

Ukrainian woman finds refuge in Edinburgh-based business

A young Ukrainian woman has hailed colleagues at a Scottish firm for their help in supporting her family's escape from the Russian invasion.

Dasha Filichkina, Chief Operating Officer at Edinburgh-headquartered space strategy firm, [AstroAgency](#), fled her newly built home with her one-year-old son, 50-year-old mother and her Yorkshire Terrier as bombs dropped on her hometown of Dnipro.

The 28-year-old travelled across Ukraine with her family to the Moldovan border where she parted with her husband, Yaroslav, who was unable to cross the border due to military conscription.

After a four-day drive through Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, her senior management colleagues at AstroAgency helped to bring her family to the UK.

Now living in Edinburgh, where she had previously been a regular visitor while working for two UK space companies over the past six years before helping AstroAgency to grow its team of five staff to 25 in a matter of months, Dasha recalls the frantic moments leading up to her escape.

She said: "I woke up to explosions on the morning of the invasion. War had started, and I was faced with a choice, do I wake my husband, or let him and our one-year-old son sleep an

extra hour in bed knowing we were probably going to die here today.

“There had been murmurings for months that Russia was going to invade Ukraine, but most people here didn’t actually believe it was going to happen, so we just got on with our lives. I worked from Ukraine, along with a number of my colleagues at AstroAgency, and my husband and I had just settled into a new house shortly before the invasion.

“I had initially stayed in Ukraine for a few weeks following the war and was still working from home. It left my international colleagues in disbelief over Zoom calls, but we eventually had to leave Dnipro and our home. You could hear people screaming for help, but what shook me most was seeing white sheets draped over cars with words read in Russian towards the sky, ‘kids on board’.

“We drove the length of the country where we reached the border crossing to Moldova. My husband jumped out the car and asked if we could go through first with our baby, the guard quickly ushered us through and Yaroslav closed the car door and said to me ‘you must go now!’”

While he was left in Ukraine, Yaroslav booked hotels for the family before the trio eventually made their way to Greece.



Dasha and her son

Dasha had the necessary visa requirements to enter the UK, but her mother did not have the correct documents. AstroAgency received support from local MP, Joanna Cherry, and were eventually able to liaise with the Home Office to bring Dasha's family over from Greece.

She added: "Immediately, my business partner Daniel offered to help us find accommodation in the UK, but my mum didn't have any of the proper documents that would let her enter the country and of course, I couldn't leave her behind.

"The team worked so hard to help my mum get the sponsorship she needed to travel to Edinburgh where I could at least work alongside my colleagues from our company headquarters and focus my mind on growing the business instead of falling into depression. So, after two months, we left the car behind in Greece and flew to Amsterdam, before getting the ferry to Newcastle where colleagues drove me to Edinburgh."

AstroAgency founder, Daniel Smith, had worked with Dasha as

she rose through the ranks at two previous space companies. After spotting a gap in the space market and starting his own business, Daniel was approached by Dasha who was keen to join him at his new firm following her break when her son was born.

They have since gone on to form a strong friendship – with Daniel being named the godfather to Dasha's son Kyrylo at a ceremony that took place in Dnipro, shortly before the invasion.

Daniel said: "My wife is Ukrainian and we were in the country for months waiting for her new visa, up until the turn of the year. During that period my wife was pregnant and we stayed with Dasha and Yaroslav a lot while we faced the possibility of having our child in Ukraine due to visa delays.

"The concern I had about this was the build-up of troops on the border. My wife and I were lucky to get out in time and my daughter was born in Edinburgh around the time the maternity hospital was attacked.

"The immediate priority for us at that point was to try and bring my wife's family and Dasha to the UK, as well as keeping our staff positive and focused, and of course dealing with the usual challenges new parents face."

"Dasha kept us all strong. She'd completely amaze us by holding team meetings and delegating tasks over Zoom while fighting was going on around her, or while travelling through Europe with her little boy, mum and their dog. I wasn't surprised by her resilience and strength of character, but the team certainly were!

"We employ a number of people in Ukraine and have helped our families and our colleagues out, whenever they have decided to leave the country. But I always have a constant feeling of not doing enough.

"The AstroAgency team have been incredible, protesting,

gathering medical supplies to send to the border and more recently, raising thousands of pounds and visiting the Dnipro Kids charity in Edinburgh, who have helped to provide an outlet for my feelings of helplessness. The charity is a huge inspiration to us.”

Dasha fears the war is starting to wane in terms of public interest, and that events of global significance such as the potential continental-wide catastrophe at the Zaporizhzhia Power plant which the Russian military continue to occupy, and now Russia’s proclamation of four annexed Ukrainian regions, will be forgotten.

She added: “There is increasing concern amongst Ukrainians that the public psyche and the news agenda is starting to steer away from the war, but what happens over there will have huge ramifications for us all. We need to continue to stand together in defiance to stop this from becoming a global war, and to stop this from impacting your families.

“I was able to meet my husband for two weeks this month, but I don’t know when I will see him again. The war is not over and I miss my home every single day. But whenever I feel like I can’t continue like this, I ask myself ‘are you going to give in?’ I have an image in my head of the woman, the professional, the mother I want to be and that keeps me motivated to stay strong for my family and my team.”

Dasha has recently been shortlisted for Diversity Hero of the Year in The Herald’s Diversity Awards which celebrate the outstanding achievements organisations have made with diversity and inclusion. The awards will be presented at a formal dinner in October. She has also been nominated at the Women’s Enterprise Scotland Awards 2022 for Start-Up Business of the Year.

AstroAgency was founded in late 2019 as the world’s first marketing and strategic intelligence agency dedicated to

space, working with more than forty public and private space clients, including the UK Space Agency, Australian and Scottish Governments, European Space Agency Business Incubation Centres across the UK and a host of companies looking to grow their activity one of the UK's fastest-growing industries.

As well as supporting Ukrainian based family and colleagues, the firm has created a number of initiatives to support the war effort, including utilising their monthly 'SpaceBar' platform, a free online gathering open to anyone interested in the commercial space sector which originally started to help graduates find jobs in the industry during lockdown, to raise more than £3,000 to date from space sector colleagues around the world for the Dnipro Kids charity.