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Europe Rallies Around Ukrainian Entertainment Industry Professionals

Six months after the Russian invasion, the country's filmmakers face uncertain prospects as many seek a fresh start elsewhere on the continent.

By Christopher Vourlias

Courtesy of Silver Frame

When she arrived in Warsaw just weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Yanina Kucher — an entertainment industry veteran with more than a decade's experience in her country's film business — wasn't prepared for an extended stay. She'd left first Kyiv, then Lviv, with her cousin's wife and young niece in tow, traveling to neighboring Poland to wait out what she hoped would be a short-lived skirmish.

Warsaw felt somehow familiar, less geographically and culturally removed than the alien metropolises of Western Europe. She had a personal and professional network in the Polish capital that was quick to find her a home. Yet her thoughts never strayed far from the war: to the parents who stubbornly refused to leave Kyiv; to the reports of the Russian army's brutal, terrifying advance. "It's every day," she tells *Variety*. "I have friends who died in this war. I'm always in touch with my relatives and my friends."

Six months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war has left a trail of devastation and displacement. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 6.8 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe as of Aug. 24 — Ukraine's Independence Day — with more than 1.3 million settling in Poland and close to a million more in Germany. More than two million have crossed the border into Russia: many with the hopes of a resettlement payout promised by Russian President Vladimir Putin, still others — particularly from Ukraine's war-ravaged east — because they had nowhere else to turn.

For those who have emigrated westward — including hundreds of members of the country's now-fractured film industry — the prospect of resettlement is fraught with challenges: tangles of red tape, unfamiliar languages, the uncertainty of beginning a new life far from their support networks back home. Many spent years climbing the rungs of the growing Ukrainian film and TV business, only to find themselves starting from scratch in foreign lands.

But it's the emotional burden that weighs heaviest on Kucher. "I wasn't ready at all [to settle in Warsaw]," she says. "I hoped that I would have the chance to come back to my country soon."

A sense of unity

Within days of the first troop movements, Russia's attack on Ukraine upended production within the country. Most plans to produce films this year have been thwarted by the war, says Kyiv-based feature and documentary producer Igor

Savychenko: “Crew members are either at war, in evacuation or engaged involunteer work.” Savychenko has completed one of the first documentary films to appear since Russia launched its invasion on Feb. 24. Directed by Volodymyr Tykhyy, “One Day in Ukraine” records one day in March at a time when Kyiv was threatened with encirclement by Russian forces. The film premiered at the U.K.’s SheffieldDocFest in June.

With state film funding suspended and television sources fast disappearing at a time when only news is being broadcast, Savychenko estimates Ukrainian domestic film activity is “20 or 30 times” less than before the war.

Co-productions within Ukraine are all but impossible now: European public film funding is bureaucratic and slow, and Hollywood-backed films are hampered by issues with securing insurance.

Plans to begin shooting a light comedy in May were dropped and new ideas for features are related to the war — for example “Cherry Blossom,” about how a soldier’s relationship with his daughter is affected by his PTSD.

One project that is going ahead is the \$7 million Polish-Ukrainian movie “Gorky Resort,” a film set in 1939 about the Soviet liquidation of Poland’s officer corps, which echoes the massacres carried out by Russian troops this year in Bucha and other Ukrainian communities.

After the war prevented Ukraine fulfilling its \$700,000 co-production pledge, Polish producer Marek Nowowiejski decided to fund the project entirely, granting Ukraine an honorary co-production credit and Ukrainian distribution rights. The film, directed by Lukasz Palkowski, is now in pre-production and will employ at least 40% of the crew and many cast members from Ukraine.

“History repeats itself,” Nowowiejski says. “The subject of Russian aggression belongs to recent Polish history, but for Ukraine it is a contemporary reality.

“We understand that tragedy of Ukraine better than any other nation. The film will be dedicated to all victims of Russian barbarities.”

Hit Ukraine costume drama “Love in Chains” (top), meanwhile, relocated to Poland to complete production of its fourth and final season, with part of the cast and crew — some requiring special permits — traveling from Ukraine. The final shooting day was “a moment of joy and sadness,” says Polish producer Stanisław Zaborowski, as “the filmmakers who had worked on it returned to their country without much prospect of new projects.”

The producer, who helped the production navigate the logistical challenges of relocating to Poland, describes it as “the most emotional project I have ever been involved in.” He adds: “A sense of fraternal help, unity and support could be felt from both the Polish and Ukrainian crew members.”

Pitching in

Efforts have been underway across Europe to help the many Ukrainian films trapped in limbo by the war. At the Cannes Film Festival’s Marché du Film, twelve European film funds came together to launch Ukrainian Films Now, a fundraising and networking event to support Ukrainian titles in post-production. A similar initiative was launched by the Polish Film Institute, which is helping to assist some 30 Ukrainian titles in postcross the finish line.

European industry professionals are pitching in to absorb the countless refugees who were displaced by the war. In Poland, lists of available Ukrainian crew members began to “spread like wildfire” after the invasion, says producer Krzysztof Solek, whose credits include the U.K.-Ukraine spy thriller “Legacy of Lies.” Bogdan Moncea, of Bucharest-based Castel Film Studios, offered jobs and matchmaking support to any Ukrainians looking for work in Romania.

Across the border in Hungary, production services outfit Pioneer Stillking Films hired Ukrainian crew for productions including NBCUniversal’s “FBI International” and Lionsgate’s “The Continental,” while arranging housing for even those they couldn’t employ. Catering companies providing food for big-budget Hollywood productions in Budapest began cooking extra meals for refugees.

As the Russian campaign dragged on, Kucher began assessing her prospects in Warsaw, hub of the booming Polish film industry. She sent out her resume, which includes work on Beta Film’s crime drama “The Silence” and a stint as first A.D. on “Legacy of Lies.” The hunt turned up some odd jobs — translation work for foreign journalists; a spell in costume rentals; a short-lived position at a TV company producing Ukrainian-language content about Poland — but nothing that matched her qualifications.

Though grateful for how the industry rallied around her, Kucher’s hopes began to dim; she considered whether it might be time to leave the film business altogether. But she continued reaching out to industry contacts — in Poland and beyond — knowing that her long-awaited homecoming could be months, even years, away. “I keep my fingers crossed, and I’m trying,” she says.

A volatile situation

A month after the Russian invasion, Czech Republic film commissioner Pavlína Žipková sent a letter to foreign producers announcing the suspension of the country’s cash rebate program, citing “the sudden need of financial aid of humanitarian and military support to Ukraine.” (The program has since been reinstated.) In neighboring Hungary, which boasts the second-largest production hub in Europe after the U.K., the war was a major talking point “within the first week or month of the outbreak,” says Adam Goodman of MidAtlantic Films, who sensed “nervousness” among studio partners in Hollywood.

Fears of the war potentially spilling over into neighboring countries have remained, for the time being, unfounded. Production has continued apace across the region, with Warner Bros. and Legendary’s “Dune: Part Two” among the high-profile studio titles currently filming in Budapest. Industry sources across Eastern Europe report no major disruptions as the war grinds on.

Its impact can nevertheless be felt in soaring production costs, driven in part by Russia’s decision to choke off Europe’s oil and gas supplies in retaliation for sanctions against the Putin regime, and partly by the lingering impact of the coronavirus pandemic and broader signs of a global recession. “It continues to be a volatile situation, but one for which we budget accordingly,” says Goodman, who’s providing production services on “Dune.”

After the initial flood of refugees, the numbers leaving Ukraine have dropped. Weekly meetings organized by the Polish Producers Alliance in Warsaw, trying to marshal the industry’s support for the war effort, have now become monthly

affairs. While still offering support and employment to refugees in Poland, much of the group's energy has gone into finding remote work for industry professionals still in Ukraine, says the alliance's president, Alicja Grawon-Jaksik. "They wanted to stay in Ukraine, and they needed the money."

Many of Kucher's friends and colleagues continued traveling toward the more prosperous economies and film industries of Western Europe. An editor who fled Ukraine found a job in Cologne, where many post-production companies are based; another spent four months in Berlin, working on music videos and other small-scale productions, before packing her bags for the U.K. Still others continue to hunt for whatever opportunities avail themselves, no matter where the search might lead.

One day after speaking to *Variety*, Kucher boarded a flight to Georgia, where she would join an Israeli production filming in the former Soviet republic. After 10 shooting days, the production would move on to Italy, though it was unclear if Kucher would be invited to join them.

Six months of war and exile have accustomed her to such uncertainty. She is prepared, even if she's not sure what for. "I don't feel like an immigrant. I don't know if I will stay in Poland or not. I don't know if I will come home or not," she says. "I'm in between these two countries and I feel like a person who is ready at any moment to pack my luggage and move somewhere else — even go back to Ukraine."

Nick Holdsworth contributed to this report.

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