

European Lions Clubs bring electricity to Ukrainian schools

May 2, 2023 – More than 2,200 power generators of between 3 and 9 KW have been delivered to Ukraine since last December through a unique €1.5 million fund-raising program conducted by more than 1,200 Lions Clubs in 11 European countries: *(in alphabetical order)* : Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Lions Clubs in Poland and Ukraine have participated in the logistics.

The vast majority of the generators have been installed in over 2,000 schools, kindergartens and orphanages in 11 regions of the country to allow them to cope with the frequent blackouts caused by Russia's constant bombings, which have paralyzed on and off much of the country's electrical infrastructure. They have also damaged or destroyed many schools.

The generators are providing electricity for light and heat for the babies, the school children and their nurses and teachers. They are also used to keep refrigerators and kitchen stoves running and to recharge computers, tablets and smartphones. They are mostly portable generators, powered with gasoline or diesel oil, so they can be moved to other locations when needed. A few other generators are being used for temporary shelters occupied by victims of the destruction, including many school children.

The timing of the deliveries has been delayed by a shortage of components from Asia and some last-minute administrative issues. Most of the equipment has been produced in the factories of a big Turkish company, **Guçbir Generator**. The same company has also sent around 1,600 generators to the Turkish areas destroyed by a devastating earthquake on February 6. Lions Clubs are participating in a separate disaster relief project in that part of the world.

The European power generator project for Ukrainian children has been launched and led since October 2022 by **Björn Hägerstrand**, a 56-year-old veteran of the Lions Clubs based in the Åland Islands, an autonomous and demilitarized Swedish-speaking region of Finland. The distribution of the power generators in Ukraine has been coordinated by **Valentin Kravchenko**, a leading member of a Ukrainian Lions Club in Kyiv and a 20-year veteran of the Lions movement.

The Lions who have been managing the generator project have insisted on making it 100% transparent. **Daniel Isenrich**, a former International Director of **Lions International** and accountant for the Lions' **Europa Forum**, has been reviewing all the transactions to ensure maximum traceability of the donations and the purchases.

How the European small generator project developed

The history of the European generator project for Ukrainian schools is interesting in itself. Before hitting many hurdles, it started last October in the Åland Islands, an autonomous and demilitarized Swedish-speaking region of Finland. **Björn Hägerstrand**, a 56-year-old Past District Governor and a member of the Lions Club Åland Culinaria, proposed to raise funds locally to help Ukrainian citizens to cope with Russia's bombing of the local electrical

infrastructure. After a few days, he saw on a Facebook post by **Kent Benediktsson** that his Swedish club, LC Reng Höllviken, had collected funds for generators being sent to Ukraine. Eventually, Kent became the project coordinator for all of Sweden.

Björn, a dynamic person with 30 years of experience in international trade, discussed the idea of a joint project with other Lions in other Nordic countries, as he is the Lions Clubs' coordinator for the Nordic region. They agreed in principle to target schools and kindergartens after discussing the project with **Valentin Kravchenko**, a leading member of the Ukrainian Lions Clubs based in Kyiv and a 20-year veteran of the Lions International movement.

The program was finally launched on a voluntary basis under Björn's leadership in early November under the title "Winter is coming to Ukraine." Other countries joined the project after it was debated during the annual Lions Europa Forum, which took place at the end of October 2022 in Zagreb.

Lions Clubs in Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands were the first to become involved in the project. A total of 18 generators donated by Estonian Lions Clubs were collected and delivered to Ukraine by the LC Saku club before Christmas. About 40 generators donated by Swedish and Norwegian Lions Clubs were personally delivered to Ukrainian schools via Hungary by a Swedish Lions Zone Chairperson, Anders Rendik. By Christmas Eve, a total of more than 160 generators had been delivered to Ukrainian schools and kindergartens, half of them financed by Lions Clubs in Germany.

In December and January, many Estonian Lions Clubs organized Christmas parties in Estonia's national style for Ukrainian refugee children to introduce them the country's Christmas customs and to give them many Christmas gifts.

By the end of January, the total number of generators sent to Ukraine grew to 451. With other countries pitching in, some 1,400 additional units were delivered from the Turkish factory at the end of February, more or less coinciding with the anniversary of Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine. The final two batches were shipped from Turkey between the end of March and the beginning of April.

In general, Lions Clubs have collected the funds for the generators that they have donated to Ukrainian schools – without engaging in any big marketing campaigns – on top of many other smaller individual, regional and national actions that they have already undertaken or planned to support the victims of Russia's invasion of the country.

While there have been a few individual big and small donors for this project in Germany and some other countries, most of the funds had already been raised by the participating Lions Clubs for other local, national or international humanitarian causes through charity events such as concerts, conferences, lotteries or the sale of Christmas trees or pancakes. Most Lions Club members are not rich, but they all have a big heart.

In some cases, the funds were redirected from other causes for this urgent relief mission. In Switzerland, for example, a Lions club in Sursee diverted a donation of 12,000 Swiss francs (about €12,200) to the European generator project from the funds that it had already collected to buy a used ambulance for Ukraine by staging a nice Indian dancing show.

On the other hand, some clubs didn't hesitate to organize new events and solicit new donations specifically for this project. For example, members of a Finnish club collected €700 in only two hours from the public in a shopping mall by holding funding boxes in their hands.

Many Lions Clubs all over Europe have collected and are still collecting funds, warm clothing, food, candles, water purification pills and medication for Ukraine on an individual, regional or national basis, while continuing to serve for other causes. For example, German Lions have been collaborating with Czech, Slovakian, Polish and Romanian Lions to help the people in the Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees in Europe. During the current spring season, Swedish Lions are donating seeds and food. A Norwegian Lions district says it will continue to support Ukraine with foodboxes and other projects for disabled children.

Two big second-hand generators were secured by the Belgian Lions from a local bank. Two other big ones were donated by Polish clubs in an effort led by LC Opole and LC Krakow Srodmiemie, even before the execution of a similar joint program launched by member governments of the European Union. Working largely on the logistic side, Lions Clubs in Poland were involved in 66 other humanitarian actions worth more than \$1 million in Ukraine during the 2021/22 Lions year alone, and many others since then. They have been mostly financed with grants provided by the **Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF)**, but also with funds coming from Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and Japan. The LCIF has been particularly active in Ukraine, including the provision of food and shelters for Ukrainian refugees.

To ensure that the generators would be dispatched to the right locations, the project team has been working for most of the deliveries with 12 Ukrainian Lions Clubs. The effort has been coordinated by Valentin Kravchenko because of his good connections with local educational officers and authorities, as he is in charge of the Lions Quest program in Ukraine. It's a program under which Lions work with local schools to organize special workshops intended to build up good citizens. Ukraine's Lions Clubs have been working with up to 200 schools annually for each of the past seven years under this program.

With the harsh Ukrainian winter approaching and Russian rockets continuing to pound Ukrainian cities, interest about the project spread fast within the international Lions community by the end of 2022, creating an overwhelming snowball effect. Much higher funds than expected kept pouring in. However, Björn Hägerstrand was faced with a big problem: The whole European market was practically cleaned out of generators, due primarily to the war in Ukraine. On top of that, many European households had started buying generators for their own homes, fearing a shortage of gas or electricity due to geopolitical tensions.

The prices charged by the factories escalated, especially in Ukraine, but also in Germany and elsewhere, and Björn was eager to close the project by the end of 2022 to meet a deadline set by the EU to exempt NGOs from paying VAT on goods and services used for aid to Ukraine. He politely refused offers of cooperation made by Lions Clubs as far away as Hong Kong, Malaysia and the Philippines, but he agreed to push forward the final fund-raising deadline for the European project to January 31 to give him and his team time to find a solution.

Finally, Björn and his collaborators located a big manufacturer in Turkey, Guçbir Generator, which agreed to charge a reasonable price for the generators. Furthermore, Turkey doesn't charge VAT for such humanitarian causes. Björn then ordered 1,080 units from its two factories in the Istanbul area. He also allowed the French and Belgian Lions Clubs to join the project in mid-December, and he boosted the order to 1,355 units after getting additional support from them and from other clubs in other countries. Additional donations from Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland allowed Björn to raise the total number of generators ordered from Turkey to 1,817.

Lions Clubs in Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Germany were the first to get financially involved in the project. With other countries offering their help, Björn Hägerstrand told the European project team on Nov. 16: "It is so amazing when you work together. The energy just multiplies when others are joining in and all want to help as the Lions' DNA is loaded." Lions Clubs in Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France and Belgium joined gradually the initial group, in some cases without asking permission from their national or regional hierarchy.

Many of the actions carried out by Lions Clubs go unnoticed by the media, but this particular Ukrainian aid project deserves to be publicized because of its size and because it has turned out to be their first major solidarity project on a European scale. It built up gradually and spontaneously from the bottom up across national borders.

Officially, the project has come to a close, but the participants are considering a possible extension. In a final commentary, Björn Hägerstad said: "It has been a true roller coaster. I have been leading bigger projects with bigger funds and hundreds of people involved, but I have never experienced a more difficult project. We did not have a clue on how much money we would have or how big the project would become or where to find the generators we needed when all of Europe was cleaned out of them. Still with our energy, experience and contacts, we managed to cruise the shallow waters and managed to avoid politics, bureaucracy, Lions' hierarchies and other real obstacles.

I think no one outside the project could understand the kind of mountains we have climbed, the pressure and the countless months during which we have worked night and day.

But now that the dust has settled and the outside noise has disappeared, I believe that we can all be proud of what we have achieved together, making a difference in the world. You have helped tens of thousands of innocent children in Ukraine to improve their lives in the dark times that they are going through."

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