



2023 Prix Voltaire Special Award To Volodymyr Vakulenko

**Interview with
Victoria Amelina, PEN Ukraine**

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KENNEALLY: Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Earlier today, May 22, at the World Expression Forum in Lillehammer, Norway, the International Publishers Association presented a Prix Voltaire Special Award for murdered Ukrainian children's book author and poet, Volodymyr Vakulenko.

Prix Voltaire nominees are publishers – individuals, groups or organizations – who have typically published controversial works amid pressure, threats, intimidation or harassment, be it from governments, other authorities or private interests.

Accepting the 2023 IPA Prix Voltaire Special Award on behalf of Volodymyr Vakulenko was the Ukrainian writer Victoria Amelina, the author of two novels and a children's book. She received the Joseph Conrad Literary Award from the Polish Institute in Kyiv in 2021 and was a European Union Prize for Literature finalist in 2019. She is a member of PEN International and currently works as a war crimes researcher. Victoria Amelina joins me now from Kyiv. Welcome to the program.

AMELINA: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: For the 2023 Prix Voltaire, IPA has presented a special award to the late Volodymyr Vakulenko, Ukrainian author, publisher, and organizer of festivals and readings, who was abducted and murdered by Russian armed forces in March 2022, shortly after the invasion of Ukraine. Volodymyr Vakulenko had many roles in Ukrainian publishing. Can you describe his reputation among other Ukrainian writers, like yourself?

AMELINA: First of all, Volodymyr Vakulenko was very honest and very passionate, exactly the kind of person who wouldn't be able perhaps to survive the Russian occupation without being arrested, without being questioned, and perhaps, as we can see, without being killed, because he was always honest, and it was important for him to have his freedom of speech, freedom of expression. It was very difficult for him to hide his views anywhere, and it was



particularly difficult for him during the time of occupation of his native village, Kapitolivka.

I have to say that we all call him Volodymyr Vakulenko, but his pen name was Volodymyr Vakulenko-K., and this K stood exactly for the name of his native village, Kapitolivka. So he was not only a patriot of Ukraine, but also he had very warm feelings about his village, and other writers also knew that. He grew up in the east of Ukraine, in the Kharkiv region, but since 2015, it was also very important for him to go to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and support those who had to live in the war zone. Little did he know that soon he himself will end up living in the war zone.

KENNEALLY: Vakulenko began writing children's books after the birth of his son, Vitalik, who has autism. What were the children's books about?

AMELINA: Volodymyr Vakulenko really believed in inclusivity, and he wanted all children to be able to read books and to share the same books, basically. So his children's stories were about animals. To me, it seems like – I'm also a mother of a son, and to me, it seems that Vakulenko's books were very kind and full of love for his son and for children overall. At his memory day in March in his native village, Kapitolivka, we read his book aloud, and in particular, we read his poem about an elephant. This is just an example. He was writing about all kinds of things. But his most famous children book is named *Daddy's Book*, and it is dedicated to Vitalik, to his son, who currently lives with Volodymyr Vakulenko's parents, with his grandparents, in the village of Kapitolivka in the Kharkiv region.

KENNEALLY: Vakulenko was also a political activist apart from being an author and a publisher. He took part in protests against former president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 and volunteered to fight, as you say, in the Donbas region after the Russian annexation that year. What did it mean to him to be a Ukrainian patriot?

AMELINA: He really took an active part in the Revolution of Dignity in 2015, and he was severely injured at the time. He had an injury of his head that he received in Mariinsky Park. This was very important for Vakulenko to be in the middle of history. He wanted to make history, I think. And it was impossible for him to watch how freedom has been taken away from Ukrainians, and he couldn't stay aside.

He didn't fight, in a sense. He had never had weapons, neither in Kyiv in 2015 nor later. He didn't volunteer to join the army as a soldier. But he volunteered to help the army. He brought help to the Ukrainian soldiers on the front line, and he kept doing so in the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022 as well. This is a tradition among Ukrainian writers. Since 2015, many of us, including myself, helped the soldiers on the front line on different levels, and Volodymyr Vakulenko kept doing this even after February 24th, 2022.



Some small things – he kept buying cigarettes for the soldiers or some food – whatever they asked. He just wanted to support them. He didn't have a health that would allow him to serve himself, but he wanted to make sure he does everything in his power to support those who can fight.

KENNEALLY: In September 2022, shortly after the Russians had fled Kapitolivka, where Vakulenko lived with his family, you discovered the author's journal buried in the family garden. Why were you in the Kharkiv region, and how did you know where to look for the diary in Kapitolivka? What did Vakulenko write about in that journal?

AMELINA: I came to the Kharkiv region in September 2022 as a war crimes researcher. This was the first war crimes research mission for the well known NGO which specializes in the war crimes research. The name of the NGO is Truth Hounds. It's a well established NGO that has been researching war crimes in Ukraine and other countries since 2015. I joined this NGO in 2022, because I thought that I might be useful in this way – researching war crimes committed during the full-scale invasion.

So once I heard that Iziium region was liberated in September, first of all, we were all happy. And my second thought was immediately, of course, about Volodymyr Vakulenko. We weren't friends. I just met him once during the festival in Kramatorsk, Donetsk region. But I followed his tragedy, I'd say, because we all knew that he is missing from Kapitolivka. We all knew that he's abducted. So it was important to find out what exactly happened to him. And as soon as I heard that Truth Hounds are organizing the first war crimes mission to the Iziium region, I volunteered to join them.

We went there on September 20th, 2022. I only was able to reach Kapitolivka on September 24th. Why it took us four days – basically, there were so many war crimes in the Iziium region that we just couldn't proceed to Kapitolivka. Also, to me personally, it was very important. This was the primary goal of this research mission. But we couldn't stop talking to people in other towns and villages. And during this first war crimes research mission, we uncovered, for example, three torture chambers in Balakliia, which is quite close to Iziium and Kapitolivka.

But finally on September 24th, we came, and my goal was to talk to Volodymyr's parents, because unfortunately – and this is often the case – Volodymyr's parents are the main witnesses in this case. His father, Volodymyr, Sr., saw how his son was abducted on March 24th, and his mother also came to try and help to prevent the abduction, so she's also a witness. There were also preliminary searches in Volodymyr's house, and his parents are also witnesses of that.



I came to Volodymyr, Sr.'s house and found my colleague's empty room. It was quite obvious that this is the room of a writer. I could see diplomas on the wall. I couldn't see most of his books, because those books were stolen, or as Russian occupiers said, taken for some kind of review. They wanted to analyze if those books are somehow related to nationalism. Well, to them, perhaps these books were related to nationalism, because they were just simply all written in Ukrainian language.

It was a very emotional moment for me, and I have to admit that I forgot for a moment that I am a war crimes researcher, and I was a Ukrainian writer again. I talked to Volodymyr's father not as a human rights activist, but as his son's fellow writer. I started talking about his books and looking at the books that were left on the floor in Volodymyr's room. And at this very moment, Volodymyr's father remembered that his son kept a diary. I have to say that almost two weeks passed since the liberation of Kapitolivka, but apparently Volodymyr's father didn't think about some kind of war diary his son left, because this is not what you think when your son is missing and is perhaps murdered. But talking to me about his writings, he remembered that there was this diary and that Volodymyr buried the diary in the garden before being abducted.

So after recording the testimony of Volodymyr's father, I also went with him to the garden, and we tried to look for the diary together. Eventually, I was able to find it. This moment was very surreal to me, especially because – I think you all know this by now – that Ukrainian culture was persecuted during centuries, basically, and many manuscripts by Ukrainian writers are still missing. For example, half of the novel of one of the most prominent Ukrainian writers, Mykola Khvylovy, is still missing, because all the copies were destroyed by the Soviet regime. There are many cases like that.

And I realized that perhaps Volodymyr Vakulenko is gone, and he hid his diary in the garden, and he wanted us to find this diary to hear what he had to say to the world during the occupation. It was very important to fulfill his will and find this diary. I was really scared – what will I do if I cannot find it? But fortunately, the diary was there, and I took it, and immediately after the end of the war crimes research mission, I brought this diary to Kharkiv Literary Museum. This museum is mainly dedicated to the so-called Executed Renaissance. So it preserves the manuscripts and books of the writers who had been executed by the Soviet regime in the 1930s. Unfortunately, right now, it also has a diary of a writer who was executed by the Russian regime in 2022, Volodymyr Vakulenko.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned, Victoria Amelina, about the Soviet repression of Ukrainian culture and literature. US intelligence agencies revealed before the Russian invasion in 2022 that the Putin government had prepared an extensive hit list of prominent Ukrainians who were to be rounded up, imprisoned, or killed after a military takeover of Ukraine.



What does it mean to you as a Ukrainian writer yourself that the Russians have made your country's culture a target for destruction?

AMELINA: It means to me that I'm fully aware that I am alive thanks to the Ukrainian army and thanks to our allies who supported us with weapons. And although – I mean, Ukraine is a very peaceful country. We are all about culture, music, art – mostly these things. But at the same time, every second of my life, I have to be fully aware that I have to be thankful to the army. And I have – despite the fact that I am a human rights activist, but the most important thing for us right now is getting weapons to defend ourselves.

I have to say that before the full-scale invasion, I had been rereading one of the history books, and I had been trying to imagine what it would mean for me if the Executed Renaissance would have to repeat, because perhaps 90% of my friends are writers, artists, or civil activists, and this would mean that 90% of my friends would be executed by the regime. This is quite an appalling thing to even think about.

This is perhaps the reason why we fight so fiercely, why we cannot understand what the question is when we are asked if we would agree to give up some part of Ukraine's territory. We cannot have any compromise. We cannot give up neither Donetsk, Luhansk, nor Crimea, because we know what's going on there in the occupation, and occupation is in fact something even worse than war. This is where people like Volodymyr Vakulenko become helpless and can be tortured and can be executed. To me, it is very important that the world hears us and understands this.

KENNEALLY: Victoria Amelina, thank you for speaking with me from Kyiv about the late Volodymyr Vakulenko, Ukrainian author and publisher, and recipient of the 2023 Prix Voltaire Special Award from the International Publishers Association.

AMELINA: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening.

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