

In this episode, I talk with Radu Cristea of the Lions Club of Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania in Romania about setting up a shelter for people displaced from their homes and also travelling into Ukraine by road to deliver humanitarian aid. Following on, Serhii Denisenko, a member of Kyiv Lions, explains how aid is being co-ordinated and distributed in Ukraine with the support of Lions clubs across the globe.

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer.

Hello everybody, welcome to the latest episode of the popular Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Ben Mouncer and I'd like to thank you for tuning in. If you haven't listened before, our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer.

This month on the podcast I welcome Radu Cristea, from the Lions Club of Cluj-Napoca in Transylvania, who has driven, with his Lions' friend Mihai Marusciac, from Romania to Ukraine several times this year to deliver humanitarian aid.

We also feature Serhii Denisenko from the Lions Club of Kyiv in Ukraine. Serhii has been coordinating humanitarian aid within the city, working closely with Lions clubs across Europe and in America.

But first, I have a favour to ask. We'd like your help in getting the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Tell your family, tell your friends - and if you're a Lions member, why not let other members of your club know about the podcast - and how easy it is to listen. All you need to do is either go on the website www.lionsclubs.co where you will see a link to the podcast, or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

You can listen on-demand or subscribe so that you never miss an episode. We publish a new programme on the second Wednesday of each month, and we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can.

Now let me introduce our first guest Radu Cristea from Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania.

Thank you for joining step forward and volunteer podcast. We really appreciate you coming on, it'd be great if you could start by telling our listeners a bit about how lions in Romania are helping people in Ukraine.

Wow, well, first of all, thank you for having me on this podcast, it's a great opportunity to share with people what we're doing here. You probably don't know. But in the past two months, we had over 600,000 people, refugees coming from Ukraine into Romania, well, most of them continue their way to, you know, towards the Western countries, but some of them, you know, stay in Romania. So, you know, there's a lot of needs, definitely. So we felt like, we definitely have to get involved and do something about it. Most of the clubs in Romania, and especially those clubs, closer to the border to the northern or eastern border, did do a lot in providing, you know, aid or immediate, you know, help to people coming into Romania, helping them find accommodation, you know, all sorts of assistance, like medical assistance, transportation, whatever is necessary. Because you have to imagine these people escaping the war are first of all terrified. Second of all, they've left everything behind. And that's something that I can't even imagine, how would it be if I would have to leave my house, my dog, you know, my business, everything I have behind and runaway, so it's terrible. So you need a lot of compassion for these people, a lot of empathy and a lot of support. Now, my club, Lions club of Cluj, Transylvania, with all of our members, we decided we need to do something about it.

So we started basically two main projects. First of all, we started taking humanitarian aid inside Ukraine. And I've been a part of those transports every single time. And actually, the very first transport we did was on March 3, so it was like a week after the war started, when

there was still a lot of confusion and a lot of fear. And we took a lot of food and medical supplies. And then we continued doing that for the next few weeks.

And the second main project is setting up a shelter for refugees here in my city in Cluj Napoca. We were really happy to find a big factory, that is owned by an Austrian company. And they were very receptive to my request, and allowed us to use some old office spaces that they're not using anymore, and convert them into a shelter. So you know, we got to work, we raised the money, most of the money came from, you know, the members within my club, their businesses. And then later on, we had friends helping from the district 101 in Milan, Italy, we have friends helping us from Hynek Lions and other clubs in Germany. So anyways, it's like an international project by now that we were able, in three weeks to convert that space into a beautiful shelter, all brand spanking new. We've got 28 brand new beds, and everything else they need, you know, from bathroom with showers, you know, washer dryer, dishwasher. I mean, I thought of everything, you know, we got the high internet connection, a big, big screen TV and Play station for the kids to play on, bought a couple of laptops, so they can check in, you know, emails, read newspapers, and you know, do pretty much what normal people do in a normal life. Because our idea was we are not trying to have like a hospital type of place here where people stay in bed all day long. So this place, it's ready. We had a group of 15 people, eight kids and seven parents initially. And now actually today, some more people are coming as those left. We have some more coming in. We are able to provide also a main meal for them. There's a restaurant on the premises, and we worked out a deal with them. They've got parking for their cars. There's a 24/7 guard over there present on the premises so they're feel safe. Yeah, this is pretty much it.

Well it's, it's an amazing story and I'm full of admiration for you and the amazing difference you're making to these people's lives and I'm sure the listeners are as well. So yeah, amazing work, maybe give us a sense of the geography here. Radu. How close is it where you are to the Ukraine border. And I know you mentioned you were kind of crossing over the border with supplies as well, in the early stages.

Yes, we are about four hours driving time from the northern border of Romania. And, to be quite honest, I never been to Ukraine in my life. But when all of this started, you know, we needed to do something. So we kept seeing on the news how people are waiting in lines for hours or days to come across into Romania, Hungary, Poland, and it was still winter, and it was snowing, it was cold. And I thought we need to do something about it. So I raised a small amount of money and made like 200 packages with essential things from water to little packages of food, blankets, like, you know, a good winter jacket, in each package.

So I thought, I'm just gonna drive to the border, and just give it to the people waiting there in line with kids and everything. But when we got to the border, I realized that the line was not on the Romanian side, which they came through pretty quickly, it was on their side on the Ukrainian side. So it was a decision, we need to go into Ukraine. I spoke to some friends and got some connections in the border police and the customs offices, and we were able to pass through into Ukraine. And this was, a week after the war started. So things were pretty intense. And we got to Ukraine, and we realized that, you know, what we did bring was of great help, but it was insignificant compared to the needs they have there. So after having the first contact there, we went to a place like they call it a boarding school, where actually they collect all these things and send them on to Kyiv and in other areas where they're needed. And then you know, second transport came in. And third one. Actually, by the third one, we bought a big van because by this time we used our personal vehicles. And I did have some problems with my insurance company and anyways, long story short, I can't take my car to Ukraine anymore. So with the help of our friends from Germany, from German clubs we purchased a big, Ford transit, for transportation. And last week, I was able to take their about 1.5 metric tons of goods, mainly medical supplies, because that's something they asked for, like first aid kits, all sorts of surgical things and you know, sterile things they need for wounded people, obviously and also food. So the last transport was the biggest one worth about 11,000 euros, and all that was donations from members in my club, and members from the clubs in Germany.

What was that experience like Radu? Jumping into a transit van, doing these trips to Ukraine, like it's, just tell us a bit more about that experience for you.

First of all, you have to understand it's a war zone. So even I mean, given the fact that the war line is not there, it's pretty far from there. Still, the tension, you feel, the terror that people leaving, it's unbelievable. And, you know, every time I get back from Ukraine, like for the next day, I'm all quiet and I don't communicate a lot. And my wife, who's a doctor says, you've got PTSD. And I'm like, No, I don't. Yes, you do. So anyways, it's impossible not to be affected. You have to keep in mind, the whole country is at war. They all live in such a terror not knowing when they will be targeted next. It's a terrible thought. And I was talking to a lady and she had like a son and a daughter and the son, a college student in Kyiv and the daughter, a college student in Moscow, and she was like, I can't even sleep at night. I don't know what to do. And it's just terrible it's not only the fact that you see the army all over the place with machine guns. But you know, they've given civilians, machine guns. And, you know, we branded our van like with big logos and help for Ukraine in Ukrainian because you never know when someone will think you might be a Russian spy or something, you know. So anyways, just to make a long story short, it's a very, very tense experience every time. But people there are absolutely wonderful, and the level of love they have for their country. It's unbelievable. I don't think we have that kind of love for our country. And you know, they're ready to fight to the end, and they're ready to do everything they can in their power. And I spoke to young people and older people, and I spoke to women and men, and they all feel the same. We need to do everything we can for our country.

Yeah, and I think we know that sense of the Ukrainian spirit has spread right around the world, rather, and we're all feeling that. Thanks for really giving those insights and really shining a light on what it was like to do those trips. I know that you've filmed them as well and shared videos on YouTube. How important it is you feel to kind of show as many people as possible what's going on and what your experiences were like?

Well, first of all, like, a couple of weeks ago, I was talking to a guy from Ukraine, he lives here in Romania, and we help him with some supplies to take back, he had a special permit to leave the country in return, because he was working in the field of agriculture, anyway,

something that is essential for the economy, especially during the wartime. And he was telling me, I was born in Crimea. My parents are still there. I moved here 11 years ago, my own parents don't believe me, that there is a war in Ukraine. I send them pictures on my phone to their phone, I send them videos, with people killed on the streets. That's not true at all, fake News, says my own parents don't believe me. And you know, anything, you hear all these stories all over the place, because in Russian territories, in Russian occupied territories, there is pretty much no access to any kind of information, except the official, you know, Kremlin and propaganda. And that's all they know. And it's, you know, it's heart breaking for people that their own relatives, in this case, his own parents, you know, do not believe him. So anyways, I thought, you know, first of all, I did those videos, and you have to understand those videos probably reflect, I don't know, 20% of the reality, first of all, because you can't film everywhere, people are very tense, and they don't feel comfortable, you know, filming them, they're afraid some of them. On my last trip. I was trying to talk to some young guys about, you know, what's going on. And I think the first three or four turned me down, just because they didn't want to talk in front of the camera. And I was like, This is not a television, it is not an interview, I just want to talk to you, you know. So anyways, it took me quite a while to find one kid, he was 18 and willing, you know, to just speak on camera. But I thought those images are important, first of all, for my club, for my friends to know exactly what's going on there. And then for everybody else who wants to help and support, you know, this project. So it's just important to, you know, get a clearer picture, you know, through my eyes, not through the media sites, or newspapers or, you know, TV channels.

Well Radu, it's been really inspiring to speak to you. And thank you so much for sharing your story. Now, we know Lions Clubs, with the support of their communities around the world have been raising funds and providing direct help to Ukraine for several months now. You have given us some amazing stories and insights into what you have done. What have you found that has helped kind of the Ukrainian people the most, and you can either talk about your experiences of going to the Ukraine, or as you mentioned earlier, the shelter that you've created, and the opportunities and comfort that you're giving to people there, like what have you found people have kind of needed the most?

Well, every trip I'm taking there, I'm asking them, what are your needs? And last time the reason I took so much medication is because I've been asked for. So we took a lot of kids medication for colds, for flu, for fever, like ibuprofen, like I know a lot of kids medication because they told me you have to understand we have so many kids in all of the major cities that are being shelled and bombed every day, living in basements for the past two months and they're getting sick. You know, they're getting sick, they're in humid places, dark places, cold places, and they spend most of their lives there. So we need a lot of children's medications. So that's what we did, we took a lot of children medication, when they said, we also need a lot of first aid kits. So last time, I took about 350 first aid kits, then they want medication to stop bleeding, they need medication for I can't even tell you all the medical terms, but you know, surgery for you know, blood transfusion, all sorts of stuff. I managed to get everything they needed, and to get it there. So right now, at this point, what they need is probably I would say 50% food and 50% medical stuff, you know, and buy food, I mean, anything that you know, is lasting for a long time. And packaged food and basic foods like cooking oil, flour and things like that. I want to do a next transport towards the end of this month, and am totally prepared. Since the 1st June is coming and you know, children's International Day, I want to take gifts for children. So I already spoke to a few people in Ukraine to make up some lists with the kids that have a lot of shelters in Ukraine as well for people coming from the east and, you know, trying to find refuge in the Western and South West of Ukraine because obviously they feel it'd be safer, mainly in those towns and cities closer to NATO borders for obvious reasons. So we're trying to get some lists together with ages and you know how many kids there are and the next trip will be just for kids.

Amazing, and good luck with it Radu. And once again, thank you so much for coming on the podcast and sharing your story. Thank you so much for having me.

It's time now for a short break, we'll be back after this ...

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One way that Lions clubs across the world enable humanitarian help to be given directly where it is needed – in response to environmental disasters, medical needs or, as in the case of Ukraine, wars and conflicts – is the Lions Clubs International Foundation. Thanks to ongoing fundraising, the Foundation can immediately initiate projects and provide grants through Lions clubs and their partners to help desperate local communities.

Our next conversation is with Kyiv lions member Serhii Denisenko, talking with Mandy Broadbent about the help provided to local communities in Ukraine, thanks to support from Lions clubs and the International Foundation.

Could you tell the listeners Serhii, how many Lions Clubs would there be in Ukraine?

In Ukraine, we have 29 Lions Clubs and about 700 Lions but now most of them moved west to flee from the war. My Lions club is the Lions Club of Kyiv. The President is Pierre Sleiman who is now serving in Ternopil, which is a city west in of Ukraine.

What type of aid have you received?

In Ukraine we receive a lot of humanitarian aid from Lions of other countries. At first it was hygiene, food for children, clothes and so on. Today, it is mainly food and medicine. I also think that first aid kits, medical supplies for the wounded and water purification system and electric generators will be needed. It's because the Russians are bombing life support systems and food warehouses.

So you're finding that certain items you're going to need more of?

First of all, we will need more food and medical aid such as first aid kits, and medicine, general medicines because many of our producers, Ukrainian producers do not now work.

What sorts of foods are best for people to donate?

Simple foods like pasta, and canned meat, fish, maybe some groats. Do you know what I mean?

Oats, are you thinking oats, yes like oats. So, those sorts of dried foods. Yes, and in terms of water, is your water accessible?

Yes, we have access to water here, but in many regions, they have no working systems of purification. So, the quality of water is very low.

So, you need some form of purification?

I think it may be or such purification tablets or maybe some supplies.

Yes, the humanitarian aid that you're distributing are you having to go into shelters to distribute it?

In Kyiv region we have no need to go into shelters for now. It is mostly for volunteers give food for those who cannot come by themselves for example, old people or ill people and they live in their apartments and our volunteers deliver them food and medicine to their homes. But in those regions like Kharkiv or East Ukraine where when bombings take place people have to live in shelters, yes, of course they deliver humanitarian aid to lots of shelters.

I can tell you about our cooperation with Polish Lions.

With those Lions we have established cooperation and that we need humanitarian bridge. See how it works, Lions clubs and districts from Poland, Lithuania, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, France and even Canada and other countries send goods to the warehouse in Poland, near the border with Ukraine. Cargo is collected there and then moved across the border to the warehouse in Lviv which is the Western Ukraine city.

I would like to thank my colleagues, Lviv Lions Clubs presidents for their excellent organisation. Every day, every day their club's volunteers to receive cargo, sort it and

redirect it to different, different locations in Ukraine, across a number of regions, including Kyiv. So, it is a very effective way of working to distribute. And every week, tonnes of aid is received in Ukraine thanks to our fellow Lions of Europe and America.

It really is very good to hear that you're getting the support at the time when you need it.

Of course, big part of Lions support is the work with refugees because of millions of Ukrainians fled to Europe and even America from the war and they need support because they have no work, not enough money, they have no home and we are very grateful for our colleagues, for our lions who give shelter, give their homes for our people, Ukrainians.

Thank you for talking with us and for telling our listeners.

Thank you very Mandy.

That is all we have time for on this month's podcast. Don't forget you can also listen to past editions of the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast any time via www.lionsclubs.co or on Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

Thanks once again to our special guests for a very moving episode and a big thank you to you our listeners as well. Take care and goodbye.