

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #25

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The Ukrainians' Courageous Spirit

News about the war in Ukraine is gradually getting less and less attention in American newspapers and on evening news broadcasts and, as Ukraine's Independence Day (August 24) passed exactly six months after the Russian invasion, popular interest has moved on to other issues in our broken world. It is hard to stay focused on this struggle when there are so many other pressing threats or concerns.

It is also hard for us to imagine what it is like to suffer through the barbaric tactics of the Russian forces that entered Ukraine. Here are just few examples of what the Ukrainians have experienced:

- According to the United Nations, one-third of Ukrainians have become refugees since the beginning of the war. More than 11 million left Ukraine, of which 4.7 million have returned. The photos of hundreds of mothers with their children and elderly women, many with disabilities, trying to get on trains to neighboring countries is something we have never witnessed ourselves. Eight million Ukrainians have become internally displaced persons (IDPs).
- More than 7 million Ukrainian children have become "children of war," meaning they have been forced to flee their homes without their fathers, who are serving in the Ukrainian military, and often with their mothers desperate to protect them and whatever items they took as they fled. Orphan children were taken from their facilities to safer areas, without any idea of where they were going.
- The Institute for the Study of War reports that 1,000 children from Ukraine have been taken by Russian officials and sent to Russian families in the Krasnodar region to be adopted; we do not know how many others have also been kidnapped.
- 116,000 residential buildings have been damaged or destroyed by Russian artillery attacks, including 16,100 apartment buildings. For Ukrainians who have decided to return, they have no idea what they will find – is their home still standing or has it been leveled? 800,000 people have lost their homes, and 3,500,000 are facing the need to fix the damage caused by the conflict, with supplies hard to find.
- 2,200 educational institutions have been damaged and 220 completely destroyed. Russians have deliberately demolished schools in an attempt to demoralize Ukrainians and make it clear that their culture is not worth preserving.
- 120 hospitals have been destroyed and 630 have been damaged, along with the medical supplies needed for the patients who were under the care of the doctors.
- More than 170 church buildings have been destroyed by Russian armed forces who serve a president who claims his country is preserving conservative Christianity from the evil influences of the West.

After six months of war (182 days), the sense of Ukraine's unity as a society has grown stronger, not weaker. Enthusiasm about being Ukrainian has expanded and many bilingual Ukrainians have decided to stop speaking Russian, even those who have lived in predominantly Russian-speaking communities. The country's diversity is seen as a strength, and its religious communities have

supported each other – not only diverse Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities, but also Muslims and Jews.

As a Jew who grew up in a Russian-speaking community, President Zelensky personifies this diverse, inclusive sense of Ukrainian identity. What he once demonstrated as an actor and television personality, he is now exhibiting as a wartime leader who wants to bring people together to celebrate their diversity. Unlike Russia, where Putin emphasizes ethnic and cultural oneness, Zelensky sees Ukrainian independence as fundamentally a battle for individual freedom and the building of a new democratic nation.

When the Ukraine’s National Academy of Sciences conducted a survey in July, 75% of the Ukrainian respondents noted that they believed that democracy was the best form of government, and 88% said they trust President Zelensky “mostly” or “completely.” A majority also indicated that they believed Ukrainians were united by their “belief in a better future.”

Another survey by the *Wall Street Journal* remarkably showed that 89% of the Ukrainian people rejected conceding any Ukrainian territory to the Russians in order to end the war. Despite all that they have suffered so far, they want the Russians forcibly removed from their country – and Western powers do not help by pressuring them to go the peace table with Putin. They know from their experience with their northern neighbor that a cease fire will only result in more conflict, once the Russians rebuild their forces and Ukraine’s supporting partners turn their attention to other issues. The Ukrainians are an extraordinarily courageous people, and they deserve our country’s full and generous support.

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