

Meet the Ukrainian tech entrepreneur who has raised £300,000 of humanitarian relief from London

A Ukrainian-born tech entrepreneur who took a step back from her business to concentrate on humanitarian relief in her home country has raised more than £300,000 from some of the industry's biggest names and investors.

London-based Irra Ariella Khi, 37, has set up Sunflower Relief to help distribute medical supplies, hygiene products, camping equipment and food to the millions of Ukrainians who have been displaced by Russia's invasion and to help existing relief efforts on the ground in Ukraine.

Ms Khi launched the non-profit making organisation in the belief that, with her technological know-how and contacts in Ukraine, she could help get supplies deeper into the country.

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She did so after hearing from relatives in Ukraine that a lot of supplies were being left close to the Polish border because relief organisations could not get aid further into Ukraine due to either logistical difficulties, the lack of local partners or, with so many different languages being spoken in the country, problems communicating with local networks supporting their own communities.

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She said: "Most Ukrainians don't want to get up and leave. They've lived in these modern cities and built beautiful homes

spending their lives in a culture they love, but with a lengthy and protracted conflict now highly likely, and with limited humanitarian corridors available, it's crucial they have immediate access to supplies, services and support in their precise location."

Sunflower Relief plans to form partnerships with operations and logistics personnel in Ukraine so that they can connect more effectively with local support organisations.

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It is also organising a tech team of Ukrainians both on the ground and abroad to source and share eyewitness accounts from citizens and to moderate local language communication channels with real-time intelligence and information sharing.

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Drone captures long queues for humanitarian aid

It is also building a network of Ukrainian, Russian and Polish speakers to help coordinate efforts between regions in the country and has signed more than 200 part-time and four full-time volunteers based in Ukraine, London and across Europe. It is seeking to recruit more Ukrainian and Russian speakers in London.

Ms Khi, who speaks eight languages including Ukrainian, Russian and Polish, added: "We're rapidly scaling our grassroots operation to ensure that this support doesn't just stop at the Ukrainian border, while we're also making a huge communications effort to ensure citizens understand how and where support can be accessed.

This can only be achieved through a combination of local language capabilities, deep local networks and local knowledge."

Those supporting Sunflower Relief include some of the biggest names in the UK tech sector.

They include Sherry Coutu, the co-founder of Interactive investor International and an early backer of businesses like LinkedIn and Zoopla; Brent Hoberman, the co-founder of lastminute.com and now head of the investment firm Firstminute Capital and Samir Desai, the founder of peer-to-peer lender Funding Circle.

Mr Hoberman said: "It is a privilege to be able to support founders delivering real impact, rarely more so than in the case of Irra and the team of volunteers at Sunflower Relief, who are carrying out urgent work in Ukraine."

Other prominent backers include a clutch of well-known investors in UK tech, including Seedcamp and Point 9 Capital, both of which were early backers of the online bank Revolut. Other supporters include the London arms of the Silicon Valley-based venture capital firms Accel and Lightspeed and the UK Business Angels Association.

Phoenix Court Works, backed by Saul and Robin Klein, the entrepreneurs behind the venture capital firm LocalGlobe, is another supporter.

All are providing either financial support or resources and access to their networks.

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Ms Khi was born in the old Soviet Union and lived in Ukraine until she was nine before moving to the west with her parents, who worked in academia, before taking a history degree at the University of Oxford. Her 70-year old father is among her relatives still in Ukraine.

After working for a while in investment banking, she set up and ran a number of tech companies, the latest of which is Zamna – which uses blockchain technology to enable airlines and travel authorities to securely share and verify passenger identities.