

The interview on *Today's Ukraine* with Professor Dmytro Drozdovskyi, conducted by Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney on 28th of March, 2022

Dr. Dmytro Drozdovskyi (PhD) is an academic fellow of the Department of Foreign and Slavic Literatures of the Shevchenko Institute of literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; he is a managing editor-in-chief of the *VSESVIT* magazine of world literature and translations, a member of the Bulgarian branch of the EESE, a participant of the ICLA congresses, as well as the author of several academic publications in the journals from Scopus and Web of Sciences databases (2019–2021).

Ukraine is a part of me; maybe this is the most expected answer.

Nevertheless, in fact, speaking frankly, I cannot imagine my life without my country. It is a world of my friends and colleagues, of different social and academic bonds, responsibilities, goals, and expectations. My parents live in the United States, they have been staying there for a long time and they got the news about the possible war just a few weeks before this catastrophe broke up. They begged me to come to their home, but I refused. It was not possible for me even to think that I can stay in some other place when my country is in a danger because of the inadequate actions of a dictator [Putin]. When the war began, my European

friends from Poland and the UK (you know this for sure) asked me to go to the USA in order to be safe. But this is not for me. I should stay here trying to do all that I can to help my friends who are now fighting for Ukraine's freedom. And I work each day as a member of the Information Defence of Ukraine. We will not have a Victory Day if we all go abroad thinking only about our lives, which is of course natural. Mothers do need to save the lives of their children. I trust that we all need to unite our efforts here and give powerful feedback to these inadequate war actions. The dictator understands the power, that is why it was so important to unite the military forces of Ukraine with our world partners.

I do not believe in the nuclear winter, but I still consider that only with the world army we could stop the monster.

Where were you when the invasion started?

I was in the theatre "Suzirja" in Kyiv with my colleagues from that magnificent Kyiv theatre. We had the feeling that February 23rd could be a special day for the dictator who still has an intention to renew the Soviet Empire. This is a day of the Soviet army.

Speaking frankly, my friends from the government sent me the news that the war would start the following day. I did not want to share this information, only sent a message to my friend Taras Kremin, who is the State Language Protection Commissioner, from the theatre in the evening. He could take all possible actions to support the institutions that can be attacked first as they are a part of the Ukrainian linguistic identity, and for Putin the concept of the Russian language in Ukraine is very important.

Moreover, my old friend who left the country on February 23rd and after whom the sky "closed" for civilian flights in Boryspil airport also informed me about the war invasion. However, that was my conscious decision to stay in my country supporting my friends in any way I can.

How do you survive this turbulent time in Kyiv? What does a day look like over here?

I wake up at 4–5 a.m. every day. Thank you, God, for the new morning. If it is possible to sleep, of course, as sometimes we hear sirens all night long and we hear the sounds of shelling and artillery. Then it is not possible to sleep. But each morning I wake up with a feeling of gratefulness for the Forced Army of Ukraine. They made it possible to sleep. There is a block post close to my house on one of the central motorways in Kyiv Podil, so I hear everything that is around when there are attacks and counterattacks. After that, I take care of my job at the Information Defence of Ukraine and this takes up to 3 hours. Then I go to my editorial office of the international journal *Vsesvit* that I run. One person who is a concierge there works in our business centre. On behalf of the *Vsesvit* journal, Yurii Mykytenko,

my colleague, and I prepared a petition for world cultural institutions: <https://www.vsesvit-journal.com/news/zvernennya-zhurnalu-vsesvit-do-kulturnyh-instytutysij-i-perekladachiv-svitu/>, asking for support of the Ukrainian defence activities.

Our petition has been supported by many European partners, and it was highly criticised by the Russian readers on our Facebook. The discussion was hot, and some pro-Russian European agents stated that this is not human.

What did they mean by this expression “inhuman”? Is killing people by Russian soldiers and converting money from culture into weapons human?

Since our Centre concierge needs food, I feel also responsible for doing the shopping for her. After that, I sit at the computer and share the daily news with my world colleagues, trying to persuade them to think in the categories of the new world that cannot be the same as what it was before the war. This war will change the world drastically, and we will have a new political, social, and cultural reality. Unfortunately, it is not possible to work in the evening as we live in a regime that does not allow switching on lights in the nighttime. It means that I have limited access to the computer at that time.

It is important to have friends' support – just a conversation is relieving and important. It allows me to “anchor” somehow in a different reality, and these conversations filled with wholehearted support make me stronger in a psychological sense.

I also communicate with my colleagues from various Ukrainian regions and I frequently attend meetings with my friends and colleagues in Kyiv. It also helps me mentally to survive. It is important not to feel alone and lonely in such moments of crisis.

Some of my friends initially left Kyiv, but they returned only 2–3 weeks later. Contacts with other people are crucial for survival, it is so difficult to live in the city that is under incessant enemy army attacks. Each evening one has the premonition that this evening can be the last of one's life. It was so difficult to have the feeling that I would be dead, that I would not wake up and admire the world in the morning. With time I accepted this idea, and it helped me to move ahead easier.

Could you describe your days in the city? Days of an average citizen?

Here I would like to add that now we need to think of how to buy food. There was not much food at all for some days in my Podil district at the beginning of the war. The nearest bank offices closed, so I had to go to different bank offices near Saksahanskogo Street, and this usually takes time – about 2 hours going there and back. I have a time problem with the organisation of my daily routine, since I work for the Information Defence of Ukraine. I can leave home just at about 2 p.m., while the bank office works until 4 p.m. In addition, there is no transportation in the district where I live, as the underground stations operate mainly as shelters

for civilians, and they are filled with women, children, and elderly people. For example, it is not possible to enter or exit the underground at such stations as the Kontraktova Ploscha and the Maidan Nezhahezhnosti – really important stations for transportation in the city. Any average citizen worries, of course, about food and water, and that is why many people left Kyiv. I still remember the panic of the first days of the war, when the nightmare began. In fact, it is an unforgettable experience to write academic papers while hearing the rockets and bombs outside. Just this interview is being prepared at the time of the curfew in Kyiv when we are not allowed to leave our homes and we hear these awful rockets outside. People have now united all their efforts to survive. This is the most important task.

In what way are valuable historic monuments, buildings, and artefacts preserved?

We heard some horrible news in the first days of the war that Mariia Pryimachneko's pictures were destroyed. However, later we got the information that some of them were in safe places.

On March 21st, I was passing by a museum located near the Taras Shevchenko park and I saw that the museum building was surrounded by the militaries. Their duty was to guard the building with historical artefacts. On the other hand, on the way to my editorial office, walking along the Andrijivskiy uzviz, I saw many historical monuments exposed to the damaging effects of the war. They are so vulnerable – they can be as easily destroyed by the rockets as the business centre in the Podil district was on March 20th.

What institutions, if any, are still in operation in Kyiv? Is it important that they fulfil their functions under the shelling of the city?

We have in operation mainly the institutions that support the basic needs of the citizens. Some supermarkets are open, while the majority of small shops are closed. Restaurants and cafes are closed, open markets are closed. A lot of pharmacies are closed, which greatly complicates the lives of people who urgently need medications. We have now about eight offices of my bank in the city open from 9 a.m. till 4 p.m. However, most banks in Kyiv are closed. The printing house where we print the *Vsesvit* journal is closed, too. Some colleagues from our office had to leave Kyiv and they are in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

Do you hold any discussions with your colleagues from Russia about the war?

We openly presented our positions on the website (<https://www.vsesvit-journal.com/news/zvernennya-zhurnalu-vsesvit-do-kulturnyh-institutsij-i-perekladachiv-svitu/>), but decided to terminate our contacts with Russia, the country that is responsible for deaths in Ukraine. After all, people are killed not by President Putin but by Russian soldiers who are afraid of saying “No” to the dictator. We have heard one fundamental support from a Russian academic, but she has advocated such support

with Ukrainian values over decades. Some Russian readers of our petition have responded aggressively, showing that they do not share any forms of the “cancel Russian culture” motto. Maybe they are too strong for them. Consequently, we do not know what their reaction is to the deaths of innocent civilians in Ukraine each day. I still believe that Russian people could have organised a riot in the tradition of the Russian history and should attempt to terminate Putin’s dictatorship even though he has powerful weapons in his hand. After all, it was possible to eradicate successfully the Soviet regime some time ago. And Putin should be put on trial and punished as a world criminal. Russian people should stop this monster, and the deaths in Ukraine severely blemished their human integrity and morality.

Has the war produced a lot of significant symbolic moments? Which one is the most important for you and why?

I am proud of my government and my President, who behaves in a very praiseworthy way. I especially adore his speeches which he delivered at international meetings in European and American Parliaments. These speeches gave me an understanding of the new reality which we face in rebuilding Ukraine. I trust that Ukraine is changing the world, it is changing the contemporary world history. Ukraine has introduced a brand new understanding of peace and world identity. It is a great pity to see that NATO as a world-leading organisation has not agreed to close the sky above Ukraine, since the Third World War may break out at any time. This New World War started on February 24th and still may initiate a *New World* with its centre in Ukraine.

What is your attitude to the various ways of moral support that people from all over the world show to Ukraine?

I am deeply grateful to all academic institutions that sent their letters of support, among others the ESSE (the European Association of the English Studies) and its members in Bulgaria (I am a member of its ESSE branch), the University of Lodz and Professor Wicher, who wrote an inspiring letter. I am grateful to all world institutions and academics who supported the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and sent their letters of support to Prof. Zahorodnii, the President of the NAS of Ukraine Academy, and to Prof. Mykola Zhulynskiy, the head of the Shevchenko Institute of Literature, where I am employed. The international appreciation of the new concepts based on empathy, solidarity, “unity of the hearts” (as the Polish people say) is extremely important.

The fight and its intensity varies all over Ukraine. What is the difference between the reactions to the military actions in bigger towns and in villages?

I cannot answer this question as I am staying in Kyiv all the time and I see brave and courageous people here who every day are ready to meet the enemy and counterattack the invaders. My friend, an actor and the former Minister

of Culture of Ukraine, Yevhen Nyshchuk, is a good example of what I mean; every day he visits the hot spots near Kyiv, saving people's lives and defending Ukraine.

Is the response to the war of the Western world enough? Why yes or why not?

The world supports Ukraine. They support peace and human lives. Billions of euros and dollars come to Ukraine and we need much more assistance to rebuild the country after our victory. Yet, it is important to understand that Putin can be stopped only with physical power – only violent power will lead to complete victory. The sanctions are very important, and we appreciate them, but we need weapons to save our lives. A lot of lives could have been saved if on the first days of the war the NATO “birds” [planes] destroyed the Kremlin bunker. Now, Putin is blackmailing the world with the possibility of a nuclear attack. Ukrainians believe that the EU should accelerate all the bureaucratic procedures to make Ukraine a part of the EU immediately. After all, we are in this extraordinary situation. Ukraine now is saving Europe from the tyrant and Ukrainian people sacrifice their lives to save the world. The world must understand this and change its policy for Ukraine's sake. My compatriots, not only civilians but also militaries, die daily, because the sky is not closed. We are fighting against a monster, a colossal python ready to draw blood from his own soldiers, whose bodies are lying scattered all over the Ukrainian soil. And these soldiers, mainly young men, die for the wrong reason. They do not even know what they lose their lives for. And we should remember that world peace can cease in a second if the Russian bombs and rockets are dropped upon the USA or the NATO countries. It is not an exaggeration that now Ukraine is fighting for world peace. At this point, it is Ukraine that is paying with the lives of its people to stop the war. That is for the time being.