

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #17

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Ukrainian Heroes

While the battle for Ukraine wages on, there are many remarkable stories of young people and their mentors who are fully engaged behind the front lines. Efforts to rebuild have begun, and courageous Ukrainians are laboring to restore housing and to reach out to those who are vulnerable. In many cases, these students are young women, because males are engaged in the Ukrainian military and have not seen their families in months.

In the western part of the country, one Christian educational institution hosted an online event involving 59 different locations with more than 1,000 participants. The purpose of the event was to encourage and equip volunteers, drivers, cooks and those working on logistics with suggestions for how to sustain themselves and those they serve -- both practically and spiritually -- as they undergo the marathon challenge of feeding, housing, and evacuating people. *[Dad, I was trying to clean up/clarify this paragraph; not sure that did it!]*

Around Kyiv, Pastor Sergey and his team are busily repairing homes for families with children in the villages surrounding the capitol. They repair roofs and replace windows, or build small prefab homes. Many families want to return home, and without the fathers and husbands to handle the rebuilding, Sergei's team is stepping in to do this work. Sergey wants to get this work done before the fall, when temperatures go below freezing. Meanwhile, his team distributes food and water; their goal is to distribute 10,000 food packs a month and each pack, provided by the West, feeds one person for two weeks. This gifted pastor also has ten years of experience in an orphan care ministry and has developed a life-skills training program for youth. He has counseled teens about finding a purpose for their lives despite the challenges and loneliness they face with their broken, separated families.

Another ministry is run by Chaplain Igor, who goes into front-line cities in eastern Ukraine to deliver 3,500 loaves of bread and 5,000 liters of water. He and his colleagues search the cellars of these bombed-out towns for abandoned, disabled people, who they then evacuate from the war zone when the missile attacks end.

In one of the campuses in Kyiv, seminary faculty, staff, and students serve free hot meals. They deliberately sit beside the people they don't know, listen to their stories, and provide comfort and pastoral care. Several times each week, volunteers take bread and 1,000 food packages to remote villages. In addition, the seminary is training lay counselors in a new six-week program designed to help church members learn how best to listen to the war stories they hear and how to offer helpful advice to desperately needy people, especially the elderly.

Helping the Orphans: Before the war, there were 100,000 orphans and vulnerable children in institutions in Ukraine. It is currently estimated that 4.8 million children (65 percent) are now displaced. Many of these children in the eastern war zones have gathered in bomb shelters and underground basements, often without food or drink for days. Fortunately, the former Ukrainian Minister of Children’s Rights, Nikolai Kuleba, has organized a team to evacuate more than 40,000 orphans, vulnerable children, and their families to western Ukraine and nearby European Union countries. He estimates that the Russians deported more than one million Ukrainians and have deliberately taken 200,000 children away from their parents without notifying them of their current location. In addition, many deported Ukrainians have been stripped of their passports and other forms of identification, so they have no legal standing and are now completely vulnerable.

A Family for Every Orphan (AFFEO) has been serving vulnerable children in Ukraine for thirteen years. They have a dozen partners spread across Ukraine with three more in Romania that are giving emergency relief services (humanitarian aid, trauma care services, and housing support) to thousands of Ukrainian children and families each day. Ukraine Without Orphans (UWO) is another key organization that works with a network of 110 non-government organizations and numerous churches.

These two organizations and many others are helping the most vulnerable victims of this Russian invasion, an invasion so much more brutal than most experts anticipated. Putin and his national security cronies, along with the top Russian military leadership, clearly have no empathy for Ukrainians. Their soldiers know this, having seen Putin give awards to some of the military’s most vicious commanders -- those who instruct their troops to rape women and children and pillage the villages they enter.

The cruelty and cowardice of Putin’s leadership stands in stark contrast to the Ukrainians’ bravery and compassion. Ukrainians of all ages and walks of life are coming together to serve and help each other. They are volunteering at the risk of their own lives to care for the vulnerable that they find hovering in fear, often without food, drink or needed medications. These volunteers will never forget these days when they defended their country and put their lives on the line to defend what they hope will be a New Ukraine.

What we are witnessing in Ukraine gives me great hope for the rebuilding of this country – the courage of its soldiers, its fearless government and military leaders, and the amazing students and their mentors who are teaching them how to live with integrity and compassion. Ukraine has what it takes to become a vibrant democracy, if we can help free them from Russia’s aggression. The support of the United States and other western countries must remain steadfast, so that the work to rebuild Ukraine and care for its people can continue.

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