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Interview

Firstly, can you explain what relations the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań had with Ukraine (and the university community) before the war?

The relationship between Adam Mickiewicz University and various Ukrainian universities has a very long tradition. In the period between the First and the Second World War (1919-1939), when the borders of the Republic of Poland were different, the university in Poznań maintained close contacts with the university in Lviv, which was then within the borders of the Polish state. The awareness of these contacts has survived until today. Equally lively were the contacts between Poznań and Kharkov and Kiev in the nineteenth century. In particular, many Poles studied at the University of Kharkov, and many Polish professors taught there. In the 1960s, the then authorities of the university in Poznań established close contacts with the university in Kharkiv, which was an extension of the cooperation between the two twin cities. After the fall of communism in Poland and Ukraine, a new chapter in mutual contacts began. Our societies began to build new pro-European elites, therefore cooperation between universities became very important. UAM began cooperation with nearly 20 Ukrainian universities, from the largest ones in Kyiv and Kharkiv and Lviv to smaller ones in Humań, Lutsk, Drohobych, Vinnitsa, Perejaslav, Odessa, etc.

The impetus for strengthening ties with Ukraine came from the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian war in 2014. At that time, a large group of refugees from Ukraine came to Poland who had to leave the eastern territories seized by Russia. They had nowhere to return to, so they sought a new life in Poland. Many of them settled in Poznań, which is a very dynamic, modern and fast developing city. Whole Ukrainian families came to Poznań and settled down, and Ukrainians quickly became the largest ethnic minority in our city. The Ukrainian language became audible virtually everywhere, inscriptions in Ukrainian appeared on posters, flyers, public transportation and ATM. Since our languages are very similar (although we use different alphabets), and also mentally Poles and Ukrainians are very similar, integration took place quickly. Before the war, about 600 students with Ukrainian passports, who came from Ukrainian families in Ukraine and Poland, studied at UAM. They constituted the largest group of foreign students.

Cooperation with Ukrainian universities has developed very well thanks to numerous programs supported financially by Polish and Ukrainian state and local authorities. The UAM established Polish language teaching centers at several universities (e.g. in Humań and Drohobycz), we conducted joint scientific research (archeology, biology, linguistics), joint studies (undergraduate studies, Eastern Studies, political science, law), summer schools, etc.

How did you react and what were the first decisions you decided to take when the war broke out?

The first reactions immediately after the outbreak of war were very emotional, as many of our friends had been exposed to death under Russian bombs. Moreover, many of us had visited Ukraine and well recognized the pictures showing the center of Kiev, Kharkiv or Odessa. Now these places have become a battleground, and the first people are dying ...

The vast majority of Ukrainian students at UAM asked for help in bringing their families to Poland. After crossing the border, refugees from Ukraine were able to travel around Poland on trains for free, for many of our students and faculty went over the border to pick up their friends and loved ones. Once they reached Poznań, many of them found shelter in our dormitories and other facilities in Poznań and outside Poznań. In total, we have provided ca. 250 places for refugees. The cost of their stay has been covered by UAM since the beginning of the war.

In order to help Ukrainian students, who now often have to take care of other family members, we decided to waive the dormitory fees and provide them with financial aid. This applies to full cycle students as well as exchange students. De facto, the ongoing expenses of their housing are covered by UAM.

From the very beginning, we started collecting donations for friendly universities, which was done either by faculty or student unions or lecturers. Such convoys were sent to several places in Ukraine.

Our students got involved in many different aid actions as volunteers, mainly in reception centers, shelters, at the train station, but also at city administration offices. We must remember that in the first weeks of the war almost two million refugees arrived in Poland, who suddenly needed almost everything! In Poznan, but also throughout Poland, these people found shelter, and about 30 percent of them found refuge in Polish homes. Also, many of our lecturers and students took in refugees from Ukraine under their roofs.

We also did not forget about the demonstrations against the war, which are traditionally organized in Poznan on Plac Wolnosci (Freedom Square)...

Today, how is your university organised and what actions are taken to welcome and support these people who are leaving their country?

Today, the situation is somewhat different, but still, thanks to the enormous commitment of the Polish society and solidarity, we manage to help the refugees from Ukraine effectively.

First of all, there are clearly fewer refugees coming to Poland. According to the border guards, some 3 million refugees have arrived in Poland since the beginning of the war, but there are also those who have returned to Ukraine or found accommodation and work outside of Poznań or outside of Poland.

It is difficult to say how many of these refugees will stay in Poland permanently. There are currently about 100,000 Ukrainians in Poznań, and one in seven of the city's residents is Ukrainian.

Many of the refugees are women with children. With them in mind, we have organized a day care room for their children. Students from the department of educational sciences also run a day care center for school children. We run similar activities for refugees staying in large reception centers in Poznań.

We organized Polish language courses for people who want to learn how to speak Polish quickly (Survival Polish), as well as Ukrainian language and literature courses for Poles.

We continue to collect donations of humanitarian aid for Ukrainians. The war, which has been going on for a long time, causes that those who stayed in Ukraine face numerous difficulties in access to food, medicine, etc. The cost of sending donations to Ukraine, depending on the size of the car, is about 4000 EUR.

We provide psychological counseling for our students and also for refugees, which seems to be very important now, because more and more refugees come to Poland after traumatic experiences of war.

We provide all kinds of legal advice, which is a huge problem. There are now thousands of Ukrainian children in Poland without legal guardians !

We organize material help for refugees who often arrived in Poznań with only one piece of hand luggage with which they escaped from Ukraine.

For the refugees, in cooperation with the governor's office, one of the sports halls was occupied as a reception center. Every day our student volunteers work there, providing support and care to the refugees.

We help them in their search for work, occupation and sources of income.

The University works very closely with the city and provincial government, as well as with local professional associations (lawyers, doctors, etc.). Without our support, many of the initiatives and activities of these institutions would not have been possible, because many students at the UAM speak either Ukrainian or Russian, without which it is impossible to provide effective assistance. For many reasons, knowledge of these languages has survived at the university, while all other administration offices and primary education have switched to English.

How many families and students are currently being cared for by the university and how can you continue to welcome people?

In all available places in the dormitories and other facilities at UAM there are currently about 250 people, although in reality there were many more, because many of them had already gone to other cities in Poland looking for work, and new ones were taken in.

I don't know exactly how many staff and students accepted refugees? These were individual decisions, and UAM's help was limited to material support for refugees

or legal assistance in legalizing their stay. We also offered safe accommodation for several dozen mothers with children at our hostels. These people in Ukraine worked at the local universities and usually had already had some contact with UAM before the war (their husbands remained in Ukraine). At the request of the rectors of Ukrainian universities, who don't want to lose good employees, we don't hire these lecturers permanently, but we offer 3-month contracts. We accepted about 30-40 PhD students, but also for internship, offering them financial support. We want to offer them a safe existence in Poland, but we don't want them to break contacts with their home universities. Only about 20 Ukrainian students decided to ask for official admission to study in Poland, while less than 100 declared that they want to temporarily (like exchange students) continue their studies at UAM. We help them all, and special scholarships have been funded by, among others, Dominika Kulczyk, a philanthropist and a member of EPICUR's advisory board.

As a member of the EPICUR alliance what could be the tools or mechanisms provided by the other universities of the alliance to support and help you?

Help can be provided in many ways. The most important thing is to find the most effective way to help the refugees from Ukraine, who today have certainly reached all EPICUR cities. For many reasons, the vast majority of the nearly 3 million refugees from Ukraine do not want to leave Poland, waiting for a quick end to the victorious war. But maybe it will be faster and easier to organize help for refugees in your cities? The situation in Poznan, like in many other cities in Poland, is complicated and difficult, but we are still able, thanks to the extraordinary mobilization of the society, to help the Ukrainians effectively. I don't know for how long we will have enough strength and mobilization...? Everything depends on how long this war will last and how many Ukrainians will decide to stay in Poland and other countries? Never before in our history have we had to help so many refugees ...! Many of our friends have stayed in Ukraine and their life there is becoming more and more difficult with the prolongation of the war. UAM organizes humanitarian aid for them: mainly long-term food and medical supplies. We have already sent such donations with the help of humanitarian organizations and various foreign companies (mostly Italian !). Maybe we will manage to organize such a transport with humanitarian aid together with EPICUR ?