

RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine

Episode 3: "Mother Tongue"

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Transcript

(0:00)

Laurel: Hi, Hello, Laurel. Cool place! All sound studios always have a really comfy couch. Always.

(0:21)

V/O: At first glance, this recording studio looks like any other – mics, sound decks, acoustic padding on the walls – until I see the bright green tape stuck in criss-cross patterns across the window panes.

(0:35)

Interpreter: The tape on the windows, it's when the shelling blow. It can break the windows.

Laurel: Yeah. When did you put the tape on the windows?

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: The second day after war starts.

(0:51)

V/O: I'm at the Dovzhenko Film Studios in Kyiv. In Soviet times, they made propaganda films here. But now, it's turned into a place where independent artists can rent out small spaces for themselves.

Laurel: Can you can you tell us what you do?

Denis: We are writing the songs, we are recording...

(01:10)

V/O: Denis Musaev is a songwriter and music producer. Some of his songs are rock ballads, others are bouncing pop tracks. He's produced music in both Russian and Ukrainian. Or at least, he used to.

(01:28)

Laurel: Is there a difference between writing songs in Ukrainian versus Russian?

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: It's even easier to write Ukrainian songs because Ukrainian language is more melodic and every word sounds better.

(01:51)

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. Today... the stories of those resisting using the very ways they think, speak, and sing.

(02:26)

PART 1: DENIS

Laurel: Can we put a mic on you? Oh also Happy Birthday! I'll give you a birthday hug...

V/O: Today is Denis' birthday. He's turning 32 and his phone won't stop buzzing as birthday messages come through.

(02:45)

V/O: Like many Ukrainians, Denis is bilingual. He grew up speaking both Ukrainian and Russian. The two languages are similar, but distinct, comparable to say, Italian and Spanish. For a long time, mostly because of Soviet and Russian influence, Ukrainian was looked down on as something of a peasant's dialect. Educated urbanites – like Denis – primarily communicated in Russian. After the Maidan revolution in 2014 though, Denis began questioning the role of Russian in his life... and his music.

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

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Interpreter: A lot of Ukrainian singers starts to do more Ukrainian music. Because they feel a lot of courage... and they feel they need to do this.

(03:41)

V/O: At the same time, Russia remained the largest market for his music production work - as is the case for most Ukrainian music producers. All this changed on the 24th of February. When Putin launched a full-scale war, Denis dropped his clients in Russia and stopped producing any music in Russian, all together.

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: When all this Russian aggression, Russian war starts, he wants to break all connections what connects us with the Russian government, with the Russian people.

Laurel: By recording music in Ukrainian, are you losing out on the Russian market?

Denis: No... [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: Right now, the question is not about the things what can you bring your more money or some things like this. Right now is the question about your honor, about your culture. It's more spiritual things than some materials.

(04:47)

V/O: Denis has a brand new track that's ready to go. It's called Yellow Blue, a clever play on words - in English, we hear the colors of the Ukrainian flag, but for Ukrainian speakers, Yellow Blue sounds like "Ya Lyublyu" - or "I love".

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: It's the Ukrainian song, it's the dance song.

Laurel: It's a celebration song, party song.

Interpreter: Yes, yes.

Laurel: This is a banger... Definitely makes you want to dance.

Denis: Banger?

Laurel: Banger, yeah, you know that word!

(05:39)

V/O: Yellow Blue is very euro-pop and upbeat - it could easily be a Eurovision hit. Denis is clearly proud of the song. But, he tells me, he's not going to release it just yet.

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: It's definitely not the time for this song right now. It's like, let's wait a little bit.

(06:01)

V/O: He's going to wait, he says, for the day Ukraine wins the war.

Interpreter: It will be super actually in the day of our... when we defeat our enemy.

Laurel: But no one knows when that will be?

Denis: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: We know because we already has a victory.

(06:29)

PART 2: OLGA

V/O: Across town from the recording studio, I meet with Olga. We had first met at a restaurant that had become a hub for young volunteers helping to distribute aid. They called themselves Palianytsia, named after a traditional Ukrainian bread. The reason? In the early days of the war, Ukrainians were super paranoid about Russian saboteurs, so they'd make suspected spies say Ukrainian words that Russians supposedly have a hard time pronouncing without an accent – like, for example, "Palanytsia". Olga explained all of this to me. She's something of a language expert.

(07:04)

Olga: I've been bilingual since my childhood. My mom was a teacher of English. And when she taught me to speak, I started speaking two languages at once. And actually, it was not Ukrainian it was Russian and English, because I'm originally from the east. And there we mostly speak Russian. Ukrainian was my third actually mother tongue. However, now it has become the first one.

V/O: Olga blows me away with her linguistic skills and knowledge. She speaks five languages and can talk passionately about the intricacies of each of them. At university, she studied German philology, the history of Germanic languages. Before the war, she ran a language school in Kyiv.

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(07:49)

Olga: I'm a teacher of English. So this is what I do for a living. But now, currently, I'm, I'm a person who is doing everything I can.

V/O: Like Denis, since the war broke out, Olga has had to reassess her relationship with the Russian language.

(08:07)

Olga: Now I deliberately decided to speak only Ukrainian. I mean in Ukraine yeah, and abroad as well, because I am not want to be associated with Russian.

Laurel: When did you make this decision?

Olga: Well, the final decision was on the 24th of February.

V/O: When the Russian invasion began, a lot of people's jobs came to a halt, including Olga's. So now, like seemingly every Ukrainian who hasn't picked up a gun, she's pivoted to volunteering towards the war effort, using her connections in eastern Ukraine to help move goods across the country.

(08:47)

Laurel: What are you receiving and sending off today?

Olga: Well, receiving a couple of bulletproof vests... and also, a couple of those thermal scopes and different things that other people had a chance to buy...

Laurel: So you've gone from owner of a language teaching school to someone who's delivering bulletproof vests?

Olga: Yeah well I mean, this is something that everybody does now. I mean, we're all volunteers of any kind. For eight years. I mean, I've been through this and I've been in this...

V/O: Olga is originally from Luhansk. It's a city in the eastern Donbas region which has been under the control of pro-Russian separatists since conflict began there in 2014. Many in the outside world think that this war began in February. But for Ukrainians – especially those from the east – it started in Donbas eight years ago, when fighting forced Olga's family—and over a million other Ukrainians—from their homes.

(09:48)

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Laurel: How old were you then?

Olga: Oh just a second, let me see. I was 24. It didn't, you know, make me another person straight away. Yeah. But it was the beginning of making myself a different person.

(10:10)

V/O: For Olga, part of this new person she was becoming, meant leaving behind a language that no longer felt like hers. I've heard some people say that native Russian speakers in Ukraine now feel ashamed – or even judged – for speaking the language. I ask Olga about this.

Olga: It's not that they're, you know, being like suppressed, you know, like they're being punished for something. It's yeah, they feel this guilt because... because they associate Russian language with what is happening right now. There are still people who speak Russian and that's fine. As long as they do not associate themselves, you know, with Russia. So they are Ukrainians who speak Russian, this is ok.

(10:55)

V/O: It's not the Russian language itself that leaves a bitter taste in Olga's mouth - it's the brutality and imperialism it now reminds her of. Choosing to speak Ukrainian, then, is a personal act of resistance. A claim to Ukrainian identity, unique from the Russian one. But, as Olga tells me, there is more to war than words.

Olga: You know, language and identity. These are linked things. But an identity, yeah, is something more than a language. For example, now, Kharkiv, yeah? The place that is being shelled all the time. It is a Russian speaking city. However, you see how people are pro Ukrainian there, like, how they defend their country, how they defend their city. That's why it's not only about the language, you can speak any language you want, but it's your deeds and how you act. This is what matters.

(12:11)

PART 3: YARMAK

Laurel: Hello, hi, Laurel. Nice to meet you. So where are we going?

Yarmak: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: We're going to the volunteer center so is the place for our conversation

Laurel: So many volunteer centers

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Interpreter: The whole country big volunteer center.

(12:33)

V/O: Volunteer centers like this one have popped up all over Ukraine since the war began. People have taken over restaurants, schools, community centers – wherever there is space– to distribute goods to those in need. This building used to be an arts centre. I'm here to meet Yarmak, a famous Ukrainian rapper. He says he came here as a teenager and that the place stopped him from getting into trouble. Now though, the centre is stacked high with emergency supplies - medicines, water, canned goods - even homemade camo nets. Yarmak, too, has found a new purpose.

Yarmak: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: Right now they are concentrated on military training.

Laurel: You went straight from rapper to soldier.

Yarmak: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: That's the time we live in now. Hard times making strong people.

(13:34)

V/O: Yarmak has played some of the biggest music venues in Kyiv. He's released six studio albums and has over a million subscribers on his YouTube channel.

Laurel: When you're training as a soldier do people recognize you and stop you?

Yarmak: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: Of course, all soldiers from 25 to 30, everybody knows him... yesterday he was like on the shooting range and when he came to the shooting range everybody starts to make photos, like commander like was really angry about it... the shooting is canceled.

Laurel: Wait they had to cancel the training session because you were too famous? I mean it's kind of a problem to be famous when you're when you're a soldier

Yarmak: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: No, it's not a problem at all. Because when he connected to other people, they feeling that they are going stronger and like they feeling that all the country unite.

(14:36)

V/O: While he's officially a soldier now, Yarmak's battle really began when he took part in the Maidan revolution. He was among the crowds in Kyiv when police opened fire on protesters. In the end, more than 100 people were killed throughout the demonstrations.

Yarmak: *[speaking Ukrainian]*

Interpreter: *It's totally changed his world because he was a peaceful man. His nature was totally calm. Before 2014, his songs was some kind of funny like Eminem but after he was involved in the Maidan actions, he realized he didn't create any funny songs since that moment because inside Ukraine it was a totally different atmosphere.*

(15:33)

V/O: During the protests, Yarmak wrote a song that would become an anthem of the movement. The song's chorus translates to "my country will not fall on its knees, cities will become mountains... the soul of a Ukrainian lives in each of us."

Yarmak: *[speaking Ukrainian]*

Interpreter: *The main idea of this song is that Ukraine wants to be free, wants to be independent and we want to be a part of Europe.*

Yarmak: *[speaking Ukrainian]*

Interpreter: *It's the story of our country, is the mental feelings of our people. It's the fight for our land during the centuries.*

(16:42)

V/O: Although he's rapping about Ukrainian independence, the lyrics are in Russian. Yarmak says he wrote songs in Russian hoping that his music would wake up the Russian people. He shows me a music video for another of his songs, also in Russian. It's called "What is it with Ukrainians?" – using a tongue-in-cheek reference to a derogatory term Russians use for Ukrainians.

Laurel: *There's a lot of dead soldiers on the ground. This is graphic! A puddle of blood. Oh, wow. It's like a rap video with scantily clad dancers in front of like, just two dozen dead soldiers. This is crazy!*

(17:40)

V/O: The video is... intense. But it's not just the visuals, it's the lyrics too. Yarmak raps about protests and putting Russian heads on spikes. There's a lot of anger. Yarmak has now stopped trying to use his music to reach Russians. After Putin's regime poisoned Russian activist Alexei Navalny, in 2020, he decided to change his approach.

Laurel: *After the poisoning, how did your music change?*

Yarmak: *[speaking Ukrainian]*

Interpreter: *He realized that we need to create our Ukrainian mentality, our Ukrainian culture, and he starts to speak in only Ukrainian and starts to make only Ukrainian music. He don't even remember when he last time speaks Russian.*

(18:42)

V/O: Back in Kyiv, language teacher Olga has to leave soon to transport the bulletproof vests. But first, I ask her about the changes she's seen—and heard—in how people are using Ukrainian.

Olga: *Well, it's everywhere. I mean, people are finally singing songs, not only at home, but you know, in the street. My parents sing and I sing and we've always had, you know, those family gatherings with Ukrainian folk songs and everything. But now, people are bringing this further. Our culture is everything we have, our national identity, our history, and what is happening now is actually our newest history.*

Laurel: *Why is it so important now?*

Olga: *Well, because finally, people are understanding that Russia and Ukraine are two separate countries, two separate cultures.*

(19:37)

V/O: Singing in Ukrainian is now an act of defiance. A rallying cry. I ask Olga if she would sing me her favorite Ukrainian folk song.

Olga: *This is a song about a couple in love. And the woman, yeah, the girl is asking the guy. Why didn't he come last night to her to visit. It's a story of the people who*

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are like meant to be together but there are some circumstances that, like, pull them apart.

Olga: [Sings in Ukrainian...]

(20:50)

V/O: That's it for today. Next, we'll travel to Borodyanka in the aftermath of the Russian occupation to see how this small town managed to fight back.

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, Tom Wright and Nicholas Brennan are executive producers. Rowan Slaney, Megan Dean, Clair Urbahn, and Soobin Kim produced this episode, with associate producing from Giulia Franchi and Francesca Gilardi Quadrio Curzio. Susie Armitage is our Story Editor. Cover Design by Ryan Ho. Music by Stellwagen Symphonette. For PRX, Jason Saldanha and Julie Shapiro. Special thanks to Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Hanna Fedorishyna, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, and Lucy Woods.

(22:00)

V/O: For more of our reporting, and a transcript of this episode, visit projectbrazen.com/resistance

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