

In Conversation with **Mariya Ionova (MP),** **Member of Ukrainian Parliament**

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Mariya Ionova wears many hats. She is a Member of the Parliament of Ukraine, holds a bachelor's degree in Finance and Credit and a master's in Global Business and International Economy, is a wife and mother of two children – and above all, is a fierce Ukrainian patriot. Over her eight-year tenure in Parliament, she has collaborated with others in government to secure Ukraine's integration with Europe and to assist Ukrainians impacted by the ongoing Russian war. Since 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and launched a hybrid campaign in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Eastern Ukraine, she has regularly visited the contact line to deliver aid and support to internally displaced Ukrainians. In addition, she is advancing legislation to promote women's rights, to prevent and combat domestic violence and the protection of children.

On 15 April 2022 – 52 days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 – we spoke to Ionova about her priorities as an elected official in wartime, her view of the West's response to Russia's war on Ukraine, and her predictions for how the war will end.

CJLPA: When you were elected to be a member of Ukraine's Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, did you ever imagine you would be serving your country during a time of war?

Mariya Ionova: Yes and no. I was first elected in 2012, and I was very active in questions of European integration during the Revolution of Dignity and Euromaidan.¹ The war for us started in March 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and occupied Luhansk and Donetsk. The West did not want to escalate the war by putting boots on the ground. We had been fighting for six months and we were asking for sanctions. Russians were killing our people; I remember when President Petro Poroshenko [elected after Viktor Yanukovich's removal] was working 24/7 on creating an international coalition and asked for a UN peacekeeping mission. He also worked on strengthening our Armed Forces together with our partners, and signed association agreements: legislative agreements to put the European Union and NATO integration into our constitution. This was a strategic course in his presidency. Because of this, when Russia invaded Ukraine again on 24 February of this year, we did not falter. Our armed forces, Ukrainian people, government, and Parliament work in solidarity, and we are brave.

After that, we visited the front lines in Eastern Ukraine and meet regularly with IDPs [internally displaced persons] to provide humanitarian assistance.

¹ Protests over then-President Volodymyr Yanukovich's decision not to proceed with European Union integration in favour of closer ties with Russia, that resulted in his removal in 2014.



Fig 1. Mariya Ionova 2022
 © Mariya Ionova.



Fig 2. In the town of Audiivka, (left to right) Iryna Geraschenko (MP), Rebecca Harms (MEP) and Mariya Ionova (MP) 2022
© Mariya Ionova.

On 24 February, we were expecting war. But we did not expect such horror, such inhumanity, such cruelty, that there would be such crimes against women and children, girls and boys. Pure brutality. You can't find the words when you see a seven-year-old boy watching his mother get raped and dying. Today, my colleagues and I are not only Members of Parliament, but we're also volunteers in our communities. We are people who love our nation, our country, we love our people. And we are full of rage at the same time. We will not be OK until this settles in the courts. We need justice. We are working on the diplomatic front, on humanitarian aid and securing weapons for our military.

CJLPA: Without sharing any details that might put you or your loved ones at risk, what steps have you taken to protect your safety and the safety of your family?

MI: On 23 February I was in Parliament, and I felt it was wrong that my family was at home in Kyiv. I really couldn't function at work from worry. So, in the evening, I called Myron [husband Myron Wasyluk, a Ukrainian-American advisor to the CEO of Naftogaz of Ukraine] and said 'please be ready in one hour, we're leaving for Western Ukraine'. When we arrived at five in the morning in Lviv the day after, the bombing started in Kyiv. My mom and aunt also arrived two days later, and then I went back to Kyiv while my family stayed in Lviv, and then to the Ukrainian/Hungarian border. I am worried about my mother; she has cancer and now must look after my children while my husband and I fight for Ukraine.

Since then, I've been travelling to Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Ivano-Frankivsk. We are donating humanitarian aid from the USA and Canada. In our party [European Solidarity], we have a network of women that I work with closely: Jana Zinkevych, Sophia Fedyna, Nina Yuzhanina, Tac, Viktoriya Sumar, Iryna Gerashchenko, Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze and Iryna Friz. They are all strong, intelligent, and brave women. I'm so proud of these women, but it's also heart-breaking what they're doing. Iryna Friz, the first Minister of Veterans in Ukraine, in the past 53 days of the war, has sourced 328+ tonnes of humanitarian aid for Ukraine, including bulletproof vests.

I don't think about my security. I have my responsibilities and I must do them. There is no safe place in Ukraine. Today in Lviv, seven people including a small child were already killed and 15 badly wounded. My father and my brothers are in Kyiv, they are volunteers in different places. The men are trying to do what they can.

CJLPA: As a Parliamentarian, in a time of war, with the country under martial law, what are the most important actions the Parliament is and should be taking right now?

MI: Now our priorities are hostages and civilian hostages. There are more than 1,000 civilian hostages, and 500 of those are women, including local representatives, journalists, and civil activists. The conditions for them are not, shall we say, according to the Geneva



Fig 3. Near Mariupol in Shirokino, 809 metres from an enemy fire point. Members of Ukrainian Parliament (left to right) Iwanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Iryna Geraschenko, Mariya Ionova, with Ukrainian soldiers 2022 © Mariya Ionova.

Convention. They need medical attention. On this list of hostages is paramedic Yulia “Tayra” Payevska – her daughter Anna-Sofia Puzanova won a bronze medal at the Invictus Games. Yulia was working as a paramedic in Mariupol from the first days, and the Russians kidnapped her. We must highlight her name. They’ve made up stories about her. It’s just terrible.

We also have a list of 40 children who were kidnapped and taken to Russia, most of them from Mariupol. We know the exact address of where they are in Russia. But these children have relatives in Ukraine. One boy, Ilya, his mother was killed in Mariupol, but his grandmother is in Uzhhorod. Another boy, Maksym, 15, is an orphan who was studying in college in Mariupol and was wounded. He also has relatives in Ukraine. Another girl, 12-year-old Kira Obedinsky, her father Yevhen Obedinsky was the former captain of the Ukrainian men’s water polo team, and he was killed in Mariupol. She’s been taken to Donetsk, and they want to give her to a Russian family, but Kira has a grandfather in Ukraine. Each has a personal story. As mothers we all can imagine our own children in these stories. This problem has to be named: Russia is a country that is kidnapping children.

CJLPA: We have heard reports from Ukraine’s government and the media about atrocities being committed against Ukraine’s people – executions, rape, abductions. What can you tell us about the situation on the ground that Ukraine’s allies may not be aware of?

MI: The list of 40 children represents those where we have the exact address where they are being held, where we have a complete history and detailed information. But there are many, many more cases where we don’t yet have all the details. Especially in occupied territories, to which of course we don’t have access. All we have on those cases is information that the Ministry of Defence is collecting, and that which the Ombudswoman on Human Rights gets on their phone hotline [about missing or kidnapped individuals]. There are over 4,000 criminal cases that are open but, unfortunately, we don’t have the volume of legal professionals to prosecute them all. There are still bodies that have still not been identified after 50 days of war. Where there is rape of women and children, 99 percent of these victims are not ready to speak to law enforcement institutions, they are afraid to speak now. And that’s also a problem. But we are asking our international partners for assistance.

There has also been evidence that people are dying of starvation and dehydration. In Mariupol, in Bucha, there are elderly people who have been blocked in their houses for weeks. In Bucha, they were finding that [Russian troops] killed families, five bodies in a yard. In all, thousands killed. We have to get all this documented and get this to the International Court, and it has to be punished. That’s why we are calling this a genocide.



Fig 4. Members of Ukrainian Parliament Mariya Ionova and Iryna Geraschenko in front of a bombed building 2022
© Mariya Ionova.

CJLPA: How would you rate the response from the international community so far to these atrocities?

MI: All the European countries and America were teaching us about democratic values [before Russia's latest invasion]. Now it's their turn to show us how they defend those values. It is the responsibility of the free world. If they will not help us, he [Putin] will not stop. He has 150 million people. He doesn't care how many Russian people will be killed. And he will go further. There are no red lines for him. The free world was not ready to defend their values. They didn't have a strategy. Our strategy is that Russia must be defeated, Putin must be punished. He is a war criminal. The Western community is not ready for this. For us, there is no grey, only black and white. We are paying with our lives. That is why we are demanding weapons to defend ourselves.

So, we say, ok, if you won't give us a no-fly zone, at least give us military equipment. The problem is all these countries waited to give us assistance. They were sure we would fail. That is why they didn't have a strategy of support for us. When we showed the whole world that we fight, when we showed our resistance, we understood that they don't have a strategy on Russia. They would like to trade with Russia as business as usual. And we also heard realpolitik. Now realpolitik is the whole world watching online how we have been raped and tortured and killed.

CJLPA: How should the world be supporting Ukraine?

MI: Our humanitarian request is weapons. We don't need masks, soap, food when we are under shelling, under bombardment. We need weapons. And sanctions. There are 330 Russian banks. Do you know how many were turned off from SWIFT? Six. Now after Bucha they increased, but not 330. They find loopholes. Why didn't they sanction sooner? What about Russian information sources? Why are we not expelling Russian diplomats? At least half of them? And we still have discussions in the United Nations, to be or not to be. He [Putin] uses this weakness. He's inspired by this weakness. I understand democratic procedures, but he is going crazy. He's killing and attacking every day. Where is international order? Where are international rules? Why are we five steps behind? Why is he making the rules, setting the agenda? Why not strong democratic countries? What are you waiting for?

CJLPA: Do you believe Ukraine will win this war against Russia?

MI: We have already won. By spirit, by unity in our country. By being a brave nation. We will not fail. The alternative is we will be killed. We will not give up. This is why we've already won. We hear [Russia's] is the second biggest army in the world, and our army has shown that when you have spirit and love and value freedom, you will fight. It's a historical chance for all the world. We have repeated this historical circle for centuries. We need to get other



Fig 5. In Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's Parliament) Members of Ukrainian Parliament Mariya Ionova, Iryna Friz, Iryna Geraschenko, and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze 2021 © Mariya Ionova.

nations to help prevent this and this criminal Putin, and that's why we're asking other countries that he needs to be completely isolated from the free world. And if the free world wants to do this, it's their choice. But we will not give up. There is no alternative for us. What he's doing to Mariupol, he will do with the whole of Ukraine. He wants to erase us from the whole world – our genes, our language, our land, our history. World – are you ready to respond?

CJLPA: What else do you think Western audiences need to know about Ukraine?

MI: The whole set of war crimes that are being committed in Ukraine now. We are not blaming the world. We are not making accusations. Everyone makes their choice. But if we all together share the same values and principles, then all together we need not only words, but also actions. We must be united and fight. We are committed to this fight because we don't see another way. To be under the Russian Federation? No way! In Donetsk and Luhansk, Putin thought those were his people, but people were saying, no, we want to be here in Ukraine. You see, in Kherson, Putin failed. Ukraine is in favour of being our own country. We are a European, Atlantic country, in the European family. But if European countries share such values, they need to step up. We will do it ourselves if we need to, but the casualties will be huge. It's a question of security for the whole world. We are protecting the European Eastern border with our lives. We appreciate that all the world is standing with Ukrainians. But words are not enough. We appreciate words, but

we need action. We are fighting for the world. Russia's war is against NATO also, it is against democracy. The best security guarantee is NATO membership. In this regard, I would like to take this opportunity and wholeheartedly thank the British people and the British government for their clear position on supporting Ukraine... and this position is becoming strong and stronger. Together we will prevail and of course Ukraine will win!

Constance Uzwyshyn is an expert on Ukrainian contemporary art. She founded Ukraine's first foreign-owned professional art gallery, the ARTEast Gallery, in Kyiv. Having written a masters dissertation entitled *The Emergence of the Ukrainian Contemporary Art Market*, she is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge researching Ukrainian contemporary art. She is also CJLPA's Executive Editor and the Ukrainian Institute of London's Creative Industries Advisor.
