How did the Ukrainian fashion industry react to news of war?

By Triana Alonso  •  26 February 2022

"I'm dead nervous and anxious. Things have gotten really bad today," typed Tani B. in a brief WhatsApp message on Thursday, February 24, in the early morning hours. The war had begun. Military planes flew over Kyiv and explosions and sirens awakened the residents of the capital by five in the morning. Long gone are the days when the 22-year-old model enjoyed her first steps in the industry in Spain, just like so many of her fellow Ukrainian models. Tani B. garnered success within a short period of time, walking for Armani on several occasions and starring in Zara catalogs, Hoss Intropia campaigns, and magazine editorials.

"Despite the pandemic and the scarcity of jobs during the first few months, it was a peaceful time enjoying the sun and learning Spanish," she recalled of her happy days in Valencia. A year and a half after her arrival, the expiration of her visa forced her to reluctantly return to her native Ukraine last January, when reports of the conflict were limited to "tensions" with the neighboring country.

"I had a feeling that something was going to happen upon coming back to Ukraine, but I also realized that I never missed the country that much. We are afraid. For a long time, we didn't want to believe that something like this could happen. We knew that someday things would get complicated, but no one can prepare you for this," said the young model, assuring that she does not want to be a "coward" and flee the country where she now resides with her grandmother.

The unthinkable happened within a matter of hours. Putin's troops invaded the sovereign country on all four sides, took control of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and started attacking Kyiv, claiming that they only targeted "military objectives". Thousands of civilians took the safe decision of fleeing the country, while others took refuge underground for the night as bomb threats continued. Elite model Julia Ratner's family were among these people. "We will never forget this. I have spent the worst 20 hours of my life. I can't sleep while my whole family is sleeping underground in the subway," said the model, who suddenly went from starring on the cover of Elle magazine or one of the latest Nodaleto campaigns to becoming an activist on social media platforms. Through her Instagram
One of the latest Nodaleto campaigns is becoming an activist on social media platforms. Through her Instagram profile, @dear.ratner, she spreads awareness about the current situation and provides contacts to help her compatriots seek asylum in other countries.

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A few hours later, in the early hours of Friday, February 25, Maria Mokhova watched in rage and disbelief as the foundations of her country's democratic freedom crumbled in the wake of explosions in her city of Kiev. "My foreign friends keep asking me why this is all happening. It's because that asshole can't stand how free, beautiful and rich my country is. He is not only attacking Ukraine today. He's attacking freedom, democracy, equality, and all the values of the Western world," reflected the L'Officiel Ukraine journalist and co-founder of the White Rabbit PR agency, which specializes in promoting Ukrainian talent. Only 72 hours before the outbreak of war, the city's atmosphere bore little resemblance to the period of invasion. "Life in Kiev goes the usual way; it is still difficult to get a table at a trendy restaurant on a Friday night. We carry on with daily life, work, and plan our events for the upcoming season," explained the industry expert on Monday, February 21.

Her plans to travel, as per usual, to Paris Fashion Week remained in place since she already pinpointed a feeling of "concern, anxiety, and even panic" in Ukraine for many weeks. This uncertainty has not derailed the activity of
of concern, anxiety, and even panic in Ukraine for many weeks. This uncertainty has not deterred the activity of the national design industry, which saw a good handful of designers participating in New York Fashion Week and has already set the dates for the Kyiv Art & Fashion Days festival scheduled for next May. The reality is that the threat of war looks different from the inside after your country has suffered violence over the Euromaidan protests, saw Russia invade Crimea, and witnessed the proclamation of independence in the pro-Russian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk throughout just this last decade.

"We have been living in a state of war for the past 8 years and, even though it is absolutely horrible to admit, the truth is - we got used to this constant threat and pressure," Mokhova acknowledged, assuring that this time, however, the situation seemed "much more dangerous than ever." "Nobody wants war, but our country is prepared to defend itself. Business operates mostly as usual, although with investors pulling out capitals from Ukraine the economic situation might truly get worse."

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To keep moving forward despite adversity is -- in addition to being the leitmotif that characterizes the Ukrainian population’s power of resilience -- a sentiment shared by most of the brands and designers contacted for this article. "My brand has successfully survived several major crises in 2004, 2008 and the beginning of the war in 2014. I believe we have developed an immunity to such crises and will be able to cope with the current circumstances," Lilia Litkovskaya, founder of her eponymous brand, confided a few days ago as she prepared her Paris Fashion Week presentation and finalized her collections for retailers in France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and China. At the beginning of the week, the artisanal tailoring brand was still going about its business as usual. Imports and exports had not yet been affected by the "crisis" and international sales continued, although local sales were beginning to be affected and those from Kazakhstan had decreased given the "political turbulence".

Irina Dzhus had also planned on showcasing her avant-garde and concept brand Dzhus in the French capital. "This uncertainty has already influenced our strategic decisions," said the designer on Wednesday, February 23, after opting for a digital presentation in Paris as opposed to a physical wholesale showroom the designer has commonly organized in previous seasons. "For us, as a niche and independent brand, these organizational expenses would have been significant, whereas our current priority is to save more financial resources for unpredicted situations," she explained, fearing that the current political climate could reduce the interest in Ukrainian design from international partners. "If the situation changes for the worse, affecting supply channels and
Ukrainian design from international partners. "If the situation changes for the worse, affecting supply channels and the safety of the manufacturing process, the orders might not be completed, and considering the force-majeure circumstances, the clients might not be refunded for the failed operations," she analyzed.

Fresh out of New York City, Theo’s CEO and creative director, Teo Dekan, still adopted a certain serenity despite growing concerns within his team a few days before the war: "We are trying to stay positive and focus on our current workflow. We have presented our new collection at NYFW and now it’s sales season so we remain calm and stick to the plan." Things are different now. "Honestly, we did not expect this would really happen. For the last 3 days our main task is to make sure all members of our team are safe. We are supporting Ukrainian army, helping friends and families. War must be stopped", said the designer, on February 27.

This calm attitude was also shared by the brand, Kachorovska last Thursday. "Despite everything that is happening, we stay focused and continue on with our lives. Spreading awareness about the war, buying products made in Ukraine, supporting volunteers and the Ukrainian army and informing at all levels are necessities just like air," said the brand, which, between February 21 and 25, presented its collections at the Archetype Showroom in New York, along with five other Ukrainian brands: 91 Lab, Chereshniivka, Elena Burenina, Paskal and Frolov.

Ivan Frolov rightfully insisted that, even though the perception of the situation by the local community and the international spectators is “definitely different,” he felt the support outside his country’s borders. "The main thing here is that the international audience tries to get into this situation deeper than ever before. People show huge amounts of support and increase international awareness on what’s happening in Ukraine. And this is vital for us today," commented the brand’s founder and creative director, aware of the foreign view of Ukraine as a "high-risk" market.
“Crazy political threats don’t let fear and panic dictate our choices. It’s true to say that the fastest growth happens in the most difficult times. We manage to develop our brand constantly, even though our country hasn’t been at peace for the past 8 years. And we only hope to continue to grow and complete our strategic goal, as being part of the Ukrainian creative industry. It’s about supporting each other and making a great impact in building our economy as a whole,” analyzed the designer who specializes in corsetry. At the time he answered these questions, Ivan was confident in his government and believed in a "diplomatic solution to the conflict" without the need to reach military actions. "No matter what, we’ll do all in our power to resist the imperial ambitions of some politician," he concluded.

For their part, Tetyana Zemskova and Olena Vorozhbyt had been sleepless for days before the first attacks, going for early morning walks to try and calm their distress. "It seems like everyone is slowly getting used to this nerve-wracking situation," acknowledged the creative duo behind the Vorozhbyt & Zemskova label just a couple of days ago. Despite the fear of possible cyber-attacks, the Ukrainian designers were confident that the situation would not turn into a "bloody war, but a hybrid war", a threat they felt they had to "prepare for not only psychologically".

"All you need is peace"

The invasion of Ukraine has caught everyone by surprise. Some in the West believed that Putin was bluffing and that he would not go so far as to challenge European peace due to the risk of sanctions from the allies. The Ukrainians, for their part, learned to live with the omnipresent tension provoked by their enemy. But no one could really imagine how and at what speed Putin’s troops would implement a breakthrough. Just last week, the Gudu label was confident of stability and "not succumbing to panic attacks". The brand’s teams know what they are talking about since they are used to threats from Moscow. Founded in 2015 in Kyiv, the company is Georgian designer Lasha Mdinaradze’s project. Her country of origin suffered Putin's attacks in 2008, when it recognized the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Under the government of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the nation announced that “due to national interests” it will not participate in international financial sanctions against Russia.
"We are not our government. We are with Ukraine," stated Sofia Tchkonia who is also from Georgia this Friday morning, February 25, standing in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The driving force behind the Kyiv Art & Fashion Days festival that promotes the capital’s designs was just a few days ago in the midst of designing the invitations for the second edition of the event scheduled for April 22-24. The entrepreneur, whose activities are focused on promoting fashion events with emerging brands in markets outside the traditional circuit of the major fashion weeks, continues to organize the Tbilisi fashion week to be held in Georgia at the end of April.

The Tsum Kyiv shopping mall has been displaying a huge "All you need is peace" message in bright red letters for a few days now on its building’s exterior, demonstrating a political and social responsibility that is rare to find in the department store sector. Today, with shutters down, the imposing building not only presides over the Khreshchatyk shopping street, where flagship stores of brands such as Zara or Mango are also located, but is also part of the capital city’s history. Opened in 1939 as the country’s first department store, Tsum suffered fires and extensive damage during the occupation. However, its imposing façade was one of the few on the road that managed to remain intact. Its reconstruction that started in 1944 turned it into one of the architectural landmarks of Kyiv and an epicenter of fashion and modernity. Its evolution, however, did not prevent its country from seeing blood spewed in the Independence Square, a few meters from Tsum, during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.
Learning from past mistakes requires the right amount of anticipation to be able to react in time. Looking back, many people are still surprised that Covid-19 seemed to be at first an issue as far away as China itself for Europe. And while Northern Italy was being struck by the pandemic, the Milan Fashion Week shows continued to entertain its guests just a few days before Paris Fashion Week kicked off and European governments declared a state of emergency and the confinement of their citizens.

The framework is repeated, dates coinciding with each other and all, leaving the industry wondering how long it will be able to continue looking the other way. 48 hours before the outbreak of war, the richest man in Europe, Bernard Arnault, inaugurated with great fanfare the brand-new Louis Vuitton ateliers in the French city of Vendôme. And last Thursday 24th, the first news of bombings on Ukrainian territory coexisted with the Max Mara, Prada, and Emporio Armani shows for Milan Fashion Week. Many attendees asked themselves how they could continue working and celebrating while Europe is in shambles.

Certainly a bad time to be optimistic, but that same day, while Russian tanks advanced determinedly towards Kyiv, Tani B. maintained the hope that characterizes the Ukrainian people’s courage, looking over the horizon beyond the gray clouds of the military invasion. The young model hopes to relive her dream and be one of the models walking down the catwalks of Milan or Paris. "When peace returns, I would like to go back to traveling and working all over the world. Maybe even live in Spain again, but my house and my heart will always be blue and yellow," she declared. Ironically, her last message sent was also a heart, but this time in white.

By Triana Alonso
Translated by Roberta Herrera

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