OPINION EXCHANGE

'The Long Breakup' gives context to conflict in Ukraine

Filmmaker Katya Soldak will attend Sunday's Minneapolis St. Paul International Film Festival screening of her documentary about her country's turbulent post-Soviet era.

By John Rash | MAY 13, 2022 — 5:45PM

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Ukrainian unity in its fight against Russia has impressed the West, indeed the world, especially at a time of fragmenting, even fracturing societies in the U.S., Europe and beyond. To outside eyes Ukraine is the very definition of a nation, with virtually every citizen sacrificing something — some, everything.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin, channeling his inner Stalin, doesn't see it that way. And perhaps not surprisingly after generations under Russian rule, even some Ukrainians were uncertain about their national identity post-Soviet independence.

Not now.

Ukrainians have "said goodbye to Russia. They were already living in a world where the freedoms were available; they don't need to whisper, they don't need to be afraid," said Katya Soldak (https://www.thelongbreakupfilm.com/crew) , a Ukrainian-born, New York-based journalist whose documentary about her country's post-Soviet saga is showing at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Film Festival (https://mspfilm.org/festivals/mspiff/) .

Speaking of residents of her hometown of Kharkiv, Soldak said, "When Putin invaded, they were like, 'What is this? This is our place, we are Ukrainians.' "

AP

Activists dismantle Ukraine's biggest monument to Lenin at a pro-Ukrainian rally in the central square of the eastern city of

The individual and national journey to becoming Ukrainians is the focus of Soldak's film, "The Long Breakup (https://www.thelongbreakupfilm.com/) ," which will screen (https://prod3.agileticketing.net/websales/pages/info.aspx?evtinfo=731752-36893ed1-b0b9-423c-bbab-90f22d0aeafe&epguid=6afead16-021b-4b88-b338-6a4b642c57cf&) at noon Sunday at the St. Anthony Main Theater in Minneapolis. (Soldak will join me to discuss her film and answer audience questions afterward.) An editorial director for Forbes international editions, Soldak put down her pen and picked up her camera, shooting her documentary over 10 years, with the main characters not experts, but everyday Ukrainians working through the turbulence of the post-Soviet, pre-widespread war period (Russian aggression didn't commence, but crescendoed in February; Putin illegally cleaved Crimea and began waging war in eastern Ukraine in 2014).

The festival (sponsored in part by the Star Tribune) has a theme this year: "Shining Through," which Susan Smoluchowski, executive director of the MSP Film Society, said is "designed to reflect the fact that we have indeed been able to shine through the darkness of the last couple of [COVID] years."

But it could also refer to films like "The Long Breakup," which shines through the headlines to get to the heart of what's happened, and thus is happening now, in Ukraine.

"This film just tells the story of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia or Ukraine and the USSR, historically, in such a simple but such a human way that it should be required watching," Smoluchowski said. "It really will open the eyes of our viewers to what is happening, and in a sense, why it's happening."

Even before her nation became international front-page news, Soldak said that "I always felt very strongly that Ukraine is a very interesting country and has a great story that needs to be told."

Indeed it does, now more than ever, with the world focused on Ukraine's gritty resistance to Russia's invasion.

Soldak began filming in 2005 after the "Orange Revolution" — peaceful, potent protests against what was considered election fraud in favor of a pro-Russian candidate. "We were filming a lot of interviews and thinking that will be the story," said Soldak. "Right here is the post-Soviet country experiencing the Orange Revolution, trying to move to the West. The revolution won, and here's the happy ending."

Only it was just the beginning of an intensifying fight over Ukraine's future. Sensing that "something important was happening to my country," Soldak's camera kept rolling. Interviewing political analysts, historians and "regular people," Soldak said "I was always feeling like I was investigating something because we didn't know at that time how brutal Russian influence is going to be, how much was happening behind the scenes and the influences and the attempt to destroy Ukrainian statehood after the Orange Revolution that was not really on the surface."

Eventually, however, Soldak turned her lens away from the experts and toward the everyday people making individual decisions about their collective national identity.

"Anyone can interview an expert," Soldak said. "But not a lot of documentary filmmakers have access to the culture from within, over time. And to make an honest film that would not be kind of just scratching the surface, you would need to stay with the same characters for a while."

So Soldak chose characters she was used to staying with for a while: Her mother, stepfather and grandmother as well as childhood friends, all born and bred and once loyal to the Soviet Union. Each story is as unique as the person, making for a human, accessible film amid broader geopolitical consequences.

"At the end, all these political experts became irrelevant," said Soldak. "Sometimes you would see what they said in 2005 will not matter in 2010. Or historians even; things were evolving and changing. And the best way to see that would be to follow people like my family. They ended up being the most compelling characters because they were changing, and I could follow the transformation. And believe me, I didn't know that [would] change when I was just interviewing first, so it was also part of the journey."

The journey is jarring to some childhood friends, including a couple who even yearn for a restoration of Russia's monarchy. Others, while still being able to sing Soviet "Young Pioneers" songs by heart decades later, clearly want Ukraine to tilt West. Her mother and stepfather generally vote for presidents preferred by the Kremlin, but they, too, begin to change as Russia's revanchism intensifies.

Today, Soldak said her mother and stepfather's identification with Ukraine is stronger than ever, after they escaped a besieged Kharkiv for Romania and temporarily settled in Brooklyn. "My parents are safe," she said. "Not happy, but safe," reflecting refugees' nearly universal mixed emotions.

Her cameraman is safe, too, working for a main news channel (amid shuttling people to the train station, Soldak said). He's part of a group of gutty Ukrainian journalists honored with a special Pulitzer Prize citation (https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/journalists-ukraine) on Monday "for their courage, endurance, and commitment to truthful reporting during Vladimir Putin's ruthless invasion of their country and his propaganda war in Russia. Despite bombardment, abductions, occupation, and even deaths in their ranks, they have persisted in their effort to provide an accurate picture of a terrible reality, doing honor to Ukraine and to journalists around the world."

The journalists have helped bear witness to the Russian invasion and may even help bear witness to eventual war-crimes trials. For her part, Soldak bears witness to many of the events leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion. And while she's quick to express gratitude for worldwide support, she believes the global glare should have been on the Kremlin in the years her film documents as well.

Just as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy showed peaceful prewar images of his nation in his searing video presentation to Congress, "The Long Breakup" captures Kharkiv, Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities — even Crimea — before Russia ruined them. "I'm glad that I'm able to show my Ukraine the way it was before the war," Soldak said. "Because what people see in the West now, it's mostly the destruction, its victims, dead people in photographs and social media of mass graves, buildings that are half destroyed, demolished houses. In my film, you can see how these people live, what they were like, you can hear the music they were listening to, you can see some cultural sites, you can see them talking."

You can also see them changing.

Including her mom, who in a scene that encapsulates her – and Ukraine's – long breakup with Russia, exclaims: "The veil has been lifted, and your country is Ukraine, not Russia."