

THERE IS NO ONE
ELSE ON THIS
CHAT, ONLY YOU
AND MARTYNKA.
SHE HAS A
PROFILE PICTURE
AND IT LOOKS
LIKE YOU ARE
TALKING TO
A FRIEND.

Nastya Podorozhnyia
(Martynka)

**This interview was made on Thursday,
the 15th of December 2022, at 6 pm.**

by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk

Nastya, could you first introduce yourself, please?

My name is Nastia, I was born in Kyiv in Ukraine. I've been living in Poland for the last 8 years, I came here to study. Right now I am a human rights activist and sex educator. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I was mostly a journalist. I've been writing about reproductive rights but also about human rights in general. One of the most important texts I worked on was about the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, which was not a very popular topic in Ukrainian media. When the full-scale invasion happened, I created this women's rights movement, Martynka.

Let's talk about Martynka, because she is the main reason why we met today. Maybe you could introduce us to her, who she is, when she was born and so on.

Before the war started, my family and I were expecting that something might happen, that's why I decided to go to Lviv, to be with my family just in case. On February 24th, when I woke up, my boyfriend at the time called me and asked me where I was hiding. I didn't understand why he asked me this weird question. I went to the bathroom to check the news, because I didn't want to wake up my nieces. That's how I discovered the war started and for the next week or so we were escaping the country.

When we crossed the border, we were thinking of the way we can volunteer, my sister and I. I wanted to use my best skills so I wanted to volunteer as a journalist, writing about things like how to buy a sim card in Poland, etc. for Ukrainian refugees. During one of those days, I was asked by my colleague to interview a human trafficking

expert. They told me about this enormous problem: how many traffickers are coming from all over Europe and they are trying to exploit the vulnerable position of refugees and then take them away... They are saying they will take them to a hostel or shelter, but in reality, there is no hostel or shelter, but something much, much worse.

And I realized there was no hotline in Ukrainian - the official human traffic hotline in Poland was only available in Polish, English, and Vietnamese. Immediately I saw a gap and I tried to fill it a little bit, so together with my family members, who escaped the war by then, we produced these information cards and a video describing the safety tips, and how to safely cross the border. We created a hotline on Telegram, which is one of the most popular messaging apps in Ukraine. We created this bot Martynka, named after my youngest niece, it has the logo of a girl with a sword in her hand. I specifically wanted her to be a female character, so let's say when you are in the car with a stranger that's offering help, contacting a "friend" it's more discreet than contacting an emergency line. Immediately when I created the bot, I was thinking about gender-based violence, because I am a survivor of gender-based violence and I went through reporting it in Poland, as a Ukrainian migrant. Several weeks after we launched the hotline, we received a request for the morning-after pill. It was coming from a teenage girl, but she was at the age of consent already.

It was a young girl who escaped the war by herself, she had sex without protection, and she was unpleasantly surprised that she cannot buy the morning-after pill in the pharmacy without a

prescription. As a journalist, I wrote a piece about how Polish women are buying emergency contraception in Poland¹ and I knew about the organization called Lekarze Kobietom - Doctors for Women. I thought it was effective, but it turned out not to be. When I gave her their email and she received a super long email in Polish, saying: please go to a doctor and if he rejects the prescription, call this hotline and ask for... all this bullshit. There is this girl and the clock is ticking and she needs contraception now. Then I realized that one of my friends is part of the Dzień Po collective. And this is how I discovered them and we started to collaborate. Whenever a refugee asks for emergency contraception, we redirect them to Dzień Po.

The abortion topic came very quickly, some days after this situation with the morning-after pill. I don't even remember who the first woman was. By then we were prepared because we partnered with Women On Web, one of the biggest organizations in the world helping with abortions. We started to spread information on how to do abortion in Poland in a safe and legal way. This included explaining how to fill in a medical questionnaire on the website of Women On Web – at the beginning of the Russian invasion the questionnaire was translated into Russian quite badly and there was no Ukrainian version at all. Bad translations can scare the refugees and they think it might be a fraud if something is badly written.

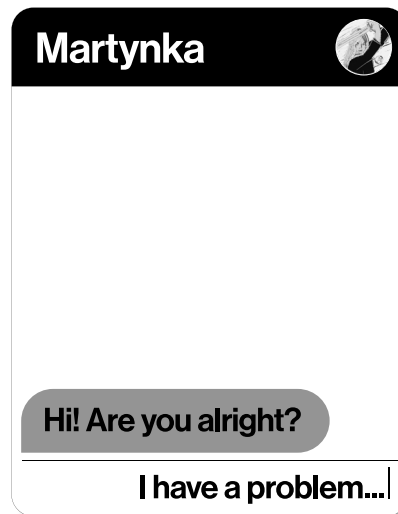
This is one of the most popular requests on our helpline. We have helped around 400 women so far, since March 15th. The most popular request remains psychological help, we connect refugees with psychologists and we pay for their

consultations. And the second most popular topic is reproductive health - abortion and contraceptives. Violence is also becoming more and more popular. Usually, violence is becoming a bigger issue during winter and summer holidays, when people stay at home, and sometimes the tension in the family grows bigger and bigger. So we are receiving more requests about violence recently.

We also started to support domestic violence survivors, and we opened a shelter in September. We are very flexible as an organization when there is a need to open a new service. We realized there are more and more women who are talking about domestic abuse both in Poland and Ukraine. Some Ukrainian women use wartime laws as an opportunity to leave their husbands who cannot leave the country. So this is their escape from the abusive relationship. Some women are in abusive relationships in Poland. We provide shelter for them in a small apartment in Krakow, we help them with finding a job, finding a school for their kids, and so on.

So how does the Telegram group work exactly? You are referring to a “bot”, but what does it mean?

It is a chat and there is no one else on this chat, only you and Martynka. You are not receiving messages from “operator Nastya” or “operator Vika”, but from Martynka. She has a profile picture and this name and it looks like you are talking to a friend. But in fact, it's our operators who receive and reply to those messages. So I wouldn't call it a group because there is only you and Martynka.



¹ <https://zaborona.com/kontracepciya-y-polshchi/>

**How many people are behind the bot?
And how are you organized?**

At the very beginning, it was just me and then we expanded, now we have 3 people who respond to the messages. Nastya is our most experienced hotline operator. Ukrainian, Russian and Polish. She is a refugee herself and now she lives in Germany. We have Rita who lives in Kyiv. When the city is under Russian attacks, she has to reply to people from bomb shelters. Rita earned her master's degree in social work and she wrote a thesis on domestic abuse. That's why we always value her opinion on cases connected with this topic. The third operator is Niko, a non-binary person originally from Ukraine who's been living in Poland for several years now. Incredibly empathetic person. Another important person in the team is Vlada – she's our funding manager. Thanks to Vlada, our organization has money for all expenses: from psychologists' compensation and medical bills to our own salaries. We also have a creative team consisting of Kateryna, our SMM specialist based in Warsaw, and my sister Lera, who is still responsible for all graphic design. Very often the idea for a post comes from the hotline, when we hear people are lacking information about some topic, so then we create the content about it. Overall we have around 7-8 people on the core of the organization and additionally, we work with 10 psychologists and 3 lawyers.

When we speak about the structure of your initiative, I wonder are you formalized as an NGO or an informal collective?

We went to the notary and we did a founding deed, which is a first step for

creating an NGO. So our plan is to create an NGO but we were hesitating for a long time. First of all, we need a separate person for all of this, we are a small collective that has limited resources, but registering became more and more important for us in order to ask for money from donors, and some donors will not give money if we are not registered. But so far we call ourselves a grassroots organization and we are trying to make it horizontal. When we work on the hotline, I really don't like when my colleagues are calling me "boss" and expect a done decision. I am encouraging them to make the decision together. We are trying to be horizontal.

And coming back to the need for abortion. How is the situation for those who fled from Ukraine and who need abortions in Poland?

Well, translation is a big problem. The other obstacle is knowledge. For some people, it is a surprise that abortion pills exist. This is a small percentage but it still exists. And then there is a huge percentage, most of them, who believe in a lot of stereotypes about abortion. Like they will not be fertile anymore, or that their uterus will fall out. They are asking why they did it to themselves, why they allow the guy to not put on a condom, and they blame themselves. This connects us to another issue. Abortion very often is an emotional topic. You have to be empathetic, you have to have soft skills to process all those requests. We give people numbers, we give people data from scientific papers. Usually, we use information from websites like WHO. We are also very empathetic, constantly giving each other feedback, how to communicate better, and how to express

that we are here for them. Sometimes refugees are asking us questions we are not able to answer. For example, they ask about the country of origin of abortion pills. This is coming from Women On Web and we can only say that they are definitely very safe. They have numerous dealers and we never know where they are coming from. Also sometimes they ask us if we are doctors... But the truth is, you don't have to be a doctor to be an abortion companion. This procedure is very easy. We don't ask if someone who puts on a bandage is a doctor. Of course, I am exaggerating, abortion is more serious, but still much safer than many things we do at home that we consider safe. The mortality rate from taking mifepristone, one of the abortion pills, is lower than from taking Viagra.

The last thing is the legal situation. If you are a refugee, you are very afraid of illegal status, you are afraid you might be deported. It's the main source of stress, people are afraid to do anything illegal. And unfortunately, even though it's legal to order yourself pills, you can still be interrogated by the police as a witness.

Do you collaborate with any other collectives, besides Dzień Po or Women On Web?

Oh yes. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, I reached out to Jolanta saying: Hi, I am not a journalist anymore. We discussed the situation in the Czech Republic and we decided that it wouldn't be a good direction to go for Ukrainian people for abortion. We found better and easier solutions. We are also in touch with Ciocia Basia, we are friends with Abortion Dream Team, who are like our older sisters. They are a huge inspiration - their communication,

and social media, also they are very very friendly. I have huge respect for them and they have respect for our team, they have offered us training. And then there is the biggest women's rights organization, which helps with legal issues, FEDERA. They also offered us training about the legal aspect of reproductive health, which was super useful, they also invited us to WKRW², which is an alliance of different organizations. There are around 100 Polish organizations that function not only in Poland but also in other countries in Europe. They fight for equal rights, women and reproductive rights. Together we can issue some statements, sign petitions and so on. So it's the more political side of activism that I really appreciate. I like the fact that Martynka doesn't only help, but we also participate in voicing our concerns.

Was there any mobilization through the Polish feminist movements when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine happened? Especially when it comes to reproductive rights.

I can tell you about one interesting collaboration we had last summer. There is this Polish activist in Norway, Aleksandra Weder Sawicka, who organized this initiative asking women from all over Norway to go to their local pharmacy and get the morning-after pill because it's available without prescription. Each of them could buy only one pill because they don't sell those pills in bulk. Then they sent them to Doctors Without Borders who were going to Ukraine. Later on, the pills were sent to Ukraine.

The box itself says "Humanitarian aid Ukraine", someone wrote in Cyrillic, probably Aleksandra, "Slava Ukrajini"

(Glory to Ukraine) and she made a very cute mistake, she messed up the order of the letters which makes it even more touching. The person who not only invented this whole initiative, put her resources, to organize it, to pack it, but she also wrote something in Cyrillic, in the alphabet she doesn't know... That is so sweet, I can't even... And this is one little example, we have also received pills from Spain from local volunteers.

And regarding the support from Polish society... Well, regular Polish people were not thinking of abortion, when they were thinking of refugees. They were rather giving other stuff, which was also very needed, like clothing, stuff for children and so on. But women's rights organizations were very active. I am so so grateful to the Polish sisterhood that supported us. All things I've described: Federa being so friendly, Abortion Dream Team being so welcoming... I was surprised because before I worked in business and in journalism. There is this feeling of competitiveness. There is nothing like that in reproductive care. I would say that the pro-choice activists are the most friendly, warm-hearted, and nice people. I had zero negative experiences with any pro-abortion activists. They always had this attitude that we are all in this together.

No competitiveness. I just love it.

I just remember the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and how we as Ciocia Czesia were thinking about how we could help, but because abortion for people from outside of the European Union is not legal in the Czech Republic, we were disappointed we cannot help... We hoped something would change with the refugee status, but we didn't find any clinic that agreed to accept people from Ukraine... but what



I also wanted to comment on is a funny story from the Czech Republic.

Actually, this act of solidarity of donating morning-after pills to Ukraine brought a lot of negative light to the anti-choice organization, Hnutí Pro Život. Some people were collecting morning-after pills, and one doctor went to Ukraine with humanitarian aid and he created a crowdfunding campaign for that reason. Then Hnutí Pro Život made a post on FB where they said that instead of preventing getting pregnant, we should prevent rape, so maybe we should provide pepper spray to Ukraine instead of morning-after pills. Finally, a lot of Czech people realized what this organization is really about. It's not recognized here yet, who they are. Society here doesn't think they are dangerous. So it was the first time when it was publicly discussed who they are, where they have money from, etc. A lot of well-known people were publicly making statements that they do not support them anymore - like doctors for example.

When I was in New York when Martynka received the Moonshot Award...

Congratulations!

Thank you! And I met a Czech doctor gynecologist, Ondřej Šimetka, he is the head of the gynecological department - he was part of the jury. He told me very briefly, I wish we had this conversation for a longer time. He described to me this anti-choice organization, that they are covering their activity as a "center of help for women", and "support women", while in fact, they are making women decide not to have an abortion. It's this one you meant?

Yes, exactly, they are called Hnutí Pro Život.

Just two weeks ago this Polish anti-choice

organization launched a new website, Ocalone.org. It's a colorful, cool design full of pictures of happy women. It's the same strategy as Hnutí Pro život has been using for many years already. The website is dedicated to pregnant people who are hesitating if they want to keep a child. Of course, they are trying to convince you to keep your pregnancy. They are describing different issues, like living with an abuser or having a fetus with defects. In each scenario, they are trying to say that having a baby is still better than abortion. I also saw them even trying to use the word "feminism", in the sense that "women are so strong, they are able to move mountains, so they can always have a child". So the pro-choice movement is trying to make sure that this website is recognized as anti-choice and that people will not get fooled.

The last thing we want to know is what are your needs now? Is there any way in which we could contribute to Martynka? Since you are already cooperating with Dzień Po, should we donate the pills to them and they will distribute them to you or could we also donate some of them directly to you?

Of course, of course, I will never say no to this! Never say no to any donations, that's the first rule. Especially now, when fewer and fewer funders want to support us. "Sorry, we don't support Ukrainian projects anymore" became a typical answer from funders. Right now almost no emergency funding is available for Ukrainian organizations because the conflict is no longer "trendy" in the media. At the same time, we have more work than a year ago. We are helping more and more human trafficking survivors, raped women, and

families who have literally no home to return to. That's why it is crucial for regular people to keep supporting us through platforms like PayPal.

But definitely, we have different needs, we need expertise - like experts who will help us develop our marketing strategies. The problem is that we are getting censored on social media platforms. Instagram is blocking our ads, saying that we are advertising real estate, which is of course not true. We never promoted any housing... and there is no way to report it.

Housing?...

Yes! That we are trying to rent or sell apartments. Let's say the post is about how to find a gynaecologist in Poland and Instagram says it's a housing ad.

This is unbelievable! It's targeted censorship...

And there is no way to report it... I mean there is a button: ask for a review but I never get any reply. So when you report a comment or spam, they reply very fast, but in this case, they just don't.

So we are trying to figure it out, we are trying to get someone who works on Instagram, and at the same time, we are thinking of different strategies how to promote our work because targeted ads are just not working. We use influencer marketing, like influencers are talking about Martynka, sometimes Russian bots come and report posts or stories and they are deleted. It's really hard to promote a progressive Ukrainian organization. This is why we are always looking for expertise, money, specialists, and basically anything. If I can speak of very prosaic things, we



are looking for an accountant. As a young organization, there are so many little things and there is so much responsibility on each of us... yeah, I hope I answered your question.

Yes! And what about Ukraine - is it possible to send morning-after pills there?

Yes, I know women's rights organizations that are spreading abortion pills and morning-after pills. There is a bigger problem with abortion pills because there is such a low knowledge and understanding of how those pills work, sometimes people are afraid to take pills as humanitarian aid. Right now I am in communication with an organization that supports women in the military. It's such an amazing project. They are gathering meds to support the reproductive health of women in the Ukrainian army. A very, very important project that no one is thinking about.

Can you send us links?

Well, this is not public. I can connect you to these women but not publicly. I would love to make it public and to make a big campaign. Ukrainian refugees together with Ukrainian women are supporting Ukrainian female soldiers. That would be amazing, so far we don't announce it publicly, but why am I talking about it? What was your question?

What ways are there to send pills to Ukraine?

So the reason why I was remembering it is that I offered to donate abortion pills to the female soldiers. And I was told that the doctors in the army don't want to take them, something which has to do with prejudice

and lack of knowledge even though they are doctors. This is super sad, but we can't do anything about it. We have to do this very difficult work, to keep looking for good allies - good doctors, and unfortunately, there is still such a huge stigma and sometimes it's not a problem to get the meds, but it's a problem to give them to the right people. But in general, I know very good Ukrainian organizations that are accepting morning-after pills and abortion pills. So if you have them, I can think of legal ways to organize it.

Great! Thank you very much for giving us this interview!

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**The mortality
rate from
taking
mifepristone,
one of the
abortion pills,
is lower than
from taking
Viagra.**

