and the human factor. Until 2023, shelter requirements were uniform for all types of institutions — 0.6 m<sup>2</sup> per person and multi-tiered “beds.” However, the rules updated after 2023 differentiated requirements for various sectors — education, healthcare, and others. Shelters must be more spacious, have two exits with wide, airtight doors, like an armored shield. The facility must have ventilation to provide fresh air for everyone and backup generators for power. The basic package for such a shelter includes everything necessary for comfort: from folding benches and pillows to first-aid kits, water, and food supplies. After all, if needed, the shelter must provide the means to stay inside for at least 48 hours.

In addition to technical requirements, psychologists are consulted during shelter setup to ensure children feel safe going down into them. Additionally, school basements have been equipped with televisions, projectors, games, and learning materials.





A commission comprising representatives from the State Emergency Service, the police, educators, and others is working on the shelter renovation project. Educators submit proposals regarding the potential use of the premises for learning, while emergency responders ensure compliance with sanitary conditions and technical requirements. The final design is developed based on these recommendations.

Oleh Masniak, technical coordinator of the Safe School Program, explains: Every project is implemented under financial and time constraints. On the ground, the program team worked with education departments and school principals who had basement inspection reports. These reports provided specific suggestions and comments regarding the use of the premises as basic shelters.

If the shelter is too small to accommodate all students, principals must find another shelter nearby. Or switch to hybrid learning.

“The distance to such shelters, if the building is multi-story, should be 300 meters, and for low-rise buildings, 500 meters. The Ministry of Education specified 100 meters in its internal documents. Another option is alternating in-person and online learning,” says Serhii Obodovskyi, head of the Civil Protection Events Organization Division at the State Emergency Service.

## THIRD-WAVE SHELTERS

After nearly four years of war, the meaning of a shelter is shifting. Once just a refuge, it is now a place where education continues, even during long alarms, lasting more than five or six hours. An increasing number of institutions want to continue classes underground. Near the front, basic shelters are enough, but schools hope to build full-scale bunkers that will protect even against radiation, says Serhii Obodovskyi. Still, not every school has the time or means to make this a reality.

“In many places, the management is not ready for the simplest shelters, because it is a big risk. But now there is a state subsidy: if an educational institution meets certain criteria, it can build separate anti-radiation

**One day,  
Ukrainian  
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and “war”**

shelters,” says Olha Moloko, lead manager of the humanitarian aid and reconstruction cluster of East Europe Foundation.

Currently, nearly 80% of educational institutions in Ukraine have basic shelters. This figure has risen from the low 13% since the full-scale invasion began. Ukrainian experts draw on the experience of Israel, Switzerland, and Finland and set an example for building codes. State Emergency Service expert Serhii Obodovskyi explains that Finland and Switzerland have 100% population shelter coverage, even though Switzerland has remained neutral in wars for over a century. Finnish law requires any building to include a shelter from the start. These shelters are regularly inspected and maintained in a state of readiness.

In Israel, schools, libraries, and gyms are equipped with “miklat” — public reinforced concrete shelters with thick walls capable of withstanding blast waves and debris. Meanwhile, Lithuania, also located near Russia, invited the Ukrainian State Emergency Service to consult with them on setting up shelters.

“Although Lithuania is a European country, it is post-Soviet,” said Serhii Obodovskyi. “Their experts invited us to consult on evacuation and sheltering the population to share our experience. Lithuania is currently at the stage we were at the war’s start — their shelters can accommodate only 10% of the population. They were not particularly concerned about this, but now they are using our experience with the simplest shelters.”

Ukraine and Finland have also established an international Shelter Coalition, through which the government plans to raise nearly 14 billion euros for basement conversions. This will help build 2,300 new structures by 2027 and another 3,000 by 2030. Together, they will develop a pilot project for third-wave shelters.

One day, Ukrainian schoolchildren will forget the words “air raid,” “shelter,” and “war.” But for now, they wait for the all-clear in the shelters, dreaming of a peaceful Ukraine, meeting friends without sirens, and traveling with their families. Their childhood continues even in wartime, amidst underground walls decorated with drawings.

# MONIQUE VAN DAM



Head of the  
organization ONE  
WORLD Citizens

ONE WORLD Citizens is an international youth organization that brings young people together around the ideas of social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and active civic engagement. It creates a space where young people can implement their own ideas for positive social change, develop entrepreneurial skills, collaborate with peers from other countries, and participate in dialogue with local and international leaders.

ONE WORLD Citizens and East Europe Foundation have been working together since 2013, when they jointly implemented an international project. The Foundation's team also regularly takes part in large international youth exchanges organized by ONE WORLD Citizens.

**How did your work with EEF begin — when and how did this partnership emerge, and do you remember that time?**

It was before the Russian invasion. Everything started at a meeting in Eindhoven, where we discussed an Erasmus+ project. Victor Liakh was part of our group — that's how we met.

At that time, we were already an international youth network focused on social projects and sustainable development. We believe in the power of diversity — the more different people there are in a group, the better the bottom-up solutions you can find. So we applied for a grant and invited East Europe Foundation to join. We already had participants from Albania, Bosnia, Georgia, and several key EU countries. We thought it was important to bring together people from very different life situations.

**What helps keep partnerships warm and human over time?**

We believe that when it comes to sustainable development, we must act as one world — that's reflected in our name, One World Citizens — because these challenges know no borders. The same goes for social inclusion: we want to help create a more inclusive world.

What truly unites us is a shared belief in the power of young people as key agents of change. We also realized that we need to help young people develop the skills to take action — not only entrepreneurial skills but also the confidence to trust their own vision of change, even when no one else sees it yet. You have to trust yourself — but it's always easier when you're among like-minded people.

**Ukrainian youth represent a unique generation growing up during the war, with a very different experience from that of young people in Europe. What can Ukrainian youth offer to the world?**

A lot — especially now, as the whole world faces growing risks of conflict. We will all have to deal with that.

The world today is very different from the one I grew up in. From what we've seen during our youth exchanges — especially from the Ukrainian team, but also from Bosnia, Albania, and Georgia — there's something truly powerful in these countries. In the West, we've become too focused on individual development, personal gain, and lifestyle. We've lost our sense of collective strength and the power of community. That's what Ukrainians have shown us: how people can come together, take action, and truly make a difference.

During one of our youth exchanges, which brought together young people from 12 countries, many participants learned from you that — despite circumstances — it's possible to rely on your inner strength and your community, even during war. That's something I keep repeating: we must remain strong in difficult times and learn to act together.

**Every organization wants to make its community and country a better place to live. But how do you keep faith that change is possible when the world feels overwhelmed by chaos?**

When something troubles you, you can either fall into negativity and become passive — or take action. If you know how to take small steps to make things better, locally or globally, then you're already on the side of change. You gain energy and start believing that change is possible.

Another important thing is believing that each of us can be an example of change — to inspire others and give them hope that change is possible. Individual efforts matter because they show that, no matter how small or big your actions are,

you can contribute. Of course, this takes skills and a positive mindset.

Real impact happens when you come together. That's what we value in youth exchanges: collecting answers and ideas from very different countries, cultures, and life situations. We learn from what young people are doing in each country, align our goals, and can even change the world together.

For each of our programs, we ask national teams to prepare a small live project before the main event — the idea is to take a small step toward change, so after the event, they already have the experience of making an impact. Your team, of course, started in Kyiv, at EEF office, with a project aimed at making roads greener — they created a green wall. It was a wonderful way to show young people from other countries that change can begin right where you are. They also created a very interesting project demonstrating how to reuse waste to grow plants.

**What can Ukrainian civil society organizations do to make their voices heard more on the international stage — to build truly equal partnerships?**

I would add that equal partnerships create a real win-win situation — this way, the other side values what you bring to the project, and vice versa.

We have always focused on practical, action-oriented solutions that everyone can take part in — so people really feel they can make a difference. What's truly important, in my view, is that many local solutions to challenges come from people from completely different backgrounds. It would be wonderful to have a platform where these best practices could be shared more widely.

This may sound a bit unusual, but a few months ago our former Prime Minister publicly called on Europe to develop “wartime thinking” — because, as he said, Europe has been asleep and must now wake up. In a sense, he was right — we need to be prepared. But we must also call for solu-

tion-oriented thinking. When so many people feel anxious and unsure how to act, we need to show that there are other ways forward. So, in my opinion, we should make visible the creativity Ukrainians have shown despite the challenges. That would be a powerful contribution to the world.

**In your view, what lessons can the world learn from Ukraine's experience of solidarity and mutual support — not only from young people but from the country as a whole, based on what you've seen over the years?**

First — empathy. Keep caring for one another. Don't say, "That's not my problem." The power of empathy and care — constant care — is how smart solutions emerged. For example, when there was no electricity, some offices that still had power opened their doors — there was a washing machine, there was internet access. Sharing and caring — that's truly important.

Second — humor. I really love seeing the power of humor, how it was used even within our teams during the projects. Humor is a great strength.

And third — never give up, and stay together. Never give up. Those three things — empathy, humor, and perseverance — are what I've taken from your experience.

# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** November 2023  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Letter to Wrap Up a Busy and Exciting Work Week

Hello everyone!

It was great to see you all at today's Friday meeting. By the way, we had 70 participants on Zoom! I'm proud of our growth and the results we're achieving together!

I'm excited to share some inspiring updates. The Spilnodiia team highlighted their remarkable progress in advancing volunteerism. The ShoTam media website recently featured an article about their journey: from building a volunteer fire brigade in the community, to organizing doctors' visits in liberated areas, and helping communities recover in the Russians' bombing of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant.

Spilnodiia's efforts have truly energized the volunteer movement in Ukraine. We've empowered organizations with grants, equipped rescue and fire service volunteers through training, encouraged the rise of new volunteer fire brigades, published practical manuals, produced online courses, and achieved so much more together.

In particular, our Zrozumilo! Online Educational Platform now features courses such as "Volunteering from A to Z" with Serhii Prytula, "Basics of Civil Protection" with the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, "United Ukraine: The Formation of National Identity" with Marichka Padalko, and "Watch Your Step! Watch Where You're Going!" with Oleh "Fahot" Mykhailiuta, leader of the band TNMK.

When the enemy blew up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, our partners from the NGO "Volunteer" set out without hesitation to address the aftermath of the tragedy. I am proud that our work enables us to support organizations whose activities become vital for people at such moments.

I want to thank the Program team for their work: Tetyana Mazur, Svitlana Ostriana, Liudmyla Lukianova, Alia Bondarenko, and Iryna Dobosh.

Your dedication is truly inspiring. Thank you for everything you do, and remember to look after yourselves.

Sincerely,  
Victor



# PEOPLE AROUND THE WATER

Text: Olena Livitska  
Photos: Danylo Pavlov



“I feel like I have to do something — so I’m going.”

How the bombing of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant became a test of mettle for volunteers who set out one spring to learn how to rescue

After the Russians blew up the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, 80 settlements found themselves in the disaster zone, some of which were flooded



Early June 2023. Kherson, freed last fall, is underwater. The Russians destroyed the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, causing the city and almost a hundred other towns to be flooded. Thousands of people are escaping the water and the disaster. Others rushed to help them. Meanwhile, the Russians keep shelling. But that does not stop those who want to help.

A line of cars carrying boats and supplies needed by people at the center of the disaster stretched along the road to Kherson from dawn on the first day after the dam was destroyed.

It's impossible to count the number of volunteers who came to the Kherson region to help the rescuers. But this coordinated effort helped save lives



Among these cars are some from the Kyiv region. Driving one is businessman Oleh Dibrova. As always, his Fox Terrier, Plaia, sits quietly beside him in the passenger seat of his small Honda. Oleh is leading this volunteer mission to Kherson, organized by a group that just completed training at the State Emergency Service center in Obolon, Kyiv, where they learned rescue skills and how to help as much as possible.

The All-Ukrainian Public Center “Volunteer” took on the task of organizing the training; Oleh and his friends have been involved since its founding in 1997, and he serves as chairman of the supervisory board and project coordinator.

East Europe Foundation responded to the call and undertook to finance the initiative as part of the Spilnodia Program, which it implemented in partnership with the Ukrainian Independent Center for Political Research and the NGO “Together Against Corruption” with funding from the European Union. The State Emergency Service of Ukraine gladly agreed to this cooperation, as they understood its significance better than anyone else.



## WE MUST DEAL WITH THIS

As soon as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, Russian forces occupied the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, a Ukrainian hydroelectric facility on the Dnipro River. In October of that year, it became known that the dam and power plant units in the Kherson region had been mined. If detonated, the water would quickly engulf more than 80 settlements, threatening the lives and health of hundreds of thousands of people.

The explosion occurred at 2:50 a.m. on June 6, 2023, releasing 18 cubic kilometers of water over the next three to four days. This war crime caused a massive environmental disaster. Under international law, destroying dams is prohibited, even if they are military facilities. But the Russians are ignoring international law in their war against Ukraine.

In the days that followed, evacuation of people and pets continued in the disaster





zone. For a long time, communities had no access to clean water. People from across the country and around the world helped locals clear debris and deal with the aftermath of the flooding.

The blowing up of the Kakhovka HPP dam is not just a story about ecocide and its consequences. It is also a story about social solidarity. Those were days when the meaning, role, and significance of volunteering in Ukraine were clearer than ever.

Among the thousands who rushed to help were those brought together by one of the first volunteer organizations in independent Ukraine — the Volunteer Public Organization. Not because they set out to be at the epicenter of the disaster, but because, for nearly 30 years, they have promoted and taught volunteerism.

The people of “Volunteer” are never indifferent when free help is needed. That was the case then as well, says Dmytro Doroshok, deputy chairman of the board of the “Volunteer” center.

In the spring of 2022, as soon as the Armed Forces liberated the Kyiv Oblast, countless Ukrainians rushed to clear debris, clean up, and rebuild villages and cities after the destruction.

“It was a call to action, an impulse: everyone just came and tried to do something,” said Dmytro. “At that time, instead of clearing or dismantling debris, rescuers often had to shoo away people who were putting themselves in danger by acting incorrectly. There were so many people that we realized we had to figure this out. It’s good they were active and ready, but we needed to train everyone.”

At that time, he says, East Europe Foundation decided to support the “Volunteer” center and included them in its large-scale Cooperation Project, launched with support from the European Union. The Foundation had already collaborated with the State Emergency Service, and “Volunteer” had a similar experience. So, the pieces fell into place.

Dmytro became a manager, and Oleh went to study. Both had been brought together by volunteering in their youth. At first, Oleh Dibrova was one of the participants in the scout camps organized by

A flooded apartment in Kherson's Korabel district



# The people at “Volunteer” never turn a blind eye when help is needed



Dmytro; the following year, he was already an instructor. Later, they traveled together to Germany to gain volunteer experience, wrote projects and implemented them, and developed the organization. And although each went their separate ways in adult life, joint projects brought the friends back together from time to time.

The war caught both of them in the Kyiv region. At the invasion, Dibrova was in the Bucha district, and Doroshok was in Kyiv. They made sure their families were safe while they got to work. Dmytro reorganized the center's operations and helped people fleeing cities and villages where fighting continued. Oleh joined the volunteers and prepared to repel the Russian attack on his native Kyiv region. On March 27, he signed

Oleh Dibrova and Plaia



a contract to serve and underwent rescue training during breaks between shifts. He was amazed and heartened by the people around him.

They trained in small groups of 10-15 people. Over two weeks, each group learned about mine safety, rescue and search operations, and how the State Emergency Service operates. They taught how to handle unknown objects and what first aid and psychological support should look like when a person is in shock from an explosion, death nearby, or anxiety.

“We trained about 300 volunteers,” says Oleh Dibrova. “Maybe it’s a bit less intense than what professional rescuers do, but these are people who will definitely understand how to help. They’re all completely different — in age and social status. For example, Denys, who traveled with me to Kherson, was barely 18. The oldest was a man who is now opening a volunteer museum; he’s over 60. These are people with values. It’s a pleasure to work with them and just meet them.”

We started in January 2023 and finished the project that summer. By the time of the tragedy at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, some volunteers had completed their training, while others were still in progress.

## DIBROVA

Oleh is 45. He has spent most of his life working with cars. He sold them for official brands and brought them to market, handling everything related. For a time, he, an engineer by training, even ran a small gallery business.

His grandfather and father were in the military. Oleh grew up in an ordinary family: he wasn’t raised to be a soldier from childhood, but they taught him to make decisions by example. Oleh sometimes recalls the story of his surname, Dibrova: his grandfather was once registered in the Russian style — they said a soldier in the USSR could not be named Dibrova! Only Dibrov would do (resembling a Russian name)! But when Oleh was born, his father restored the family surname. That’s why Oleh is Dibrova

again. He attended a Ukrainian school in Kyiv (“a bit of a dissident one”). He went to scout camps, studied at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, got married, and has two sons. He currently serves in an air defense unit in the Kyiv region.

Oleh was stunned when, in February 2022, the Russians approached his native Bucha district near Kyiv. On the first day, he grabbed a hunting rifle and joined the local territorial defense, which wasn't even called that then. They waited for the Russians from the north and took turns on watch.

No matter what Oleh did in life, he periodically returned to social projects and volunteering, which he had been involved in since his student days. The



people from “Volunteer,” he says, are the closest to him, even during the war. In 2022, he felt it: his friends were by his side. Together, they organized a crossing to the other side of the Irpin River when the bridge was blown up to stop the Russian advance on Kyiv. They helped people evacuate and cleared debris at missile strike sites. Work was in full swing until the Kyiv region was liberated. During that period, Oleh realized people rushing to volunteer needed “help to help” to prevent the crowd from getting in their own way. That’s when they created the project for volunteer rescuers.

That summer, boats became an invaluable means of transportation: after all, some parts of the city could only be reached by water



# People who survived the occupation are different

Those who survived the occupation and flooding will always remember it. But what will those who came to help them remember?



## WATER IN THE CHANDELIERS

The people of Kherson welcomed the volunteers and hosted them in their apartments. Since then, Oleh has been friends with Roman Bezrodnyi, who was coordinating one of the humanitarian centers. Before the war, Roman ran a business making sails. Oleh is also passionate about yachts. The men bonded over shared values and interests. They can talk for hours, not just about the war.

Roman's hub was in the center of Kherson, where the people from "Volunteer" set up shop. They gathered clean water, food, boats, motors, gasoline, and rescue equipment from all over. For several days, they sorted, packed, and loaded supplies. Two crews worked constantly on the Inhulets River, ferrying people by boat or delivering bread to flooded streets where people sat on rooftops or high ground. Meanwhile, people in Kherson kept calling the hub to donate items like boats or to ask for help.

The water receded after a few days. Operations were then organized to receive requests and provide targeted assistance. They received boats, repaired them, gave them to other rescuers, or used them to deliver bread or water.

Eventually, Oleh began traveling to Kherson every two weeks. They took requests again and cleared out flooded homes, including a kindergarten in the Korabel neighborhood. During the disaster, water completely filled his basement and rose half a meter into the first floor. When it receded, it left behind hardened mud, a sea of rotten children's furniture, mattresses, and other items typically stored in basements.

"Water still remains in the chandeliers near the ceiling," said Oleh. "There's no light; the generator is running. There's this small, old children's furniture. Old, funny, just like from our childhood. But at the same time, everything is so heavy and stinky. We couldn't stay there for more than a few minutes."

The city looked like the apocalypse, he says. When the flood came, it carried not just water but a mixture of sand and clay.



Then everything dried out and cracked. Beneath that layer of mud were yards, lawns, and sidewalks.

“We broke up the crusted mud, carried out the ruined belongings, and listened to terrifying stories,” said Oleh. “Those were all ordinary people. It felt like walking into a grandmother’s house, seeing neighbors, or going to the store. Everyone was exactly like that. Some were beautiful, some weren’t — crooked, cross-eyed, kind, mean — absolutely ordinary people. But their stories were striking. In the middle of the conversation, the woman we visited said she had spent 60 days in the basement. She passed on information about Russian positions to us. There she met her friend, an agronomist who had maps showing the Russians’ locations. The woman returned home, where her frail mother was waiting. Her mother said, “My dear, thank God you’re out,” and then died the next day.”

People who survived the occupation are different, he is convinced. The experience remains with them as a constant theme throughout their lives. Since then, Oleh often wonders what he would have been like. Today, he has resumed his studies and is writing a research paper on the formation of cohesion in de-occupied communities.

After some time, Oleh Dibrova and Roman Bezrodnyi came up with the idea of continuing to help these communities. While working after the dam breach, they noticed how difficult it was for people to wash clothes. So, they began setting up mobile laundries: two washing machines, a pump, and a large tank of clean water. They delivered them in a trailer upon request.

Later, they drafted a project and received funding from East Europe Foundation and Switzerland. There was no longer an urgent need to transport water with the washing machines, but displaced people heading to villages still needed them. Thus, they opened 12 laundries in the Velyka Oleksandrivka community in the Kherson Oblast and in two communities in the Mykolaiv Oblast.

## A LONG AND GOOD LIFE

Every time he returned from Kherson, Oleh tried not to think about the consequences of the enemy's actions. He is often asked to speak on this topic, but refuses.

"It's hard for me to talk about it. They aren't human, neither then, nor now," he said. "The blowing up of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant dam is truly terrifying. You walk through the city — it is empty and devastated. I knew Kherson differently. But letting these thoughts consume me is also their victory. As my wife says, 'I hate you because I know that I am capable of hating you.' These feelings aren't typical of us, yet they want us to think about them."

In Kherson, a girl of about seven got into the boat with Oleh. Kristina. Skinny, small, with big frightened eyes. She was silent and clutched a crumpled, bloodstained bag to her chest. No one touched the child. They moved her into the boat and passed others along. While waiting to cross the Inhulets River, Oleh spent a lot of time with her and got her to talk.

Her words have always come to mind whenever those days are mentioned. "I know why animals live shorter lives than we do," the girl in the boat said. "They're born, just like people, good and joyful, and live that way their whole lives, doing good and living it out quickly. But people start the same way and then forget about it. They need much more time to do the good they were meant to do in this world."

"I thought about that a lot back then," says Oleh. "Later, it turned out that in that little bag, she had been carrying a dead kitten and a barely alive puppy the whole way. Fortunately, we nursed the puppy back to health. Later, I came back and brought her a little kitten."

\*\*\*

If we recall how volunteering began in Ukraine, Dmytro Doroshok, a historian, would speak of another form of community service: Ukrainian "toloka". The ancient tradition of gathering as a community to build a house for someone, mix clay, or work the fields. This has been in our mentality and blood since ancient times.

**The blowing  
up of the  
Kakhovka  
Hydroelectric  
Power Plant  
dam is truly  
terrifying**

When the water receded, people began returning to their homes. And the volunteers continued their work where it was needed



With the emergence of independent Ukraine, volunteering and civic engagement became its foundation. When people rallied to help and united, key events unfolded — Maidan protests, revolutions, changes, and turning points.

“How did the country’s resilience manifest at the start of the war? In the fact that people didn’t need to be told what to do. This decentralization saved us. A country’s resilience is measured by the people who care about it,” says Dmytro. This is what they sought to teach society when they first established the Volunteer Civil Society Center.

That spring training session led by the rescuers and East Europe Foundation was very timely, as Oleh now reflects. They taught people not just to help, but to manage their emotions. Not to panic, but to pull themselves together and plan their actions clearly.

Since then, Oleh has been not only in Kherson but also, for example, at the rubble of “Okhmatdyt” — a children’s hospital in Kyiv that the Russians deliberately targeted with missiles in July 2024.

He is certain: in every crisis that needs helping hands (and there are many such crises everywhere right now), there are those who were trained in Obolon. Or people like them. They are all decent and good people. Because volunteering is a filter for such people. A filter for goodness.



# FRIDAY LETTER

**From:** Victor Liakh  
**Sent:** November 2025  
**To:** EEF-ALL  
**Subject:** Friday Letter: Events, Lots of Work,  
and We're Awesome :)

Hi, friends!

Another week, another Friday, and as always, plenty of events. Despite tough days, worries, and lack of sleep, you came to the office, joined us from different cities for staff meetings, and kept our daily operations running. I'm grateful to each of you for your dedication, hard work, and resilience!

The last few months of the year at the Foundation have been crazy, as always. There have been many public events. Our "year-end marathon" is in full swing with the Portfolio Review and the Board of Directors meeting. We are also preparing for the annual staff evaluation.

Before our eyes are metrics, graphs, budgets, strategic goals, tables, and charts. But behind all these visualizations is you, the team.

As I look back on this year — our fourth since the full-scale war began — I want to say, "We're holding up really well!" Moreover, we're developing, modernizing, and growing. What's especially nice is that we're welcoming new colleagues to the team.

In this letter, I want to mention colleagues whose names you haven't seen in previous Friday letters but whose contributions to our results are just as significant and sometimes decisive.

Digital Projects Team: Andrii Kharitonov, Kseniia Volkova, Timur Blyzniuk, Mykola Svetikov, Markiiian Mykytka, Oleksandr Katichev, Vitalii Hordiienko, Iryna Shevchuk, Anna Tkachenko, Liliia Shkrabak, Liliia Khomych, Anna Vasylenko, Oleksandr Ryzhenko, Anastasiia Ilchyshyn, Kateryna Nalozhytova, Artem Uliianov, Yelyzaveta Noskova, Oksana Matiash, Anna Ziatiuk, Anastasiia Klius, Kateryna Chepik, Liliia Khomych, Tetiana Tretiakova, Oksana Litvinova, Solomiia Starosolska.

I also appreciate and thank our individual digital project teams: Mriia, GGTC Kyiv, and CDTO Campus.

Colleagues, you rock!

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Those who organize office space and guide movement within it: Iryna Verbenets, Liliia Shcherbina, Viktor Rainchyk, Yevhen Hrebinichenko.

Thank you all for choosing the Foundation as your place. In times like these, you realize a team isn't about titles and signatures; it's about the people you can rely on when the ground beneath your feet is shaking. If we're moving forward despite everything, it's because we're walking shoulder to shoulder.

Let's take care of ourselves and each other!

Sincerely,  
Victor





**WHAT INSPIRES US TO  
MOVING FORWARD**

# KEEP



Amid a whirlwind of difficult news and war, each of them does their part. This coordinated effort drives reforms, launches new technological products, transforms major cities and small rural communities, and keeps the country on the side of light.

How do they do it?

What motivates these people who have chosen to dedicate themselves to helping others? How do they manage to do it all — to grow, learn, and help? What helps them avoid disappointment and keep hope?

In the end, we asked them ourselves.

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**WE SINCERELY  
APPRECIATE  
THE SUPPORT  
AND FUNDING  
PROVIDED FOR  
OUR PROJECTS  
AND PROGRAMS  
SINCE 2022.**

Baker Tilly International • Brücke der Hoffnung • Cisco • CNFA Europe • DanChurchAid • EPAM Ukraine • ERIM • Eurasia Foundation • Europe Foundation Georgia • Google.org • Hala System Inc. • Sticing Derdengelden • Terre des hommes • The Center for Liberal Modernity (LibMod) • The King Alfred School Society • Two Degrees ApS • Visa Foundation • the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) • International Renaissance Foundation • Norwegian Agency for Development and Cooperation (Norad) • German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) • the Embassy of the Kingdom of Denmark in Ukraine • United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) • the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida — Styrelsen för Internationellt Utvecklingssamarbete) • the Swiss Confederation • the European Union • as well as Ukrainian and international retail chains • individuals • communities • organizations and all friends of Ukraine who have supported our work through crowdfunding and personal initiatives.

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Kyiv, 2025

**“IN DIFFICULT  
MOMENTS, IT IS  
IMPORTANT TO BE  
TOGETHER, TALK,  
AND SUPPORT  
EACH OTHER.”**

When East Europe Foundation reached out, The Ukrainians Media gathered ten powerful stories — tales of endurance, shared struggles, and the small things that helped people persevere. Together, they form a new edition of the “Friday letter,” usually sent to the Foundation team by the leader — President of East Europe Foundation Victor Liakh, but this time shared with friends and partners as well. These are stories of people who refuse to give in to despair, stories of a country growing even in the shadow of war, and of lives transformed by the Foundation’s work. May this letter bring hope and light as the week draws to a close.