Ukrainians in Kingston reflect on the second anniversary of the war

By Josh Smith

On February 24 we approach the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has caused widespread catastrophe for Ukrainians worldwide.

Among those affected is Kingston resident Alina Ledinova who fled her home in the war-torn eastern Sumy region of Ukraine, an area that was struck by war on the first day of Russia's invasion.

While Alina and her son found refuge in the UK, her husband remained in Ukraine to serve in the military.

For Alina, the most challenging aspect was worrying about her husband's safety, who she has not seen since he joined the army, but they try to remain in contact as much as possible.

"I remember how I didn't sleep at night if I didn't hear anything from my husband, it's very difficult," she said.

"I can see how my husband has changed, I hope I will be able to help him and support him, his mental health and mental wellbeing."

Positioned on the frontline, her husband sustained injuries that required hospitalisation. Fortunately, he is making a good recovery.

"I always say to him at least you are alive, it's the most important thing," she said.

But she has other friends and family that remain in Ukraine.

She tries to stay in contact with them whenever she can but communication can be difficult, and some have not survived.

"It hurts me very much because I also lost some of my friends and colleagues," she said.

Alina relocated to Kingston in May of 2022 through the Homes for Ukraine scheme and stayed with a host family.

Despite the difficulties that they faced, she and her son adapted well to life in Kingston.

There is a large Ukrainian community in Kingston which has helped them to adjust, as has the welcoming environment that they were greeted with.

"What I appreciate in Kingston, and the UK in general, is how polite and respectful people are, they're supportive and friendly," she said.

Alina got a job at Kingston Council's United for Ukraine team and has since moved on to become the housing register and rehousing officer.

This has made it difficult for her to decide whether she would like to return to Ukraine once the conflict is over.

"It hurts me that I will have to start from the very beginning because I have a good job here," she said.

"We have somewhere to live, we have friends, we managed to have our own network in this area, and my son is very happy to stay here, he likes his school."

However, remaining in the UK is not guaranteed. The Homes for Ukraine scheme was a short-term solution which allowed people to stay in the UK for up to three years.

Around 195,000 Ukrainians arrived in the UK, and fewer than a third intend to return to Ukraine once those three years are over, according to the UK Humanitarian Response Insight Survey.

This leaves several Ukrainians like Alina stuck in limbo, adding another layer of uncertainty alongside the future of the war.

"I worry about my future," she said, "I do hope that we will get a resolution about our visas, about our status here in this country."

While Alina found her own flat in Kingston, this has not been the case for many other Ukrainians in the UK.

Bassam Mahfouz, director at Refugee Action Kingston, said that the biggest problem facing Ukrainians in the UK is housing uncertainty.

Once Ukrainians leave their host families, it is up to local councils to find suitable accommodation, which is difficult in a broken housing market he said.

Dr. Egle Rindzeviciute, Associate Professor at Kingston and author of articles on Eastern European culture and politics, said: "Britain has huge housing pressures and so it's difficult to find long-term working solutions for refugees… we're looking at very specific infrastructural constraints in Britain."

Reflecting on the situation in Ukraine, Mahfouz noted the effectiveness of the British government in helping Ukrainian refugees but found an absence of support for other vulnerable groups.

"We saw how welcoming, open and supportive people were when people are going through the trauma and the horrors of war, and that was being shown to one group of people, but it wasn't being shown to people from other countries where we know the same situation is happening," he said.

Photo: Vuk Valcic/ZUMA Press Wire/ Shutterstock   **Londoners show support for Ukraine.**