



**A Book Festival That Matters in Kyiv
Interview with Yuliia Kozlovets**

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KENNEALLY: In a historic building in the city center of Kyiv, the fortification is formidable. Built in 1798, the Mystetskyi Arsenal was designed as a cannon factory, with yellow brick walls that are six feet thick. The arsenal became a museum and culture center 20 years ago. Yet in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion, it stands as a symbolic citadel for Ukraine.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. In late June, the arsenal was transformed into a giant bookstore and literary salon for the annual International Book Arsenal Festival that is a highlight of the Ukrainian publishing year. Outside in Kyiv and across Ukraine, the war continued. Russian missiles regularly soared over the city's night skies, and only weeks before, the Kakhovka Dam was breached, likely by Russian munitions.

Inside the arsenal, 28,000 people over four days attended nearly 100 book festival events with nearly 200 program guests. Yuliia Kozlovets, the book festival's coordinator, joins me now from Kyiv. Welcome to the program, Yuliia.

KOZLOVETS: Welcome, Chris. Welcome, everybody.

KENNEALLY: It's difficult to imagine, Yuliia, more challenging circumstances for a book festival than to be held during war. Why did you decide to bring back the festival for 2023, and what did that decision mean to Ukrainian authors, publishers, and booksellers?

KOZLOVETS: Actually, we had canceled the festival last year just a few weeks after the invasion of Russia into Ukraine started. And it was a natural decision for that moment, because Kyiv was circled with the armed forces of Russia, and it was absolutely impossible and dangerous to hold any cultural event. It was dangerous to live even in Kyiv at that moment.

But now, when we are a year and a half after that moment, we with the team were to decide what to do now, because we are living here in Kyiv. Kyiv Region was liberated from the occupants. There are successes – or there are losses of our army, of our armed forces. But Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, is standing. Kyiv keeps living. Kyiv keeps



fighting. And a lot of people are living here in Kyiv, and there is a big demand from these people to the cultural events.

Life here is not normal. Having the festival now here doesn't mean that everything is like before. It doesn't mean that we have no sirens which are announcing the fire attack, or we have no bombings or shellings sometimes. It happens. It even was happening with us at one of the nights between two days of the festival – on Saturday of the festival.

The decision was difficult, but we decided with the team and Mystetskyi Arsenal being the organizer of the festival. Also, it was the strategic decision – the decision was made something around the end of February of 2023 or beginning of March, even, of 2023 – the decision was to try to find a way to have the festival in much less format, in a different form of organizing the fair part and the program part, in much less scale than usual. But we will try, because nobody knows how long we should wait if we will not try now. Nobody knows what will happen in one week or in two months with us. But we want our festival now. We need to gather together with all our friends, with all the people, with the authors meeting other book people, with the publishers, with the book creators, with the readers, with a lot of people who have this demand to read, to understand what's going on with us, to read the new voices, to hear the new voices, to talk one to another, to discuss what is actual now for us who are living in the war – in the country which is fighting in the war.

So the decision was really not so easy, because we have reformatted a lot of things with our festival. But the decision was to try to hold the festival and to gather all of us together in Mystetskyi Arsenal, which seems to be not so much dangerous, because we have, for example, our own shelter in the arsenal which allows us to keep safe 700 to 1,200 people, and it also gives some – making me a little bit calmer than without it.

So we decided that we will try. And almost every next difficult moment starting from this decision moment, I was ready that we will cancel it. I will be honest. I was ready that it could happen even the day before – like we will stop the preparation and we will say, sorry, we are canceling the festival again. Especially May – it was very, very difficult in Kyiv. There were shellings and there were air attacks and drone attacks almost every night. And it was really something very, very difficult from the side of management and from the side of how people were working, because we were not sleeping at all, almost, because all these attacks during the night – you're either going to shelter or you're going to some safer place in your flat. And during the daytime, you're working. So it was difficult, but life in Ukraine is not so easy for everybody. It was our choice, and we decided that we will do it and we will do our best to have the festival this year.



KENNEALLY: Well, the challenges indeed are extraordinary, Yuliia Kozlovets, putting together this Book Arsenal Festival. How do you interpret the festival theme – When Everything Matters?

KOZLOVETS: Usually we have this tradition of having the focus theme of the festival. Each festival had the focus theme, and usually choosing the theme – it was also the work of the curatorial group, of the organizers' group of people, like working out what is actual now? What do we want to speak about? What people will want to listen within the festival? This year, it was also not so easy to determine the theme, because everything was changing so rapidly and dynamically that there was a risk that we will choose the theme which will not be actual – for example, in two weeks or something like this.

But I am extremely grateful to the curator of the topic focus theme, which is Nataliya Gumenyuk. She's a journalist and public intellectual, and she's a really very strong personality, working a lot now with the documenting of war crimes done by Russia in Ukraine, working a lot with the victims of war, working a lot with the journalists' investigations. And in the conversations, we came to this formula and to the name of the theme.

When Everything Matters – it's about this moment in which we are living now. We are living in the moment of time when for our nation, for everybody in Ukraine, things have their actual meaning. When you are telling people that we are wishing you a calm night, it means that we really are wishing the night without sirens or without the bomb shelling sounds. When we are speaking about freedom, we are thinking about freeing of our territories, freeing of the prisoners of the occupants, freeing of our land, homes. We are speaking also about the freedom as a main idea of Ukrainians who are fighting for our freedom, for Ukraine to be free.

When we are saying something about what democracy means, it's not something very abstract. It's not something – I guess that Ukrainians now understand democracy much clearer than ever, and maybe clearer than other nations understand it, even the developed democracies, because the people living in the developed democracies – they were not fighting for these values during the last 70 years. So it's something very abstract, for example, for young people in some peaceful countries in Europe, for example, or somewhere else in the world. But Ukrainians now are studying the democracy lessons with their lives, with their war experience, and it's something which really matters for all of us.

So speaking about the things which have their precise meaning, speaking about the moment when everything matters, we're speaking about this moment in which we are living. This was also reflected in all the discussions and the panels and the names of the



events which were included in this focus theme and which were included in other programs as well.

For example, being a curator of the program for kids and teens, I was speaking about something which matters for parents who have evacuated their kids to the safety regions. Our program for designers were talking about how designers are working now in wartime. So they were speaking about their instruments, which matters for them, because it's like the voice speaking with a very, very common language with the visual materials which are the result of their work as book designers. So it was really very, very actually something for all of us. It seems to me that the topic reflects very, very precisely the meaning of the moment.

KENNEALLY: You are a former bookstore owner. What role did Kyiv's independent bookstores play at the festival?

KOZLOVETS: It was also one of our complicated decisions, and the decision was discussed in the book people communities. Not all of our audiences understood us, I will be honest. But the decision was whether we will have the fair part in the festival or not. Usually, the fair part of the Book Arsenal Festival was organized as the individual stands of each publisher, and the publishers were applying to be part of the festival with their stand and sell books at the stand.

This year, when we were choosing the format for the fair part of the festival, we understood that because of the safety reasons, we cannot organize the fair with the individual stands of each publisher, because it will mean that we will have like 120 or 140 individual small stands, with a lot of staff working on the stand, with a lot of books being divided to all these small bodies selling books. All of these people should be managed somehow in very risky circumstances. Because if the siren sounds, everybody should go to the shelter. We should close the festival. We should evacuate immediately all the people. And in this case, organizing the fair with the stands, we'll have the challenge to evacuate at least 140 multiplied by two or three – how many persons are on the stands – people immediately, together with all the visitors, and together with thinking about safety of their books and all the goods at the stands. It was impossible. We understood it really very, very quickly.

And in this moment, I was thinking, who can sell the books if it will be not the publisher? The logical answer is the booksellers – the independent booksellers. Why independent? Because we were thinking if we are trying this model and asking to be our partners the booksellers, probably we should give a chance and the priority to the independent booksellers, because they are not so strong. They have a lot of challenges. Usually, they are also socially responsible businesses being important for their local communities,



working hard in the difficult circumstances, living in war as well as all of us now, but doing their small business, developing the written promotion, developing the community unity, and doing great things together with all of us.

So we decided that, OK, we will choose the independent bookstores who are working hard in Kyiv – located in Kyiv, because it's easier to manage the staff, the warehouse, the stocks of books. It's just easier to manage, because the festival is also located in Kyiv. And we chose five operators, because we were thinking about our visitors, and we were trying to keep the same form of organizing of the fair as it was usually. Because usually in Book Arsenal, we had also the sections of the fair which was operated by individual publishers. We had a section of fiction books, a section of nonfiction books, a section of art books, a section of books for kids and teens, comics and graphic novels. This year, we also added a special section of books about the Russian-Ukrainian war, because we decided that it's our mission to make this topic visible, to speak about this very, very concretely and widely, to have these discussions in the program, and to have this topic also visible in the fair part.

So we had five sections. Each section was operated by the separate bookstore team. And they were doing so-called collective stands of their genre in their location. So for the visitor, it was very similar to what was before, but it was not divided by the stands of these publishers, per publisher. It was divided by the topics inside of each section. So the role of the independent booksellers in this story is really very, very important. I'm thankful to the teams of these brave companies who were accepting these challenges together with all of us. And we have seen that the format was accepted by the audience of the Book Arsenal.

I understand that publishers were not so much happy with the fact that they were not so active this year. But from the other side, we have invited them to a networking event, to a special reception held by the festival towards the publishing community. We had also organized a professional program for them, and the panels were really quite interesting and very successful. It was also the important seminar for the publishers on how to sell rights abroad, how to do business in Ukraine, and what opportunities are now in Europe or in other countries of the world to the Ukrainian publishers. And we have asked also our partners – International Publishing Association, the European Publishers Association, the German Publishers Association – to talk about the possibilities and the opportunities for Ukrainian publishers to which they can apply. So we have tried to do our best to involve publishers in another manner to be also part of the festival.

KENNEALLY: Chytomo, an online publication that covers Ukrainian publishing and the national literary culture, noted that a book festival is usually a platform for the voices of living artists. But here during the Kyiv Arsenal, it was crucial to underscore the voices of those who had been slain in the war. That assessment included the recently published



diary of Volodymyr Vakulenko, a writer who was found in a mass grave in eastern Ukraine. Can you tell us about the diary and about Vakulenko?

KOZLOVETS: Yes, it was the very important event for our festival. It was in the very first day, in the day of opening, just after the opening ceremony. We have had a presentation – an event announcing the publishing of a very important book for us, the diaries of Volodymyr Vakulenko and his poems together in one book. And through this presentation, we have brought the family of Volodymyr Vakulenko – his former wife and his mother and his son, Vitalii. Volodymyr Vakulenko is a kids' author, an author who wrote books for kids – important books and very nice books, poems for kids.

He lived with his son. The two of them were living in Iziium. It's a small city in Kharkiv Region. Iziium was occupied by Russians last year. And when Volodymyr was together with his son – here, I can mention that his son, Vitalii, he has autism. That is why Volodymyr decided that they will not leave Iziium, because it was a complicated decision for his son to change the premises, to change his home, and it was difficult for him. So he decided to stay in Iziium. And after the occupation, very quickly, Russians came to his yard, into his house, and took him together with his son first. The next day, they released them. But in a few days, they came again and they took Volodymyr, and we had lost contact with him and all the communication with him.

A few months, we were thinking that maybe he is kidnapped, and maybe he's in prison somewhere, and we're thinking maybe he's still alive. But after the liberation of the Kharkiv Region and after the liberation of Iziium by the Ukrainian army, it was discovered with the investigators the mass graves in this region, with a lot of people buried in these graves. And after a few months of investigation, in one of the graves, there was discovered the rest of Volodymyr Vakulenko, and the genetic expertise proved that it's him.

It was really a very, very impressive and emotional loss for the community – the kids' author who was writing books, doing nothing in this war. He was not a military man. He was killed, and he was found in a mass grave. In the 21st century, it sounds absolutely impossible. But it's a reality.

Actually, just after the situation was clear that Volodymyr is dead, our PEN Ukraine activists, members of PEN, colleagues of Volodymyr went to Iziium, trying to meet the father of Volodymyr and also his son. We have raised together money to help them, to keep his son more or less healthy and to make things happening there with his parents.

One of the persons who was really very active working with the memory of Volodymyr was Victoria Amelina, our famous Ukrainian poet and also author and member of PEN Ukraine. Victoria knew that there was a diary of Volodymyr, the diary which he was



writing during the occupied period, writing day by day the situation when he lived under occupation with his son. And in the very last days before he was arrested, Volodymyr managed to contact his father and told him that this diary will be hidden under the tree in his yard. And he asked his father to find this diary after everything will be over and after the liberation of Iziurm and for people to know what happened during the occupation period in Iziurm.

Victoria, together with his father – they have found this diary under the tree, and this diary now is in the museum, the Kharkiv Literature Museum. And this diary also was worked out, and the Vivat publishing house published finally the book, and this book was presented, and Victoria Amelina was moderating this event also. The members of the family of Volodymyr were present also in this event. It was one of the first events of our festival. And this important book is now being published by Vivat, and it is available in Ukraine in our bookshops. One of the samples of this book was presented also to Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Olena Zelenska, who were the guests of the festival in the very first day, the day we were opening the festival. They visited also the festival together with the other people. And they have also this sample of the book in their family library. So the event was really important. And now, having this book is also important for all of us.

KENNEALLY: Novelist Victoria Amelina contributed a preface to the Vakulenko diary as well, and she was working on her first nonfiction book, *War and Justice Diary: Looking at Women Looking at War*, which she was writing in English. But days after the festival ended, she was fatally injured in a Russian missile attack on a pizza restaurant in Kramatorsk. We interviewed Victoria for this program. You knew her. You knew her well. And I'm very sorry for your loss. How has the Ukrainian literary community responded to this latest tragedy?

KOZLOVETS: It's a big shock for all of us. Just two days after the festival – the festival which made all of us so happy, the festival where we were hugging one another, meeting our friends, having so much support from these meetings, from all of what happened in Mystetskyi Arsenal – just two days after, Victoria together with other guests of our festival, the Colombian authors and journalists from Colombia who had also an event in the Book Arsenal program – they went to Dnipro just after the festival. They went to Dnipro and to Kramatorsk from there, having a humanitarian mission and having the investigation also like journalists trying to visit those places and trying to talk to people to document their stories, to document the crimes of the war, to document what's going on there.

Victoria was doing this plenty of times. She was really very, very active in volunteering, in documenting the situation in Ukraine. She was working on her book. She was very actively working internationally, being a speaker in a lot of festivals, cultural forums, and a



lot of book fairs, working a lot with the international partners, sharing information about Ukraine and Ukrainian cultural community working in the war conditions. They were victims, all of them. They were victims of this air attack of the Russians. In this air attack, the Colombian authors and Colombian colleagues luckily survived. They were slightly wounded, but they were OK. But Victoria was very badly wounded and injured, and all of us had a last hope that doctors will make a miracle. But there were no miracles, and in a few days, she died.

On the next Monday after the festival, we had the farewell ceremony in Kyiv, and the next day in Lviv, where she was buried. This farewell ceremony in Kyiv – I was there, and it was so impressive – all the same people that was meeting in the yard of Mystetskyi Arsenal, but the reason for this meeting was absolutely awful and absolutely impossible to understand. It was like the next story going after the Book Arsenal.

I don't know. I was all the time thinking about the fact that, OK, these people met at the festival, and maybe if they will not have met, they will not go there – all these crazy thoughts which came to you when you can do nothing but just accept this loss. But from the other side, I am thinking maybe the resources which gave Book Arsenal its strong messaging – that all of us, we're still alive, we're still standing, we're still fighting, and we are doing our best to win in this awful war – all these thoughts which were among all of us and all these emotions which were common for all of us – they give us now the resources to stand and to fight after these awful losses, because Victoria's death was so impressive and a big shock for all of us, but it's not the only loss of this war.

Just a few days after we were saying farewell to Victoria, the next author, for example, of the online publishing house – the next author also has died in the war. And in the next days, in a few days, there were shootings and big, big losses in Lviv and a new air attack in Lviv. Lviv is the hometown for a lot of publishing houses and for a lot of authors. Victoria Amelina, for example, was also living with her family in Lviv, and a lot of PEN members are living in Lviv. It was more or less safe there, and everybody were thinking in Kyiv, meeting in the arsenal, that maybe we will meet next time in the autumn in Lviv, because it's much safer there. But now, Lviv is also attacked, and there is no safe place in Ukraine.

So what to do – just wait when, I don't know, the miracles will happen? No, the miracles will not happen. We should live our lives now. We should do the festivals. We should think about all the risks. We should accept the risk, but we should do what we can now. If the best – what I can is doing the festival, I will keep doing the festival.

KENNEALLY: Yuliia Kozlovets, coordinator of the International Book Arsenal Festival, thank you indeed for speaking with me today from Kyiv.



KOZLOVETS: Thank you, Chris. Thank you for having me, thank you for inviting me, and thank you for all your attention and kind words. Thank you.

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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