

Tourism in war torn Ukraine: when visiting help recover

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Russians snubbing European destinations, and Ukrainians coping with zero leisure trips from abroad. Tourism is a collateral victim of the ongoing war. But thanks to a European project and an ancestor of the Commission president von der Leyen, Kyiv and the Baltic countries are reviving the industry and turning it into a tool of solidarity and reconstruction

When the premises of the American Civil War forced the textile mills of Mississippi to a virtual stop, and the Russian Empire started seeking new cotton suppliers for its huge domestic market, Ludwig Knoop had a brilliant idea. The young German merchant spotted in the waterfalls near Narva, in Estonia, a precious natural resource for powering a textile company. Just a few years later, **in the 1870s, the Kreenholm Manufacturing Company was already invading the world with its cotton fabrics** and attracting thousands of workers from all over Estonia, Poland, and Saint Petersburg. Such a fulgurant success was worth him the **title of Baron from the Russian Emperor Alexander II** and, one century later, a bronze statue in his native city of Bremen. But **nobody would have ever guessed that his world**



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fame would be one day overshadowed by that of one of his descendants: Ursula von der Leyen.

After surviving the Bolshevik revolution, two World Wars, and the Estonian independence, in 2010 the Kreenholm Manufacturing Company surrendered to the global trend of delocalization, and the cheapest textiles from China and Pakistan. Though, **the European Commission president insisted to “see by her own eyes this ‘wonderland’, that she heard so much about in her childhood,”** recalls Jaanus Mikk. General manager of [Narvagate](#), a company working to revive Narva’s tourism and heritage, **he accompanied von der Leyen in her guided tour of Kreenholm, when she traveled to Estonia for an official visit, last October.** “She [was very curious and happy to be where one of her ancestors made history](#), but the schedule was so tight, that I didn’t have the time to answer all of her questions.” Located on an island on the Narva river, **the premises of the old manufactory are among the assets that the local authorities have been trying to enhance, to revive tourism.** “Being just 150 km away, we thought we could attract many tourists from Saint Petersburg, but since the war broke Russians stopped coming, and we don’t know how long we will still have to endure this situation,” says Mikk.

In Baltic countries like Estonia, tourism has been especially hit for several reasons, explains Eric Drésin, Secretary General of [ECTAA](#), a federation of European travel agents and tour operators. “First, **they border Russia**, and their situation was especially tense when Putin was threatening retaliation for Finland’s and Sweden’s bid to join NATO. Second, **they have important Russian minorities on their territories.** And then, they are **often part of touristic packages including stops in Russia**, which went immediately deserted.” Together with 7 other locations in Ukraine, Poland, and other European countries, **Narva was chosen as a pilot site by [TextOUR](#), a European project aimed at fostering sustainable tourism in remote areas.** “We’ve been enhancing theatre performances, music festivals, opera shows, and cultural tourism is keeping us afloat,” says Mikk. “**In the past five or six years, we registered more than 100 000 tourists, but 95 percent of them were Estonians**, and the rest came mainly from Finland, Latvia, and Sweden.” “We knew that we wouldn’t revive our tourism in one day, but it’s getting very long, and still we don’t know when our relationships with Russia will go back to normality,” he adds.

A global long-lasting instability, impacting tourism and businesses for the years to come is the outlook recently sketched by the [NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence](#) at the ECTAA’s spring meeting in Riga, Latvia. “Our industry needs to adapt to the current geopolitical situation and adjust its strategies, and this for the simple reason that we don’t know how long this uncertainty will still endure,” explains Drésin. **Before the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion, some [14 million foreign tourists](#), especially from Russia and Eastern Europe visited Ukraine every year, injecting into the economy over 1.4 billion dollars**, but figures collapsed since Moscow launched its “military special operation”.



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“There are still people coming for business or because they are journalists or part of governmental or humanitarian missions, but **there is no incoming tourism at all. The only people still traveling for leisure are Ukrainians,**” explains Marina Antoniuk, President of the [Association of the incoming tour operators of Ukraine](#).

One of the assets that Kyiv is trying to enhance to revive its tourism industry is the Via Regia. Recognised in 2006 as a “[Cultural Route of the Council of Europe](#)” and connecting 8 countries from Russia and Ukraine to the Atlantic coast of Spain, it is the oldest and longest road link between Eastern and Western Europe. “Most people ignore its meaning and importance for our region. It’s not only about attractions and landscapes. **More than ever, it embodies now our historical and cultural links with Europe. Before the invasion, we didn’t need to claim who we are, and where we come from, but today it is crucial, especially for our children and the generations to come,**” says Viktoriia Posternak, who coordinates the Ukrainian pilot of TEXTOUR, focusing on smaller and less known heritage areas of the Rivnenska region, located along the Via Regia. The main action designed within the project consists of a “creative cluster” in the Derman-Ostroh National Nature Park. “It’s a whole set of initiatives, aimed at raising awareness of this beautiful spot: there are sightseeing tours, visits combining art, literature, and music, and workshops on cultural heritage, local food, and traditions,” she explains. Even though **the Rivnenska region was relatively spared by destruction**, air alerts and electric blackouts are not the only elements, reminding Marina and her colleagues of the ongoing war. “**We are a crucial crossroads for refugees, fleeing from Eastern Ukraine and other frontlines areas.** Our strategic position prompted us to **put the tourism promotion at the service of the so-called ‘internal displaced people’**”.

This is why some of the actions within the creative cluster also target refugees. “On the one hand, **we involve them both as designers and participants in our initiatives**, to help them make connections with locals and get integrated. And by doing so, we also offer them relief from the psychological stress, that they are experiencing,” adds Posternak. When Russia launched the invasion, her first reaction was a paralyzing shock. “**For a week or so, we put everything to a halt, because we were totally lost, but then we realized that we couldn’t let ourselves overcome by fear, otherwise we would die.**” And this contagious awareness seems now to drive forward most tour operators, far beyond the Ukrainian borders. “In Riga, we have just discussed with our fellow European members how to contribute to healing the pain and **preparing the future of Ukraine, by both supporting the reconstruction of its museums and touristic attractions and offering holidays opportunities and distractions to its children,**” says Drésin. And since people will keep traveling and going on holiday despite the war, he adds, “the question is more how to adapt our offer and match it with such uncertain scenarios.” Stressed by the contribution that tourism will be called to give to the post-war reconstruction, this urgency has already prompted a first response by the Ukrainian operators. “**We are now investing a lot in what**



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we call ‘solidarity and volunteer’ tourism: a new kind of responsible tourism, aimed not only at discovering the beauties of our country but also at helping communities and territories recover,” concludes Antoniuk.

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