

March 28, 2023

Ukraine Changed, As Did They: The Human Cost of War

By: Rishabh Kachroo

Conversations with a handful of Ukrainian women from which this account is woven, throw light on the grim reality most ordinary Ukrainians have had to live through since Russia attacked the country last year.

In the early hours of 24 February 2022 the world watched in horror as Russia invaded Ukraine. The political implications of this act have been analysed and discussed at length, but what seems to be missing from most of these is a focus on the human costs of the invasion.

I distinctly remember that fateful morning. I had been following the news closely not just because of my interest in all things geopolitical, but also because I had a friend in Ukraine. Immediately after President Vladimir Putin’s televised speech, which was followed by multiple rounds of explosions being reported from different cities in the country, I contacted my friend, Daria, 39 at the time of our first conversation, who was a professor of sociology.

Our hour-long conversation ran through her narrating a gamut of reactions—from waking up and not knowing what was going on to eventually realising the gravity of the situation. Our chat was cut short when she had to rush to be with her son (13 years old at that time), and collect her passport and other important documents to prepare for any eventuality.

The first day of the invasion, Daria went to the university where she taught. It was when her students pointed to black clouds of smoke from areas that had been bombed that she decided to look for ways to leave the country. While the impact of a war is mainly analysed on the basis of the potential ramifications it will have on the global order, its direct and indirect effect on human lives is often either overlooked or just not given enough importance.

For Daria, starting life anew in a foreign land was an arduous process. As a well-educated individual, she was in a relatively better position than others, but she still had to rely on the German government’s financial assistance while looking for a job.

Daria eventually moved to Germany, but it was not an easy journey. She first escaped to Moldova but the country, owing to a predominant pro-Russian sentiment, did not seem like a good fit. This led her to Poland, to Romania, and to Hungary, where a religious organisation provided her with food and shelter. Then, to Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It was from there that she made her way to Germany after being contacted by a friend in Munich.

In these foreign lands, people stayed in camps as refugees while their applications were processed. For Daria, starting life anew in a foreign land was a chaotic and arduous process. As a well-educated individual, she was in a relatively better position than others, but she still had to rely on the German government’s financial assistance while looking for a job. She and her son stayed with a German family that took them in.

In trying to fit into the new country, Daria began learning the language, but her son did not wish to continue living there. “He misses our routine back home. The little things we did which gave us happiness—he misses that. He wants to go back,” said Daria, pointing out that the reality of the conflict has still to fully seep into the psyche of children. She recalled how children in refugee camps mostly stuck with each other and rarely spoke to their parents.

It was Daria who helped me get in touch with a colleague of hers, Dasha, in her early 30s, a psychologist, who decided to stay back in Ukraine. She opted to remain in Kyiv for the good it would do her so who was 6 at the time, and because she had a strong family support system there.

Dasha, who lived in the city centre, woke up to the sound of the first explosions. It was only when her entire family was up because of the calls they began to receive that she realised what was happening.

“My husband stayed with our son in his room and I went to the shops to get food and other items. Thankfully, I was able to withdraw cash from the ATMs,” she said. Later that day, she was scheduled to have counselling sessions with her patients. “Two of my clients decided to meet me I was supposed to be the one helping them, but at that moment, we all helped each other.”

“The first time I stepped out of our local area,” Dasha continued, “was the moment I realised that maybe going around and meeting others would help me get some control over what was happening around me.” Going out on blood donation drives, helping others with food and shelter, and ferrying people from one part of the city to another are just some of the ways in which Dasha tries to help others—and also herself.

The war resulted in Ukrainians who had decided to move out facing hostility from even their own relatives. But for many older people, it was a repeat of the past. An acquaintance, who did not wish to be identified, recounted how their grandmother insisted on staying in Kyiv, her hometown, as she had survived World War II there. She was not going to let this war displace her.

Those who decided to leave Ukraine were met with curses such as “Don’t ever come back. Go! We don’t need you.” Those who returned to the country after leaving are seen with judgmental eyes. Aspersions are still cast on their motives and they are not fully trusted by everybody, observed Dasha.

People living in Ukraine now are afraid of going near windows and any sudden sound startles them. The games that children play with their toys now involve a much greater degree of violence, Dasha said.

Not everyone who wished to leave the country could leave. Many faced financial constraints or had health problems, and others had obligations to elderly family members who were indisposed. Those who did get to leave, carry a sense of guilt, said Dasha. The trauma, many fear, will remain forever etched in their minds. This war has changed them, and many of them carried the scars of the events of 2014.

People living in Ukraine now are afraid of going near windows and any sudden sound startles them. The games that children play with their toys now involve a much greater degree of violence, Dasha said. Children have become quieter, and more prone to bouts of anger.

Not everyone is in the position she is to notice such changes and intervene if needed. Only time will tell what impact the war will have on the collective psyche of the country’s adults and children.

As the months have passed, Ukrainian adults have become more adept in dealing with different situations, Dasha pointed out. They have learnt to live with the war. The loud sirens no longer bother them as much as they did before. They are no longer at each other’s throat at the drop of a hat. They are still angry but have either learnt to better hide it, or have just been exhausted by it all.

Plays and other artistic performances now take place a lot more openly than in the early days of the war when they were confined to underground bunkers and metro stations. The National Museum of the History of Ukraine seems to be a popular venue for such events now, Dasha said.

A sense of relative normalcy is beginning to prevail, but my conversations with Daria, Dasha, and the third respondent give the impression that they fear a harsher future. What if the anger consumes them to the point that they become their own worst enemies?

It has been a year since the invasion happened, and the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of committing war crimes in Ukraine. Only time will tell what will come of all this but one thing is undeniable—the consequences of war go way beyond its geopolitical ramifications.

Acknowledgement: This article is based on conversations that took place over a few months in mid-late 2022 with two Ukrainians who agreed to be named and one Ukrainian who decided to stay anonymous.

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