

RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine

Episode 2: "There's a Weapon in Your Pocket"

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Transcript

(0:00)

Anastasiya: Look, this is how I came here.

Laurel: This is your suitcase. And you've been living out of that for a month.

Anastasiya: Yes.

Anastasiya because we don't know what will happen the next day, we don't know what will happen every night.

(0:25)

V/O: This is Anastasiya, the young press officer for Ohmatdyt Hospital in Kyiv, Ukraine's largest children's hospital. We're standing in her office, where she's been sleeping since the outbreak of the war. Before the war, Anastasiya's job involved posting the kind of photos you'd expect from a children's hospital: smiling kids, happy doctors, the latest hospital news..

Anastasiya: our page was really bright, like, with a lot of bright pictures with nice stories... Now our page not such happy as was before,

(1:00)

V/O: Now Anastasiya spends her days collecting and sharing evidence of war crimes.

Anastasiya: now we should write about injured children with shrapnel in their legs in their heads, and without fingers, and it's war crimes that we need to capture, because we want justice

(1:30)

V/O: This is Resistance: Stories from Ukraine. I'm Laurel Chor, a photojournalist from Hong Kong. I've reported on social issues around the world and I've always wished that people could hear the voices of those I photograph. In this series, I'll be sharing personal stories of resistance that have emerged everywhere in Ukraine since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of the country in February.

V/O: Today... stories of those fighting back... with the weapons we all carry in our pockets... our smartphones.

(2:05)

PART 1: ANASTASIYA

Anastasiya: This was our first post

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Laurel: oh my gosh, so this is

Anastasiya: Yes, this boy died. His name was Simon, he was seven years old.

V/O: Every day, Anastasiya posts photos and videos to her hospital's Instagram page as the war's wounded come in from around the country. Anastasiya, who's small, has big, blue eyes and long, brown hair, could be mistaken for a teenager. She walks around the hospital in jeans and a sweatshirt, her iPhone always in hand, carrying only a small crossbody purse. The images on her phone are horrific to see, so I'll hold off on describing them in too much detail. There's graphic photo after graphic photo in her albums, but Anastasiya remembers the story behind each one.

(2:50)

Laurel: I mean, your phones are just full of these awful, awful images,

Anastasiya: my Google album now. Like before, it was like my journeys and so on. But now, like rockets attack, girl who lost her mother, missile attack.

Anastasiya: I don't know how to come back to normal life now, ya know.

(3:15)

V/O: Everyone in Ukraine always talks about what life used to be like "before the war", or things they'll do "after the war". But of course, no one knows when or how the war will end, or what the new normal will be. Anastasiya takes me on a tour of the hospital. It's like a maze in here. She guides me into an elevator and takes me to the emergency department. Everything's very cheerful. There are cartoon giraffes painted on the walls.

Anastasiya: She is volunteer.

Laurel: Oh, amazing.

Anastasiya: She just come to help us to cheer up the kids.

Laurel: I love your costume. It's so colourful, it's like a smock with colourful... oh your friend made this

(4:00)

V/O: As a public face for the hospital, Anastasiya has had to adjust to a whole new reality, both with the work she's doing on her phone and in the real life that surrounds her.

Anastasiya: I understood that on first day on 24th February, that now, our life changed. I could never imagine that I will see dead children, like we were the biggest childrens hospital where we treated children and everything was okay and now we see such crimes. Everyday we see like normal people who had normal life but now they lost their families...

(4:55)

Laurel: How did you decide that this is what you needed to do in your job now, once the war started?

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Anastasiya: because I feel responsibility, and I see that it could help my country, it could help my colleagues, it could help my hospital. And I want to show the world the truth. I want to show people that terrible thing is happening. That's why I film it and I take a picture and it's not easy for me.

Laurel: your your iPhone is your weapon...

Anastasiya: I hope so. Because you know, we tell the truth.

(5:25)

PART 2: ANDRIY

V/O: In Ukraine phones have become an essential weapon. They're the main way the conflict is being documented, whether by social media professionals like Anastasiya, regular citizens, or seasoned frontline journalists. They're all effectively engaging in an information war largely fought online. At a phone store inside a high-end shopping mall across Kyiv, I meet up with Andriy Dubchak. He runs Donbas Frontliner, an independent, donor-funded media project. It's named after the region in eastern Ukraine that has been at war with Russian-backed separatists since 2014.

(6:10)

Laurel: Hello. Hi, are you Andriy? Laurel, nice to meet you... Thanks so much for spending time with us doing last minute shopping... So you're buying a new phone? You bought a new phone yesterday? It's funny how to prepare to go to a warzone, you need to get a new phone.

Andriy: War is logistics honestly.

(6:40)

V/O: Andriy has been filming and photographing the conflict with Russia for the past eight years. He's got a professional setup, but nothing beats his phone for speed, convenience, and reach. We join him as he's running his last errands around the city before he heads back to the frontlines in the east. First things first: he's getting a new phone – his last one ran out of space.

(6:55)

Laurel: since we're, you know, we're at a phone shop and we're waiting for them to put a brand new screen cover on your phone. Like can you talk about how important your phone is to your work?

Andriy: I show the situation in Ukraine, I show the Russian-Ukraine war, I show the frontline, I show social issue, I show military issue, because the information war is not less important than the kinetic one...

(7:25)

V/O: For Andriy, journalism is a means to an end. He's not trying to make a name for himself, or even to earn a living. He just wants the world to know what's happening in his

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country. Andriy's journey into this digital battlefield began during the Maidan protests in Kyiv at the end of 2013. He was working as an IT guy at a radio station when he figured out how to live-stream from the heart of the demonstrations.

Andriy: I just took this device and go to the field. I didn't know how to use the camera. I didn't know how to use light, but it was a free-stream and a lot of sites share it. And people in Ukraine know that something is happening here and people go to protest.

(8:15)

V/O: The uprising was sparked when the government refused to sign a pro-European agreement – and instead, made closer ties with Russia. The months-long unrest ended with the ousting of then-President Viktor Yanukovich. Russia then retaliated by annexing Crimea in the south of Ukraine and fueling the separatist war in the country's east. Andriy is now a pro at documenting this conflict, which has essentially been raging since those days of protest. We leave the phone shop and head to pick up his next crucial piece of gear ... new tires for his beat-up car.

Laurel: You can tell this car has been through stuff. You got snickers bars in the trunk, bullet proof vest, gas tank, sleeping bag, cigarettes, inverters

Andriy: gas mask

Laurel: this car has seen things

Andriy: Yeah, lots of things. Front Line. Stuck in the direct visibility of Russian sometimes

Laurel: This car?

Andriy: Yeah. Under shelling, under fire.

Laurel: It's still in one piece.

(9:15)

V/O: For years Andriy felt like he was shouting into the Void. But now, he thinks the world is paying attention.

Laurel: you know your project is almost entirely on social media. Do you really believe in the power of Instagram and Facebook that much?

Andriy: Of course yes... because it spreads information and information is most powerful thing in the world. Information is much more powerful than gun

Laurel: Do you think the information war will stop the kinetic war here?

Andriy: I hope in it, but don't know because one photo can't stop the war, 100% but it can do some steps for it.

(10:05)

V/O: You can follow Andriy's reporting on Instagram at Donbas.Frontliner, that's D.O.N.B.A.S. dot Frontliner.

Laurel: we better your tyres changed, is this the place?

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Andriy: yeah

(10:20)

PART 3: YAROSLAV

V/O: While Andriy drives east to the frontlines, we head West to the city of Lviv. So far, there have been a lot fewer Russian attacks in the West of the country, and many have fled here in search of relative safety. It's also made the city a favorite staging-ground for the country's hackers... I meet one of them, Yaroslav, outside his dorm at a local university where he's in his second year. Yaroslav is one of the founders of a 70,000-strong community of amateur hackers who have been waging a digital war against Russia.

Laurel: Aren't you cold? It's snowing. You're in shorts

Yaroslav: No no it's all fine

Laurel: It's snowing. You're in shorts

Yaroslav: No no it's all fine

(11:05)

V/O: He takes me to the space where he's been working, for much of the last month

Laurel: Are we going down? to the bunker? past the cafeteria... down the stairs...

Yaroslav: this shelter is kind of bomb-proof

Laurel: So what is this area normally?

Yaroslav: Normally we're studying here and

Laurel: just study areas and now it's bunker.

(11:35)

V/O: When the war broke out, Yaroslav had just turned 19.

Yaroslav: one of the saddest days was when on fourth, fifth day, you start scrolling your Instagram or Facebook. And there are a lot of friends of yours are sharing pictures of their friends like dying in this war. And that's how everyone understands.

(12:00)

V/O: Yaroslav runs a company making chat bots for small business's Instagram stores, but when the invasion started, he found a different use for his servers... and his skills.

Yaroslav: Since the war came, one of our lecturers said that you see, now you have to stop just learning some basics, some theoretical stuff. Let's use them in practice...

(12:30)

V/O: Yaroslav is part of a group that uses DDOS, or 'Distributed Denial of Service' attacks. A DDOS attack works by flooding web sites with extreme levels of traffic. In this case

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fueled by the tens of thousands of members who follow simple instructions on Telegram, a popular messaging app. This causes the sites to crash. Yaroslav tells me his team has targeted Russian banks, and companies that refuse to cut ties with Russia, making life for everyday Russians just a bit more difficult. They call the group: "DDOS Against the Country of Occupiers".

(13:05)

V/O: Yaroslav's goal is to make individual Russians feel real consequences for the war – and maybe, demand change in their country.

Yaroslav: *like they have to spend their money on something else than war. We need to be kind of brutal in this way, because like, the most peaceful ending of this war is to kick Putin's regime out. And the most peaceful decision would be that Russians did it themselves. And they have to understand it, but still now they are supporting him.*

Laurel: *how many websites do you think your group has been able to take down?*

Yaroslav: *I think a lot. Like this group, we've got coordinations from cyber police. So like, it's kind of legal, it's legal, like because we are in war.*

Laurel: *So the government made this legal.*

Yaroslav: *Yeah, sure... in normal times, that wouldn't be legal for sure. Like, it's not okay to break someone's site that was making money even in another country. Yeah, but, like, in this way, it's fine. Yeah.*

(14:15)

V/O: It's a lot for a teenager. But a whole generation of young Ukrainians has been forced to grow up fast.

Yaroslav: *I think that from this war, everyone in Ukraine will get some lesson. We won't be as we were before.*

Laurel: *Do you think you'll be able to go back to being a normal student after this?*

Yaroslav: *Surely and everyone, like should do that. People of my age, they don't have to be kind of lost generation or something.*

(14:50)

PART 4: THE HACKER HOUSE

V/O: Across campus from Yaroslav, another group of college students have their own way of bringing the fight to everyday Russians... They're scamming them. I meet up with Seva, an 18 year old computer science student from Dnipro in the east of Ukraine. He leads me to an apartment that's basically a small frat house for hackers.

Laurel: *you said the two options were the normal road or the Ukrainian road, which means the short cut*

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Seva: Yeah

Laurel: (laughs) I just slipped and fell, all good.

(15:30)

V/O: Seva's parents ran a printing company before the war. Now his father fights in the territorial defense forces, while his mother and sister have fled to Turkey. What I call their "Hacker House" is in a Soviet-era apartment building. You can tell a bunch of teenage boys live here. They've been taking care of a friend's older poodle and there's a soaked pee mat on the floor.

Laurel: hi sorry excuse me, Hello. This is it...

(15:55)

V/O: Seva and his two roommates—Tim and Dima— study together. We sit down in one of the bedrooms to chat. Their form of resistance? Breaking through Russian propaganda by scamming Russians, and tricking them into learning the truth about the war.

Laurel: tell me like, according to this apartment of hackers, how do you trick a Russian?

Seva: So you have to say that Russia is the greatest country, that Russian security the best in the world that of course, we need to destroy all Ukraine.

(16:35)

V/O: These hackers have tricked thousands of Russians into downloading their app. They made them believe that Ukrainian hackers were going to take down the Russian telecom system, and that this app would allow them to circumvent that. Except, of course, by downloading the app, these unsuspecting Russians hand over their phones' calling and messaging functions to Seva and his friends. They show me how the app works...

Seva: Our landing page is convincing, we have the Russian flag, we have the Russian signs. Also like this, the convincing message saying that you have to download this app, it was built by the Russian government.

Dima: And there's like the are my favourite phrase, hey, provide the safety of Russia, do your civilian debt, download the app.

(17:20)

V/O: that's Dima, sitting across the room. He's originally from Kyiv. He's a young, skinny guy who looks like any other college student barely out of his teens.

Laurel: So you're telling people, you're trying to trick people into thinking it's their Russian civic duty to download this app

Dima: Yeah like everything in Russia is safety, secure...

Laurel: And people fall for this? I mean, it looks pretty good. It's pretty slick... So could you hack our sound guy, Arman's phone right now? He has an Android.

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Dima: Do you really want this?

Arman: Uh, if you delete everything afterwards

(18:00)

V/O: Dima downloads the app—its name basically means “A Place for Calling” in Russia—onto producer Arman’s phone. He’s the one who suggested it, but now he’s looking a bit nervous...

(18:15)

Laurel: So what what just happened here? I'm on. I'm on Armen's Android phone... Oh, you're okay. app installed... allows both to make and manage phone calls... Allow your contacts. And there you go. Now I can open it. So I've just given them full access to make and to make phone calls and SMS to all my contacts.

Dima: Yeah, this is the hardest part for like for people to believe that this is nothing but because this is a messenger and the call app

Laurel: Yeah it makes sense, it makes sense. Yeah I guess it wouldn't be that hard to fall for it. Because you just have to get them to download it and say yes to three things...

(18:50)

V/O: Using the app on Arman’s phone, I can make phone calls and access contacts, just like any other messaging app. But I’ve just opened the door to these Ukrainian hackers... So, now what? These hackers, with access to thousands of Russians’ phones send out text messages about the war to the user’s entire contact book. It starts out as a fairly noble idea. Tim, the third hacker in the group, explains...

Tim: We wanted to bring some more value with the fact that we just not only just scam people but we just inform about the war. It was like, hey, my friends is in Ukraine and this like, hell, oh, they're bombing cities, they are killing civilians, and so on and so on.

Dima: There's a huge difference. For example, if Ukrainian person just sent a message to a person from Russia, hello, hello, what's going in Ukraine? And, of course, this person will not believe this. But imagine if your friend from Russia send you such a message that hey, you know what's going on in Ukraine... so when you get this message from your friend from Russia, it makes you think about this...

Laurel: But do you think getting a message that probably they'll figure out is a scam, do you think that will really convince them of what's happening? Like, how do you convince someone of the truth through deception? You're tricking them into believing the truth. Like do you think that works?

Dima: if you can somehow, if you have a chance that you will influence person, I will do this. The people are the main force and what the people think about the situation that's the main part because only the people who, from Russia, for example, they can do something in their country, they can change their president, they can change their laws.

(20:35)

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V/O: Now that they can access their text messages, they can also gain access to their Telegram account, including the full message history... which often contains... a lot.

Laurel: What kind of, what kind of content do you see?

Dima: basically their penises, a lot of them. A lot of them

(21:00)

V/O: Yup. These teens are basically weaponizing dick pics to help the war effort. Or at least to seek revenge. When they find content on a Russian's phone that they can blackmail him with, they'll call him and make him say "Slava Ukraini" – "Glory to Ukraine" – or else they'll send his dick pics to everyone he knows.

Laurel: And then have you actually sent that to all their contacts?

Dima: Yeah.

Laurel: And then wow, what happens after that like when you send that out

Dima: Their friends and relatives are basically disgusted, based on the messages they send in this group that we send the photos to. Basically their whole life is ruined by that, because when all of your friends get this photo, it's a huge,

Laurel: pretty embarrassing... I mean, you sound like you guys have a lot of fun doing all this?

Dima: Totally. Yeah,

Laurel: Do you ever feel bad?

Dima: In this situation, not at all. It is what it is, like, we don't do this in the normal times. And just we know what we do this for, we know we do this in the interests of our country, which is in war with the other country. And we feel that in this situation we are allowed to do this.

Tim: Especially when this person was telling you like NATO should be bombed five minutes before on a phone call.

(22:45)

V/O: If the goal is to change minds, I'm not sure spamming users' contacts with dick pics is going to move the needle, but, these are college kids stuck in a war. Whether or not it will change anything these hackers are going to keep doing it... not necessarily because they think it works, but because it's fun. And to Seva and his friends, those guys who've downloaded their app, they are the enemy.

Laurel: Do you guys consider yourselves soldiers in a way?

Seva: In a way yes, I suppose because we are doing the best thing we can do. Like, we are ready for this. We know how to do this. And we can implement it in real life.

Tim: There are basically like, three types of war, right? The actual, like physical war then the diplomatic one... and the information war. That's what we are, you know, best at, and that's why we do that.

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Dima: almost everybody I know, is involved in some kind of volunteering, or in some kind of like hacking. And everybody's happy doing that, because they feel like even if they cannot protect our country with a gun in their hands, they can do something for it.

(24:20)

V/O: That's it for today. Next, we'll meet those who think that resistance – begins with the very way they think and speak.

Olga: Now I deliberately decided to speak only Ukrainian. Our culture is everything we have. I mean, our culture, our national identity...

(24:40)

V/O: Resistance: Stories from Ukraine is a production of Project Brazen in partnership with PRX. It's hosted by me, Laurel Chor. I've been reporting from the field with Arman Dzidzovic and Andrii Kalashnikov. Bradley Hope and Tom Wright are executive producers. Nicholas Brennan, Clair Urbahn, Rowan Slaney, and Soobin Kim produced this episode, with associate producing from Giulia Franchi, Francesca Gilardi Quadrio Curzio, and Adam Drake. Our Story Consultant was Susie Armitage. Cover Design by Ryan Ho. For PRX, Jason Saldanha and Julie Shapiro. And a special thanks to Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Ana Adlerstein, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, Lucy Woods, and Megan Dean.

For more of our reporting, visit projectbrazen.com/resistance

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