

Ukraine: Bilkis, grassroots feminism

Monday 1 April 2024, by [Bilkis](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2024).

Bilkis was founded 4 years ago in Kharkiv, then with the war moved to Lviv. Since February 24, 2022, “Bilkis has modified its activities to meet the needs of the Ukrainian population. The main thing for the Ukrainians who lost everything was to provide them with shelter, food and medicine,” the feminists explain. During the first four months of the war, “we sent packages to eastern and central Ukraine. Most often, it was to Dnipro and Kropyvnytsky, because this is where many people from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were evacuated,” its members specify. Today, in Lviv, they opened a “Space of things”, “a space where you can leave things and where you can certainly take them away”. But Bilkis does not forget her feminist identity. Among the many campaigns they are organizing, there was one in December 2022 against an alcohol brand, which displayed a naked woman on its bottles. The activists stationed themselves in front of the brand’s store in Lviv for 3 Saturday afternoons, brandishing signs denouncing “Stop sexualizing women”, “The female body is not an advertisement”. The Ukrainian fascist group Katarsis, which came to the scene, then physically threatened them. For several months, feminists in Lviv have also been organizing distributions of hot meals, “Hodivnichka”, a popular canteen every Sunday morning. Today, they answer our questions to provide an initial assessment of two years of activities in the field.



In May and June 2022, I saw that you are organizing your group’s cycling tours around Lviv. Why was it important for you to do these hikes? Do you continue to do it?

In our team, there is Ivanka who is an experienced cyclist and who rides her bike all the time, in all seasons. Ivanka initiated short distance hikes for the women of Team Bilkis. Our women’s cycling club was open to all girls, regardless of experience level. This support from the cycling community was a good opportunity to start exploring the world of cycling. Our rides were about gaining confidence on the road, overcoming fears, such as fear of pavement, going on adventures, and having a sense of sisterhood. The hikes were an opportunity to meet like-minded people, find a traveling companion and even friends. The Femvelloclub is not a competition or a performance race. It’s about bringing together cyclists of all levels: from professionals to beginners. For some, it was their first 20 kilometer, and for others, it was far from their first. The important thing is that we all covered our distances together!

We also went hiking in the mountains once with tents. Today, Ivanka does not have enough

resources to run the Femveloclub on a permanent basis, because the coordination of such a project requires a lot of attention and careful preparation, but from time to time, in a spontaneous format, there is always a desire to ride together.

6 million Ukrainians had to leave Ukraine, 6 million are internally displaced people. Many members of Bilkis belong to this second category. After two years of full-scale war, do you think you will ever return home? How do you experience it?

Ivanka: I am from Donbas, from a small town called Roubizhne, in the Luhansk region. I've been living here for two years and, to be completely honest, I'm still adjusting: to a new environment, to a new routine, to a new life, to the constant search for new connections and new favorite places. Moving and adapting was forced into my life because of the Russian attack, and I cannot view this as an adventure or a journey. I don't know if I will return to Roubizhne or if I will stay in Lviv. The total war in my country has been going on for two years, so how can I have dreams in this situation? Of course, I have a dream: victory and returning home. My area is now occupied and I have seen photos of my apartment destroyed. I am considering the possibility of staying in Lviv for a long time, and therefore I will continue to develop here. Wherever life throws me, I just want to have the strength to do what I want, to live and help our army. Today, I am incredibly happy to have the opportunity to be on my own territory. Yes, I'm not at home, but I'm in Ukraine. This gives me a lot of strength, even though I am still depressed and experiencing the trauma of losing my home, but I am building strong inner pillars that support me in these times of predation.

You have opened the Space of the things in August 2022 where we can give things (clothes, books, etc.) and take them according to our needs. Everything is free. With the success of the Space of Things, you open one day to drop off items and one day to collect them. Can you tell us who drops off and who picks up? What do people say about the Space of Things?

Our Space of Things project has been operating successfully for a year and a half. It turned out that many people can and want to give their items to others. However, we can't handle the amount of stuff people give us (or want to give us). This is why we have implemented an item acceptance schedule. We typically receive items every two weeks, but sometimes less often. In April we will no longer take items, but we will give them away, because we have a lot now.

More than 90% of our visitors are women. There are also men, but much less often. Although we intend this place exclusively for women, we welcome everyone. We believe this is because, firstly, our target audience as a feminist organization is women. Secondly, women are more often engaged in reproductive work and, therefore, here they look for their children's things, clean their homes and thus find useful things.

As we can estimate, the main core of our visitors are young girls and women who often take and bring objects, as well as older women who are part of vulnerable groups (displaced people, low-income people, homeless).

So far we have only received positive feedback about our venue, as we try to provide quality service and maintain a pleasant environment. People say that this project is useful, that it helps them. Also, they often ask us to open other places in Lviv and other cities of Ukraine. But we can only be satisfied with one center. There are also comments that people use our services dishonestly - reselling things, we ourselves have repeatedly had such suspicions regarding specific people. However, we cannot prevent these people from behaving inappropriately. And despite these very rare cases, most people understand the meaning and rules of our Space and respect them (that is, they use things without commercial purposes).



Can you tell us about poverty in Lviv?

Poverty has been an acute problem in Ukraine in the past. However, due to the war and the deterioration of the economic situation in the country, the problem of poverty has become even more acute in Lviv, as well as in other cities. Poverty after events such as war increases due to various factors such as destruction of infrastructure, loss of jobs, reduction in economic activity, and others. People are losing their homes, livelihoods and access to basic services, exacerbating the problem of poverty across the country. Additionally, since 2022, Lviv's population has increased as people flee to the west, away from the horror of war. Our initiative regularly provides help to people in difficult situations by giving them food. This is just one way to fight poverty in our city, but it's an important way because food is a basic need for everyone.

Could you also tell us who comes to these distributions?

Different people approach us for food distribution. Of course, these are still people who are below the poverty line, but they look very different. Some people look like they're homeless, others are dressed "properly" and we would never have thought they had a problem accessing food if we saw them in a park or in a bus. We often talk to people who come to see us, and their stories leave no doubt about their honesty. This always makes us think that poverty is a much bigger problem than it seems at first glance. We feed everyone, regardless of age, sex, gender, etc., but our beneficiaries are most often people aged 28 to 30, from all over the country. Women and men come to the distribution in approximately equal proportions.

How are people reacting to this initiative?

If you ask the people who come to the distribution, they are overwhelmed with gratitude. It sometimes seems that our distributions constitute a sort of mini-vacation in the lives of our needy every Sunday. We love receiving their feedback and we often hear a "thank you" from each person who comes to pick up food, but more often than not we receive much more recognition and blessings. Often, people in need are surprised to find that it is not just food, but delicious food without animal products. Most people who come to the distributions know a difficult life and situation. We already know some of them a little better, and we have even become friends with some of them. We do not want to be technical in our approach to food distribution, we continue to communicate with them, our meals are just an instrument of attention, support and solidarity. This is a very important approach to creating a social project.

As for the issue of people seeing us from the outside when we distribute food, to be honest, we don't even pay attention to it because we are busy with the process. When we deliver food by taxi, drivers sometimes ask us what we are carrying in such large containers, and when they find out, they congratulate us. In general, everyone who knows about our " feeder " gives us positive comments. This is nice to hear and encourages us to continue.

What difficulties did you encounter?

Today, we hardly have any more difficulties. This is a small initiative in which all participants are

interchangeable and if someone gets sick or leaves town, it's not the end of the world. A year ago, when we started , the cooking process was new and unfamiliar . We made a mistake in calculating the quantity to cook . We didn't know how to bring the hot food and distribute it so everyone had enough. It took us a lot of time and effort to figure out how to cook several dozen portions at a time. With experience, we have improved all processes and developed a menu. Today, it is simply a certain " algorithm " . Last

summer we had difficulties with the public. The previous distribution location was in a residential area, where we brought a folding table. After eating, people went to the bathroom in the bushes, queued early and made noise under the windows. This bothered the residents of the building, and we constantly heard complaints and threats. Now we were distributing next to the church, where there is access to toilets, and people behave a little more politely next to a religious building. Although we have nothing to do with the church. We are simply located nearby. The only difficulty now is finding funding for this project.



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