

- **Iryna Kushnir:** My name is Iryna Kushnir. Today is the 25th of April 2023, and in this online interview Anna Chechel is with me, an interview is for the project 'Ukrainian refugees in the English higher education sector'. Ms. Anna let's start briefly by telling us a little bit about yourself.
- **Anna Chechel:** Hello, Ms. Iryna, I am very happy to join this project, because I think it is really very important today to research these issues, spread this information, exchange, analyse and definitely draw conclusions from those events that we were forced to experience in our lives, to prevent this from happening to other people. First, I want to say that yes, I have spent most, half of my life, in the system of higher education in Ukraine. That is, after graduating from the university, I continued my graduate studies there, defended my PhD thesis [Candidate of Sciences] and continued to work at one of the Donetsk Universities, because our family is from Donetsk. And these events in our lives began back in 2014, when our, let's say my native, Donetsk State University of Management was moved to Mariupol, and we continued our studies and our educational and scientific activities in Mariupol. I can say that the first transfer was, let's say, very incomprehensible. Many of us did not understand what was happening, how long it would last, where to start, whom to contact. But we probably needed this experience. Because after 8 years of working in such conditions, a decision was made to merge our University with Mariupol State University, and this happened precisely in January 2022, that is, almost two months before those events that turned Ukraine and life in all of Ukraine upside down. That is, we had such a next stage of adaptation, the next stage of searching for approaches, interaction within the framework of a new structure, a new University. And after almost 2 months of work, we heard this terrible news that hostilities are starting in Mariupol, explosions are happening all over Ukraine, destruction has started all over Ukraine, and it was terrible. I can say that, apparently, these events make us think that nothing happens in life just...everything is as it should be, that is, maybe we do not understand certain causes, certain consequences and we should investigate it. I can say that I must have been lucky because it was during this period that our family got sick with Covid. Well, maybe it is not good to say that, but it saved me from having to go to work in Mariupol and I stayed with my family. At that time, our family moved back in 2014 to the suburbs of Donetsk, where we had a small holiday house. We left for the summer, after Donetsk airport began to be bombed, and we thought that we would return in September and continue our studies, because the child also had to go to school and I needed to start work in September, but this holiday, as it is, dragged on almost for 8 years. And we were forced to be awfully close to the frontline. We constantly heard these events taking place near Horlivka, near Bakhmut. But apparently, a person gets used to everything, and we continued our studies and life and almost made certain plans for the future. But, on February 24, we realized that we have to review all these plans again. A little while, when our health got better, we really decided to leave this place, because it began to be very dangerous again. We constantly heard explosions in Kramatorsk, in Kostyantynivka, in Sloviansk - the entire Kharkiv direction began to be extremely dangerous. And no one could say how events would develop in this case, whether the offensive will be suspended or, on the contrary, the occupation of territories would continue. We found ourselves in an extremely critical situation. Frankly speaking, the people who were in the occupied territories, they were safer at that moment than the people who were in the territories where these hostilities were taking place, and it was extremely dangerous to stay there. At the same time, this situation that started in Mariupol, this news that we saw in open sources of information, and the inability to contact colleagues and ask how things really are – what is happening there? How are you? Is it safe? Is there food? Are there any conditions suitable to survive these trials? It was terrible, and certainly almost on the 2nd of March, when the connection with Mariupol was lost, is probably the date that we and our colleagues will always remember and it will always be like this... well, when I see March 2, when I saw this date on this year's calendar, I got goosebumps. Almost a year has passed since the beginning of all this horror.

On the one hand, it was unclear how things would have happened in the professional sphere, but at that time the issues of life and survival came first. And of course, the last decision that pushed us to pack our belongings very quickly and leave was that my mother has diabetes and they said that there is no insulin in our region and when it would appear was also a big question. This has already prompted us that yes, we must go, we must look for conditions to live on. And a few words on how it happened. It was really hard to find...that time we were in our little New York and when (it's a small town, it's an hour trip to Donetsk by car, and an hour to Bakhmut) so now it's also very restless there. This is a place where any event related to any military action can happen at any time. So, at that time it was already impossible to find any kind of public transport and to find a person who would agree to take us to Kramatorsk to get on the evacuation train. It was very difficult, one might say, because there are constant air alarms, constant expectations of some unforeseen events, so there were a lot of people, who chose the path to stay at home and not risk going somewhere on some trips. But when we decided to go after all, and under these air alarms, there was a person who agreed to help us in this. And when we arrived at the railway station in Kramatorsk, because it was the nearest station at that time (trains didn't go further that station), it was the day this evacuation train got under the shelling. There were no other trains, only evacuation trains came to Kramatorsk. On this day, one of the train attendants died, it was such a sad day, when Ukrzaliznytsia began to lose people who helped other people escape from the war. Certain traffic delays, that is, the time delays of these evacuation trains have already begun. Many people on this day decided to stay at home and not go, because the evacuation was really crowded those days. People came to the railway station and waited two or three days just to get on the train. People stood in the aisles, sitting, standing, as tightly as possible. They threw out suitcases to take people. It was quite difficult. But on this day, when we arrived, I will say that on the one hand we probably took a lot of risk, on the other hand, because in the morning there was shelling in Kramatorsk, there were these destructions and these events all happened, but still we decided to go and we got to the train on this very day. Now we still want to dwell on those events that helped us, which were somehow positive aspects that we encountered along the way. When we boarded the train, we were in the compartment – my mother, and my daughter, and two mothers from the Centre for Mothers with children who suffered from domestic violence. Them and four more children. How many of us were there, I can't count, but it was a lot. And it was the same count in every compartment. But there were no people in the aisles. And it was good, and all the train attendants said: 'But you are still holding on very well, you still have a lot of free seats, on the floor and everything is fine with you.'

I can say, I was also impressed by the work of our local government, who organized boarding for people. Despite these really dangerous conditions, conditions that were constantly changing, the coordination of people and their placement in cars was simple so clearly worked out, so well done! I can say who were engaged in this, I know that the Donetsk State Administration and the local authorities of Kramatorsk. I can say they are very professional people. In this situation, no one has faced this before. These were new conditions and new challenges for these civil servants. The same people as you and I. It seems to me that they hardly thought about their safety and their lives. They thought about these people who came and expected these services, this help. When we boarded the train, I was once again impressed by the spirit of the train attendants and employees of Ukrzaliznytsia, who seemed to me to have lived in these trains back then. Because they travelled back and forth without rest. Nevertheless, these people were still able to smile, somehow exchange jokes, support others, cheer up: 'You are doing everything well, you are on the evacuation train, everything is fine with you! You have done everything you had to do, rest, and prepare for the fact that there will be more challenges, but you must be ready for them!' That is, this motivational support, it once again really impressed me, exactly 'what Ukrainians are' let's say how strong we can be and yet these trials make us more open that we started to show it to each other, to show what we really are, what we were born to be. So, I can say that the train was

moving without a route. That is, at each stage, the train manager received new instructions from the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the route was constantly changing. That is, how it all happened there was unclear, but no one knew what the next station would be, when we would reach it, but we only knew that we were going to the west of Ukraine to a safer place. It was impossible to open the windows, it was impossible to turn on the lights. But everyone understood why everything was the way it was, and indeed all this was perceived, as necessary. At every station where we were, volunteers came and brought some food, brought some conditionally necessary things for being on the train. It was also very impressive because it showed that those people were constantly waiting for a train to come to them. No one knew from where or to which station, and when those trains would arrive, but the stations through which those trains would pass were determined and people were constantly waiting, people were constantly preparing food. Well, it was some kind of fruit, drinks, something that helps to keep people going in these conditions on the train. And of course, in almost three days, we arrived... it was an exceedingly long time, we stopped somewhere for a very long time, waiting for something, there were some incomprehensible events, but apparently it was supposed to be like that. Three days later we reached Chernivtsi. We arrived at almost three o'clock in the morning and it was a curfew, and no one could get anywhere. Everyone stayed at the station, they waited for the morning to come, and it would be possible to direct their actions somewhere else. Well, 'why sit' I said, 'I can't sit'... I have a daughter, and a mother. I left to find somewhere to drink, tea or something, maybe food at the station. And again apparently, it was my first time in the last 10 years when I came to Chernivtsi, I haven't been to Chernivtsi for a long time. Oh...Sorry.

When I arrived, I was just walking around the station, I saw a door opening and a woman coming out of the door. And so, we talked a little, and she says: 'There is a room right there, I've just rented a room'. I run there and say: 'Do you have a vacant room?' – 'Yes, I have it unoccupied.' And I gathered the girls and we...for the first time in three days... (you know, emotions still get caught in the throat at some stage). So, it was such a generous help from God for us, because in three days we hardly slept, and it was probably the first such quiet sleep in the last month or several weeks when you realize that nothing is exploding anywhere...Chernivtsi was almost one of the quietest regions. The feeling of this apparently relative security, it costs a lot. And it is worth fighting for. In the morning when we woke up, we had already reached the border with Romania, and I guess we were lucky again, because the day was very sunny and warm. Romania welcomed us very sincerely. Also, the meeting of Ukrainians was very well organized, that is, food, advice, transport, and medical assistance - everything we needed there we began to receive. We had to stay in Bucharest for a few more days, where one of the Universities gave us a room in students' accommodation. It was a separate room, very good living conditions. There were no students at that time because Covid restrictions were still in place. A lot of people from Ukraine, Romania were accommodated in the students' accommodation. This was probably the first such event that brought me back to the education system since the beginning of all these terrible events. Education began to greet us, you know. After that, I got an offer from our friends; they offered us to use their house in Greece (summer holiday house). My family and I were offered to stay there for as long as it takes, but no one knew how long it would take. And when we arrived in Greece, it was not exactly the Greece we were used to - sunny, with a warm sea and hot air - not at all, it was winter Greece - a little drizzly, a little cool, next to the sea – cold dampness indeed, but they (Greeks) are very kind people, open, sincere, who also tried to help us in whatever way they could. I can say that when we arrived, if certain support programs for Ukrainians had already started working in Poland, Germany, and other European countries, Greece had not yet offered anything. They were preparing some legislative bills there, they were working on it, but there was no way to provide any help other than volunteering. At this moment there was a feeling that 'do I have a job?', 'will the University be reestablished?', 'how are the colleagues?', 'how is our team?', because all the projects that were associated with the University, they hung in the air.

Regarding those public projects that we were preparing – I received a letter from partners from the European Union that they will be stopped or transferred to other territories. That is, something must be sorted out, but you cannot count on it yet either. That is, it was a feeling: ‘do you have a job?’ and ‘with what money to buy food tomorrow, if you can't find it(work) today?’ I can say that we lived in a small village in Greece, so there were no options of finding a job at any university. Learning Greek was another challenge for me. I realized that I don't know if I can overcome this challenge or not. The same thing happened to my daughter; if you stay in Greece, you would have to go to study almost three villages away. How to learn Greek and how to communicate, because I can say, Greeks do not speak very much in English, they communicate more emotionally. So, what the professor from the Ukrainian University can expect in Greece – probably cleaning, catering and picking olives. Well, it seems to me wasting my potential. Plus, the season has already started. We were in Greece almost until the beginning of June. And when the season begins, the owners return to the house, so renting housing was very expensive during the season. Awfully expensive. In any case, we had to decide that we had to move. And in this case, we were once again supported by the education system, let's say, but the system of informal education. Because before that, my daughter had been studying for two years in the program of preparation for admission to the United States of America. This is the Ukrainian Global Scholars program. And I'm really impressed with the results, the ideas, the approaches that these guys demonstrate and how they can use the opportunities that are available in the world today for students, how they can exactly apply that to the needs of Ukrainian schoolchildren, to the needs of Ukraine, how they popularize this potential of Ukrainian children – I am simply amazed. Really well done! Indeed, many young, talented children receive certain opportunities to study abroad thanks to this organization. Now they are opening the next division. You may have heard it, Ukrainian Global University is a new project that they are opening, that is, they are already starting internationalization at the level of universities. And these two years helped us and it was very unexpected to get an offer: ‘yes, we have offers in the UK and for students in certain training schools, if you don't mind changing your intentions to study in the United Kingdom instead of the United States, then we will facilitate your implementation of this decision’. Of course, we agreed, why not! The gift is good, we wouldn't refuse. And it became for us, well, something like ‘vane’ showing where we should go next. Almost the whole family follow the daughter, wherever she went, we follow her too. We found sponsors next to...The first city we came to was Birmingham. It was next to the place where my daughter's school is now, and it was convenient. I could reach her in about half an hour or forty minutes. But when we arrived, it was in June, I can say, there were a lot of schools; almost 13 people from this cohort of such small students were the youngest there who entered different boarding-schools in Great Britain. Now they will definitely maintain relationships, exchange their impressions of different schools. And they exchange what makes a Ukrainian school different from a British school. It is also very interesting to hear exactly from children who have one or another experience and, perhaps, someone else had an intermediate experience in schools in Europe. These impressions, where are the pros and cons; it seems to me that it is also necessary to collect the best practices and implement them in Ukraine, because these children are already carriers of this experience and can appreciate certain understandings. And then, of course, when we arrived... I can say that other very good processes began to take place - the relocation of our university. That is, in Mariupol, people began to leave the occupation, to contact, to change their location, that is, to leave those territories and settle in new ones. And in April, we received a message from the rector saying: ‘yes, I left the occupation and now I am starting the process of relocation the University.’ And this time the relocation of the university, in my opinion, was more organized. The Ministry of Education already had some experience, and chancellors, and there were people who had already experienced these stages of relocation. We could share this experience with our new colleagues and the process of relocation started very, very quickly. There was a lot of work – searching for some documents, restoring what was lost. I can say that it was

incredibly good at our department that almost all my colleagues got in touch, joined these processes and we were in full force, that is, there were no personnel losses at our department. This was great, we are very happy about it. We are continuing to work almost in full force now, for almost a year now, there are people in different countries, in different corners of Ukraine. Everyone is dispersed, and at the same time we are together. And this is also a very good experience, and these remote technologies help a lot to maintain the quality of communication, the quality of education, and the quality of scientific research. So, almost everything started. But on June 30, my contract ended, and I fell unemployed again. This was my first experience when I felt unemployed in a foreign country. I can say that in this case, Great Britain provided a very good scheme for supporting Ukrainians in such difficult conditions. It is the sponsorship scheme for which we came, it provides a lot of advantages not only in terms of financial support, but also accommodation support, when together with sponsors you have conditions that fully meet the needs. When you enter a rented apartment, there is often no furniture there, and when you live with sponsors, the sponsor takes care of some of your needs, gives some advice, responds, that is, some small, perhaps, but important details for us – they were taken into account. That is, what I am saying, for example, it was difficult for my mother to go down and iron things in the designated place for ironing, and she was given a separate ironing board in the room so that she could iron in her own room. Such small aspects, but which greatly affect the quality of life. We have a very good sponsor, and we still have a very good relationship. She is an Indian woman, and he is British. We had such a mix of cultures, a mix of attitudes, a mix of emotions. They are also very emotional people. We exchanged the experience of national cuisine, that is, a lot of experience, namely cultural exchange. Of course, the opportunity to constantly practice English when you communicate with sponsors it is an invaluable experience in this field, for which we are very often paid a lot of money, just to feel like we are in the environment. This scheme fully offers all these conditions. It is certainly very important to support the possibility of free education for children, free support for medical care and a lot of volunteer work, which is carried out by the British, offering a certain social and psychological support, that is, the formation of these Ukrainian communities precisely on the initiative of people who are already or have been for a long time in Great Britain or are the British local residents. I am really impressed by these processes, the processes of self-organization, readiness, openness, readiness to support and give some advice. This is particularly important from time to time, when you are in a foreign country and you do not understand how the system works, what to do if something happens to you there. As I say, we received very good help. And of course, I started looking for a job for myself, because there were many questions about whether I would continue to work in such a remote mode or not, what decisions would be made by the management, whether I would be invited again or not. And I started going to various trainings, that the Job Centre offered, all these public organizations, to know how they look for work in this country. And of course, there were and probably are a lot of offers in cleaning and catering services... But I can say that I was lucky again. Because I had a very good coach at the Job Centre, a very nice girl who told me: 'Don't even look there! That's not for you! You need to look for the job of your dreams.' I say that I have always enjoyed my work at the university. Then let's look for a job at a university. I had a B2 level, but I can say that I felt that it was not enough, maybe enough to survive in the country, but not to work in a university where the language should become essential for you. So, I started going to classes, started communicating more with the British in these projects, in various trainings. And some job offers I have already started to receive, but my hosts, my coach, she constantly says: 'This is not for you. It's not. You have to wait a little. It's not yours yet.' I don't know how they knew all this, but I still listened to this advice and still sent applications to various universities, both for job positions, vacancies, and for programs. And these rumours began, some discussions, that it is necessary to create programs for Ukrainian Academic staff in British universities. And definitely this offer from the University of Cambridge, which my host showed was probably something for

you: 'Come on, submit your CV quickly.' And I sent the documents. We waited for a very long time. I sent it back in June, but we received the results only at the end or probably at the beginning of October, and I was among those lucky ones who got into the program to support Ukrainian scientists at the University of Cambridge. I can say that, perhaps, this is the experience that demonstrates the values of the university, the dissemination of these values, among which there is some stability, preservation of ideas, generation of ideas, respect for opinions, and the creation of conditions for the diversity of these opinions. Because people from different spheres, from different branches of science, with different backgrounds were chosen for the program, i.e., both young and experienced scientists. And indeed, the conditions provided by the program are simply amazing. These opportunities: getting involved in communities, attending certain lectures, seminars, opportunities to communicate with colleagues, many meetings with invited specialists from almost all over the world, many opportunities to communicate and discuss and confirm their opinions with critical specialists who help, prevent certain mistakes. Well, about libraries, about access to sources, I don't even know what words can be used to describe these opportunities and they are very interesting. Of course, there are always a lot of new people and conditions have been created to get to know them. It is very interesting. Today, I think that if this experience is spread in other universities, it will be great. Because, in my opinion, Ukraine's potential is, on the one hand, in preserving what we have, because, in my opinion, this is important not only for Ukraine, but also an important part of the world potential of science. On the other hand, the experience that Ukraine is gaining today, we must spread it, we need to somehow analyze it, collect it and spread it because, in my opinion, this will be some new, new stage of development both social sciences, management sciences, and humanitarian sciences. It will be a rich, very saturated stage of the development of world science. Well, not to mention the military sector, because I am not a real specialist in it, but I'm saying that Ukraine today is a source of some new movements, approaches to science in various directions. And I think it will be very good that this initiative will be taken up by other universities and it will be useful both for universities in Ukraine and for universities in Great Britain. So, I think that all Ukrainian scientists will continue to be open to cooperation, to partnership, to the search for some mutually beneficial aspects of cooperation. I think that it is possible if we see some potential in every crisis, then probably the potential in the scientific environment – this will surely be exactly what we will consider as positive consequences of these terrible events that we had to experience.

- **Iryna Kushnir:** Yes, of course, sure. Thank you very much. Maybe a few more words about some obstacles you encountered. You mentioned the English language, that there was and still is a little bit of a barrier. Maybe something else.
- **Anna Chechel:** Maybe there really is something to which it was necessary to adapt and accept it – this is an approach to communication. That is, there is a lot of correspondence, a lot of forms that need to be filled out, a lot of opportunities that are also found somewhere in some Internet sources, platforms, and you need to know all about it. That is, how to find it, how to get to it, understand how it works, where to start. It is very good when there is someone nearby who motivates, prompts and somehow adjusts where to move further, because here everything is set up in a slightly different way than we are used to. It is not always possible to call someone and ask, because there may or may not be personal contacts to talk to. When you communicate with someone with artificial intelligence, it does not always answer the questions that bother you. This is among the obstacles that really existed.

I can say about the language, when we arrived in Birmingham, I felt like I hardly speak English, because their local accent is a completely different English. But it seems to me that the person should start to get used to it and when we moved to Cambridge, it was simply paradise there, because people communicate in the English that you studied before and that you feel more comfortable with this issue. Many issues are resolved over the phone. At first it was also a challenge for me, because when a person speaks on the phone with an accent, it's a double

challenge. But now it is gradually somehow coming to a more or less convenient format. Now I can say that indeed there are a lot of grant proposals, some programs, and opportunities open for scientists, but again, to figure out what exactly suits you and where it is appropriate to apply, and what might be a waste of time, I can say that there are no such services that someone was engaged in this. Perhaps this is one of the important points, which is not available today: some kind of fundraising departments, maybe consulting services specifically for the relevant industries, scientific ones. That is, there are many opportunities here, but everyone has to find their own opportunities. Maybe I'm wrong, so you tell me, because I will be glad to receive your advice as well.

- **Iryna Kushnir:** That's roughly how it is. Of course, after the interview I can also share my impressions and thoughts too. And I wanted to ask a short question. What is your daily work focused on? Are you doing any research on a specific topic and are you also supporting a Ukrainian University at the same time?
- **Anna Chechel:** Now I continue to work at a Ukrainian university and there is definitely a lot of work, and this digitized format is really extensive, it is very exhausting, but today the university works more and more in a mixed format, but definitely those who are abroad work remotely. And in parallel, we continue our research and now we also continue our research here and try to join local projects. But these are projects that are also related to the development of Ukraine. Now I have been invited to a project related to the development of social entrepreneurship in Ukraine and I will try to be useful in this project. But now for me these are the first steps, let's say so, and now we are figuring out where exactly it will be possible to join and what kind of research we will get as a result of this project. I will try to further spread this experience as well.
- **Iryna Kushnir:** Yes, alright. What are your plans for the future?
- **Anna Chechel:** Future? Well, you know, we'll see. It's hard to say. Because on the one hand, now, it seems to me, among those people who are abroad, there are currently two such approaches. That is, there are people who are focused on children, and in this case, it depends on how much the child adapts to new learning conditions first of all. I know that many people plan to return as soon as possible, because the child could not accept these different conditions of study. I can say that our child's education is quite stressful for my daughter, but she is interested. She is doing well with English, thank God; learning it all takes a lot of time and is quite stressful and difficult. But let's hope that she will be able to successfully complete her studies here. At the same time, she is still trying to finish a Ukrainian school. It is twice as difficult for her to pull two processes, because it is not always intersecting processes. Because if here she is studying on the system according to the AB diploma program and she has six subjects, then in Ukraine there are sixteen of them. So, let's see how it will be. The question will really remain, in any case, I am trying to be in touch with the Ukrainian university, I am trying to find myself here as well with my colleagues. And everything in our family will depend on the plans for the future of our young generation, because we will focus on supporting the youth and we will see. Now I can't say clearly, because it depends on where it will be and what doors of higher education will be open for our girl. But in any case, we will stay with Ukraine, we will try to support it. It seems to me that the support of those people who are in Ukraine and outside of Ukraine is important. If we work on joint processes of restoration, development and stabilization of certain processes, strengthening of the native country, it doesn't matter where you are, the influence you make for this is important. I hope that our interview will also have a certain impact and help both Ukrainian scientists and the community as a whole to understand that yes, we are Ukrainians, we are strong, we are smart, talented and determined only to change for the better.
- **Iryna Kushnir:** So impressive and interesting, Ms. Anna, that I am lost for words, everything that you have shared, that you have told is simply worth experiencing and going through to fully understand it all. Thank you very much for sharing, it is very useful for the project and for the next ones who will listen to learn about all these things.