

# “My dear Belgians, if you only knew ...”

Ukrainian English teacher works as interpreter and job coach at PlastIQ

On July 18, Vincent Mispelaere, managing director at PlastIQ, made the following call in the ‘Solidarity with Ukraine (Belgium)’ group on Facebook: “For a project just approved by the Flemish government, we are looking for a UKR job coach/interpreter.” Around 30 Ukrainians responded, but English teacher Svitlana Fedorova drew the longest line. “After volunteering for a while, I thought it was time for a permanent job,” she says.

## A bit like home

On April 17, Svitlana Fedorova posts part of her war diary in a post on her Facebook page. At that time, she has been staying in Belgium for a month with her youngest son and feels safe enough to share her story on social media. In her post, she testifies about her last days in her hometown of Melitopol in southern Ukraine, recounting her three-day journey to Belgium. A journey past minefields, Russian checkpoints and through four countries. She begins her message with these words, “My dear Belgians, if you only knew how much it means to us to see our flag flying everywhere here.”



Svitlana Fedorova

“Until three days before the fighting broke out, we didn’t believe, including the Russians, that people would go to war. Even my sister dismissed the rumors as ‘crazy Biden talk’”

## Time to go

Svitlana lived in Melitopol, between the Donbas and Cherson, in the south of the country. There she taught English to children and young adults, she was popular, loved living in her city, ... In short, she had everything to be happy. She had no problems with Russia, more so she was and remained Russian-friendly even during the war with Georgia in 2008 and after the invasion of Crimea some six years ago. “Given that the last incident involved a rather non-violent conflict, we didn’t weigh it very heavily. Moreover, a lot of our friends and family live in Russia, which means we had little to no reason to hate Russia.”

Everything changed on Feb. 24, 2021. “We had known for some time that there were troop movements on the border and that an invasion was imminent. But the realization that a war was imminent came later.” On Thursday, Feb. 24, at 5 p.m., the army bombed the Melitopol military airport. “The war was suddenly at our front door. Until three days before the fighting broke out, we didn’t believe, including the Russians, that people would turn to war. Even my sister dismissed the rumors as ‘crazy Biden talk.’ We protested for days on end, along with about a thousand other fellow Ukrainian people, in Melitopol’s largest square. There we scanned slogans against the Russians and marched through the occupied city. It was only when they started arresting people and when Kiev threatened to fall that I knew it was high time to leave.” Svitlana and her youngest son began their three-day march on March 17. She was forced to leave behind her oldest son, who was staying in Kharkov at the time.

## Online friends in Belgium

That the destination was Belgium is no coincidence. "Several years ago I helped Belgians on their trip to Ukraine. We stayed in touch. Even before the war fully erupted, I received a message from Alain and Veronique, the couple from Zottegem with whom I communicated. This stated that their door was always open to us and that it might be time to leave."

On Thursday, March 17, Svitlana took her car and decided to catch up with the convoy of cars that was heading to Zaporizja via Mariupol. Eight anxious hours, past minefields, Russian checkpoints, and country roads. "In Zaporizja we took the train to Lviv, from Lviv it went to Poland, then through Germany to finally arrive in Belgium on March 20."

"I had already said to Alain and Veronique that I was looking for a rental apartment. Through Facebook, they informed me that they had found shelter and that I could choose between an apartment where I could stay for free for a while or an apartment with low rent, but where we could live for a longer period of time. I had my savings in my pocket, so I chose the second option. I didn't know then that Belgium paid out a living wage."

## "As long as I can get a job"

Svitlana didn't find a job right away. "It didn't really matter much to me. Cleaning lady or something else, as long as I could get a job." After several months, and because she didn't find a job right away, she volunteered. Three days a week she helped Ukrainian children find their way in our society, and in April she started a Dutch language course herself to increase her chances of getting a permanent job. In the meantime, the former teacher struggled with the news seeping in from her beloved Ukraine. "It wasn't always easy. The news that reached us from the homeland was anything but hopeful. I cried a lot, especially when seeing images of the places I have been to so much and have fond memories of. My heart broke, but I knew I couldn't sit by and that it was time to look for a steady job."

## "This job is something for me"

In July, Svitlana received a message from a friend stating that PlastIQ was looking for a translator/job coach. "When I read the job posting, I immediately knew this was a job for me. After some help and research, I put together my resume and sent it right away. A response was not long in coming."

"I was so happy with the job that I didn't even know how much I was going to earn."



Pieter Remmerie, job coach at PlastIQ and leader of the 'sector-oriented approach to the Ukraine crisis' project: "Three days after the Flemish minister Jo Brouns approved the project, we posted a vacancy on the Facebook page 'Solidarity with Ukraine' (Belgium) for interpreter and job coach. More than thirty people applied, including a doctor, a lawyer, teachers, ... Svitlana was one of the first to forward her resume. We invited her to job interviews almost immediately. It was soon clear that she had prepared best."

Fedorova: "I had indeed done research work, not only about PlastIQ, but also about the people who work there." Remmerie: "She was so enthusiastic, she didn't even ask during the interview what she was going to earn." Fedorova: "After the interview, which incidentally held place on my birthday, I didn't get the answer that I could start until days later. I had given up hope for a piece and had already registered with VDAB." The Ukrainian will be used as an interpreter to translate training materials and all kinds of communications but will also take on the role of job coach. "I hope to convince compatriots to work in one of our industries."

"If Ukrainians only look up compatriots, do not make contacts with Belgians or do not look for jobs, then I fear that integrating will be difficult."

## 1,500 euros living wage: a blessing or a curse

Just as it is difficult to convince some Belgians to work for a wage comparable to the living wage, the same is not evident for newcomers. "A living wage of 1,500 euros for a woman with a child is not little," Fedorova explained. "Especially when you know that a lot of women want to raise their children themselves until they are at least three years old. With that amount, they can survive perfectly well. The living wage is a boost, support that our compatriots could very well use, but there is a downside. If one finds out that by working one earns as much or less than the living wage, they just stay home, I'm afraid."

## And then there is the language barrier

Fedorova is fluent in English. The same cannot be said of the vast majority of Ukrainians who arrive here. On top of that, it appears that people are reluctant to take Dutch language classes. "Dutch can only be spoken in a handful of countries. That makes Ukrainians less inclined to learn Dutch. They also think that if you don't speak English or Dutch, that they have no chance of getting a job."

Remmerie: "That is not entirely true. Not knowing the language is indeed a serious stumbling block, but first and foremost the aim is to recruit people for 'basic jobs', where it is expected that you can speak a few words of English or Dutch, but where it is not required that you are really proficient in one of the languages."

## Be strong and try to accept new reality

Waking up in a new world, a foreign country with a language you don't speak and knowing that your homeland lies in ruins is not something to be cheerful about. "It's hard to get over that. It doesn't happen overnight. Still, I call on my compatriots to be strong, to accept that there is nothing they themselves can do about the situation and to pick up their lives again. No matter how difficult that may be. Make plans, live, and build a network of Belgians, compatriots and colleagues, people you can fall back on when you are struggling. I am fortunate to be able to count on people I can call my friends and family today. Hopefully I am not alone, and many Ukrainians can tell a similar story, now or in the future."



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