

2011 Oxford Volunteers for Chernobyl Scheme

Development of International Partnership Between Local Authorities in Ukraine and Abroad

Observations based on experiences in:
Korosten, Zhytomyrska oblast and Krupove, Rivenska oblast

By Matthew Dalrymple

General Background

The United Nations Development Program of Ukraine, in coordination with the Ukrainian Oxford Society of the University of Oxford, has been operating The Oxford Volunteers for Chernobyl Scheme for five years. Bringing together graduate level students from all over the world, and partnering them with Ukrainian undergraduates, the program provides opportunities for them to have concrete experiences as a field practitioner in the effort to improve the qualities of communities affected by the Chernobyl disaster in a variety of sub-fields designed to align with goals the communities have already developed. In this way, these communities remain key leaders in choosing the paths they wish to take towards recovery, and are linked with volunteer specialists to assist in their achievement.

Objectives in Area of Specialty

The specialty area that was addressed in the communities of Korosten, Zhytomyrska region and Krupove, Rivenska region was “Development of International Partnership Between Local Authorities in Ukraine and Abroad”. My partner, Ivanna Voytsekhovych, and I stayed as guests in each of these communities, with both locations receiving almost a full week of our efforts and observations. As an international visitor myself, the experiences and encounters that I was having on a daily basis in the communities were also able to play heavily in developing and showcasing an improved understanding of how these communities can cultivate greater involvement from abroad.

Summary of Work

On a purely numerical scale, the communities of Korosten (with a population over 65,000) and Krupove (with just over 700 residents) almost could not seem more different. Korosten even has the distinction of being the most heavily populated of all communities in the Chernobyl affected zones. However, despite this, they were found to have some common issues in regards to the development of international partnerships and attracting visitors from outside of Ukraine.

Primarily, the greatest hurdle for each of these communities is in regards to the availability of resources in languages outside of Ukrainian. This stretches across the board, from the financial investment website of the Kosoten City Administration to the women’s museum and traditional folk art weaving educational center in Krupove; when materials of any kind are available only in one language, it directly impacts the ability of those resources to serve their intended purpose or attract attention. In a world that is increasingly connected via the internet, the criticality of multi-language resources is even more important than ever.

With each additional language that a resource is available in, it serves not only to help visitors upon their arrival, but also to even find information about the community to begin with. For better or for worse, in the eyes of an increasing number of people, if something can not be found in either their native tongue or a secondary major international language via internet search engines, the location, object or service in question may as well not even exist.

The communities, for their part, are also each keenly aware of this. Translation of natively Ukrainian materials into many other languages would require large amounts of time and native-level language experts at best and would be prohibitively expensive at worst. With a worldwide financial crisis, available resources for translations projects are difficult to justify over the pressing needs in the social services sectors. In this regard, while other areas were also addressed and will be covered in the more detailed sections to follow, translation work became the most requested task in this specialty area of the 2011 Volunteers for Chernobyl Scheme.

Tasks Performed

<i>Korosten, Zhytomyrska Oblast</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supported communication between Korosten and their partner towns - Discussed opportunities for public-private partnership - Designed English guide for Skelia museum tour and informational plaques - Supported communication between national and international organizations - Created English translation for Korosten investment website of Korosten City Administration - Established English version of Korosten investment brochure for international visitors and financial conferences abroad - Dialogued with Korosten Centre of Psychosocial Rehabilitation on their areas of work - Engagement and cultural exchange with community orphans
<i>Krupove, Rivenska Oblast</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussed opportunities for marketing the new community weaving center and women’s museum - Supported development of guiding tour in Ukrainian and

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| <p>English for visitors of the weaving center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Created an informational brochure in Ukrainian and English to support the advertisement of the weaving center- Assisted representing the Krupove community at district-level harvest festival- Connected with area youth and school administration |
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Current State of Community Activity in Korosten

Even though it is the most populated community in the Chernobyl zone, Korosten has a physical appearance that does not suggest what many people would perhaps first think of when asked to describe a town that would be affected by radioactive fallout from the disaster. It possesses a thriving rail and highway connection, its own customs post, franchises of name brand supermarket chains, easy accessibility from the national, and more.

Among these other aspects of its personality, it has the Skelia museum. A military bunker by design, it was the deepest of its kind in the Soviet military. Indeed, it would have functioned as a potential site to evacuate Joseph Stalin to in the event of a national emergency, and it is the oldest surviving structure in the community. To this end, the Skelia site not only possess a number of varying historical items inside its walls, but outside the entrance is flanked by an array of tanks, artillery guns, and other such equipment that have been collected here over the years in honor of its distinctions. For the museum, we were able to take existing Ukrainian language tour guide speeches and create from them English language versions that could be used for years to come and by more than one guide. Additionally, new informational brochures and donation cards were designed in both Ukrainian and English, so visitors would be able to have something small and informative to be able to take home with them. It was explained that the museum itself is run by volunteers, and as such is able to reserve a larger percentage of any money it does receive for the continued upkeep of the site.

The location of the Skelia museum itself is integrated with what is referred to as Central Park. Developed through community funding and work efforts, and completed only in 2008, it is one of five parks that the city administers. It is a significant site, with multiple monuments marking historic figures, a sizeable playground, a restaurant, an outdoor concert hall, and is integrated with the natural paths of the Uzh river. It is not even the largest of the community parks. Weddings are common here, and the park even features a bench that is specially marked for newlyweds to take pictures in, placed in front of a flower garden with a fountain in the background.

These sorts of developments are new, but certainly have been very welcome and well received by what is clearly a very proud community. Almost every office, car, and desk we saw were in possession of small flags, stickers, hanging wall ornaments and other such things with the Korosten coat of arms. These too are fairly new, we were informed. Volodymyr Moskalenko, the mayor of Korosten, has been undertaking a number of initiatives to build up the sense of community here, and to

his credit the people have embraced them. Certainly, this has played to his advantage when it comes to other projects, such as the creation of Korosten's new industrial park and attempting to attract wider investment from abroad.

The translation of the investment promotional materials on both the website and physical brochure from Ukrainian into English was the largest of our projects. It also provided a key opportunity to be able to educate how Ukrainian business culture and those of the English speaking world differed in some ways. Sometimes, what would sound perfectly normal in one language has the potential to sound alarming in the other. As such, our presence as volunteers provided the ability to identify how to approach these issues in advance of these new materials being used in a real business meeting. In this way, Korosten will be even better prepared to put its best foot forward when attempting to make further strides with the international community.

Current State of Community Activity in Krupove

Statistically, for every one person in Krupove there are more than ninety-two in Korosten. While they are certainly both in the Chernobyl zone, and share some things in common, they are also attempting to tackle very different issues.

As mentioned in the summary section, Krupove has also targeted the need for multi-lingual materials, particular in regards to their new folk art weaving center. The bulk of our time spent working in this community was on projects directly related to this effort, from the translation of Ukrainian language histories of their master folk artists into English, to the graphic design of the promotional brochures for the facility and even arranging photography sessions for the artists, their work, and their community as a whole. Krupove, while small, does identify that the newness of their weaving center is a critical time for them to produce and distribute such materials so that the center can attract positive first impressions while the window of opportunity for branding is still fresh.

Interestingly, the secondary language picked up by many individuals in Krupove is German. Almost all of the children have it as their secondary language class, and even adults would sometimes use words and phrases of it towards each other in conversation. This was highly unexpected, and likely creates an opportunity for future programming exchanges with German-language nations and groups abroad.

Beyond this however was something that was significantly different from our experience in Korosten. In our time with the youth and administration of Krupove's community school, there is acknowledgement that the educational system in the region may be changing soon. With increasingly pressing financial constraints, several regional schools may be shut down, among them the school in Krupove. This would introduce the issue of which remaining schools would receive which students, how they would accept the transference of classes already taken, potentially labyrinthine bus systems, and a number of other concerns. Should this closure occur, it would be to the massive detriment of community culture in Krupove, as whole families can trace their personal histories back to the school.

Krupove possess little in the way of a commercial sector for taxable revenue streams, with only three small convenience stores servicing the community. As such, families take frequent trips to the district capital of Dubrovytsia for the vast majority of their necessary household purchases. Krupove is a very proud community, however, it has been difficult to for even local community entrepreneurs to justify creating additional businesses in the town due to factors of declining population and the perceived inability to overcome the stiff pricing competition from the already established businesses in Dubrovytsia.

References to and Perceived Issues From Chornobyl Contamination

Each of these communities held similar treatment of the situation of being located within the officially designated zones of radiological contamination from the Chornobyl disaster. They regard that the event and the resulting stigma from it has certainly been a stigma, but, the daily effort of life in the zone continues on and the matter of radiation is something that can be worked around.

In Korosten, a community which was razed to the ground in totality during the Second World War, the invisible enemy of radiation was not mentioned to be a high ranking threat by any of the individuals we encountered during our stay. Due to the high population of the community for the Chornobyl zone, and its heavy reliance on the extraction of non-renewable resources (mining, etcetera), there is much more concern over other varieties of pollution into the ground, water, and air from these industrial processes. In this respect, while the accident at the nuclear power plant the and resulting radioactive fallout is certainly viewed as destructive, the event was also a quarter of a century ago. They know the background radiation is with them to this day, but, toxic chemicals seeping out of local industry are something that are viewed as a much more pressing (and solvable) to day-to-day impacts on the community.

The greatest concern about the Chornobyl contamination amongst those who we interacted with in Korosten was stigma associated with it from outsiders. This has impacted the ability of the community to attract visitors, new families, and other sources of exchange. They have been making progress towards overcoming this however: the largest annual community event, a festival celebrating the deruny potato pancake, drew more than 15,000 visitors in the previous year.

In Krupove, the issue of radiation has also been one they have been attempting to diminish. Within the first hour of being in the community, we were informed that the available water supply came from a well that was drilled more than three hundred feet into the ground. In this respect, while background radiation is certainly present in the community, wells have been intentionally dug deeper to keep the water at a safer level for human consumption, household activities, farming, and the like. Certainly, purified imported bottled water would be insufficient to serve these needs, and would also be exorbitantly expensive. However, the awareness of relative levels of geological penetration of radioactive fallout has certainly helped in mitigating some of impact of the Chornobyl disaster in this community. Additionally, despite limited resources, members of the seemingly small population there have been deeply involved in the effort to advocate to the Ukrainian government to increase support

benefits to Chernobyl affected communities. As such, the disaster and its impact are something that is certainly present in their minds, but they will not allow it to dampen their dreams and continued life in their community.

Recommendations and Challenges for Korosten

Outside of the continued development of multi-lingual materials, there is also the certain need to market these resources once they have been completed. A museum or investment guide can be available in innumerable languages, but if their existence is not broadcast, then they will not be able to have the desired impact. Even when the work of the translation is complete, it does not mean the work of the task has ended, and this would be a highly disadvantageous behavior to slip into.

Beyond this however, Korosten faces much stiffer challenges that deserve consideration. For one, as previously mentioned much of the economic sector is based in the extraction of non-renewable resources. In the event that these commodities run out before Korosten can develop an effectively diversified economic sphere, the results could undue much of the progress that the community has been able to make. They are now in possession of a recently opened industrial park for the purposes of developing a more modern approach to economic growth, but it has not been able to achieve full tenancy yet.

This is in part because the variety of technical, white collar jobs performed in such sectors requires skills generally achieved through college and university education, but there is a brain drain of many of Korosten's best and brightest to Kyiv and abroad. Due to this, Korosten would be advised to seek businesses and investment opportunities in technological growth fields that have not yet achieved much establishment yet in the rest of Ukraine. The higher costs of rent and office space in Kyiv can make Korosten, which is easily accessible from the capital by a two hour bus ride, a potentially attractive location for start-ups that have themselves not achieved much in the way of international investment or grant funding. In this respect, with the smaller size of the city and its possession of a robust park system and a growing restaurant and entertainment scene, they would potentially be in a key position to brand themselves as a place for young entrepreneurs to be able to get their companies off the ground.

Additionally, while Korosten has made a number of advances and has achieved significant strides in the past few years, much of this success has come directly from the efforts of the mayor, Volodymyr Moskalenko. While this is certainly inspiring and has resulted in multiple re-elections, it does present its own set of intricacies. In the event of a shift in political power, it is possible that should the mayor lose his position, and much of the progress that has been made could be in a position to stagnate. Because of this, it would be advantageous to diversify some programs, or to develop additional community leadership positions for certain projects. Ideally, some of them could even be from the youth population. This would not only better secure some efforts from a single swift change in political office, but would also create more means by which a variety of more experimental or niche programming can be developed while also creating an environment for hands-on leadership training.

Recommendations and Challenges for Krupove

As an outsider myself, one of the quickest things I noticed in Krupove was a lack of signs. If not for the fact that we were met by local contacts upon our arrival, it would have been very easy to have become lost quite quickly. With Krupove aiming to have an increased presence of visitors from both Ukraine and abroad in regards to the newly developed weaving center, the ability for a guest to be able to maintain their bearings in the local community through street signs and other such informational materials.

This would pair well with another recommendation for Krupove: the development of regular activities that would be able to draw both one-time and repeat visitors. As it stands now, while Krupove has developed a highly comprehensive folk art weaving center and associated museum, the work to continue to develop other means by which to attract guests can not stop here.

For instance, with its rural location, it is in a prime position to be able to turn some of the natural landscape of the community, which includes a vibrant forest, into a potential hiking or camping location. Furthermore, with the amount of agriculture in Krupove, it would be possible for them to work together to create a community farmers market. This sort of event is popular worldwide, and would also be a prime opportunity for additional branding of the area as a home of traditional Polesian culture. This even holds the potential to attract business from the district capital to Krupove, rather than the relationship always being the other way around. With every additional potential activity that a visitor can be engaged in there is the increased probability that they will continue to spend more time in the community. As such, there are certainly venues that could be implemented using some of the aspects Krupove already possess.

For the weaving center specifically, the impressive award winning records of the master folk artists is certainly a key means by which to attract a wide variety of interest both abroad and at home in Ukraine. Many of these masters have showcased exhibitions and won accolades on an international level, with many of them even having choice examples of their work in museums and private collections all over the world. However, their presence in the international exhibition scene generally ends after the fall of the Soviet Union.

This is largely due to monetary constraints, rather than a lack of desire. In the modern international system though, it is significantly easier for financial grants to be able to come from abroad to pay for the costs associated with international art exhibitions. Education on both how to find and write proposals for such grants would benefit the community greatly, as these sorts of trips provide them with an excellent opportunity for them to be able to gain name recognition and attract international interest over the traditional weaving art that the community has produced throughout its history. Not every community can lay claim to something like this, so they have a very unique niche that they would be able to capitalize upon.

Conclusion and Message for Future Volunteers

As with any set of communities, no two are the same. However, despite their differences in size and scale, the communities described here are each rich in potential and are driven to achieving very far-reaching goals. That they are each not only looking for, but actively developing means by which their local communities can be approached by the international community speaks volumes for what they seek. They may be located in a place of the world where it would be easy for some to resign themselves to a certain fate, but they aim to be a part of the modern international system.

Not only this, but the lessons that can be learned from these communities will be applicable for generations to come. Populations both now and in the future from the world over will be affected in various ways by nuclear fallout for generations to come. While the Chernobyl accident may have been a quarter of a century ago, communities miles apart are still feeling the impact of it. Not only that, but there have been communities affected by further nuclear accidents since the events at Chernobyl, most significantly in Japan just this past spring. Because of this, the opportunities present in both the communities analyzed here and those visited elsewhere by my peers are not only ones to assist in the growth and development of Chernobyl affected communities today, but also to create a foundational groundwork of resources and experiences that will be able to assist any communities of the future who may find themselves facing similar accidents, stigmas, hopes and dreams.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the Ukrainian Oxford Society and the United Nations Development Program of Ukraine, without which the previous paper and this program for the Chernobyl communities would not exist. In particular I am highly appreciate of the professional and personal efforts made by those responsible for overseeing all of this years volunteers, including Dzvinka Kachur, Giovanni Mozzarelli; and Alla Yushchuk.

Furthermore, the communities of Korosten and Krupove both have my eternal gratitude for being so welcoming to me as an international outsider. Their efforts created the means by which I was able to work, learn, observe and live in these communities, and their stories will be ones I will carry with me for the rest of my life.