Ukrainian youth and war: how to turn fears into strengths?

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Youth in Ukraine are supporting each other and their communities. Their experiences offer insights and coping strategies for all those dealing with the challenges of war.[1]

I work with Ukrainian youth, support-ing their projects and creating safe spaces for them during the war. I too am a young Ukrainian, and was internally displaced by Russian attacks in the Kyiv region. During the first months after the invasion in February 2022, shock and uncertainty froze people's minds but there was one thing that gradually provided some relief – communica-tion. I am involved in the Ukrainian-Danish Youth House, a platform for exchanging culture, knowledge and ideas between young Ukrainians and Danes in order to support participation and democratic engagement.

One of the reasons why Ukrainian culture is so rich is that historically Ukrainian territo-ries were under the control of several different States. This introduced many influences that mixed with traditional customs. Having survived years of Soviet repression of intel-ligence, propaganda and exploitation of our traditional culture, and having finally gained independence in 1991, Ukrainians are in a state of inner reflection about their national identity. The war which started in 2014 sharp-ened our perception of our national values, and the full-scale invasion in 2022 challenged them. Now, although some people are living in safety where they have always lived, mil-lions have fled to other countries, some are living in frontline cities, over one million are in temporarily occupied territories, many are internally displaced and many have lost their homes and belongings.

Learning from our experiences of war

In September 2022 the Ukrainian-Danish Youth House[2] organised a panel discussion at the annual Opinion festival.[3] This annual event provides a platform for discussing important social issues; this year, because the usual host city of Severodonetsk is temporarily occupied, the festival was held in Dnipro, in person and online.

We chose the topic 'Youth and war: how to turn fears into strengths?'. We wanted young people to share their different experiences, so we invited a human rights activist (whose apartment in Kyiv had been destroyed by Russian missiles); a director of the All-Ukrainian Youth Center, who coordinates volunteering through local youth centres in different regions of Ukraine; a student, who co-founded Kyiv Humanitarian Shtab (a centre which provides food, hygiene materials and other necessities) and opened a youth-friendly co-working space; an artist and art researcher, who continues to organ-ise cultural events and art exhibitions; and a student from Kherson region, who fled to Denmark and now works with the Danish Youth Council to spread information about Ukrainian culture and war. We were inter-ested in hearing young Ukrainians' personal stories and were looking in particular for coping mechanisms, changes in life strate-gies and thoughts that give strength. Here are some of the themes that emerged from the discussion.

Youth are a force for change: Fresh ideas are introduced and implemented by young crea-tive minds. The volunteering movement which plays a significant role in war and resistance is also youth-driven. Youth centres became a meeting point for those who are willing to help and soon developed into humanitarian hubs. There is a strong belief in society now that everyone can contribute to victory even by doing small things. This benefits young people, who are sometimes portrayed by older generations as naive or inexperienced. Now with their skills, knowledge of digital technologies, languages and creativity they

Young Ukrainians take part in a workshop in an air raid shelter in Chernivtsi during a power cut, October 2022.
Credit: Ukrainian-Danish Youth House

are creating fast, efficient solutions to societal problems and challenging stereotypes.

Focusing on things they can control: Youth attracts youth, so displaced youngsters tend to join volunteering communities in their new host cities or villages, receiving support from their peers and learning new skills. Being involved helps them deal with loneliness and gives a feeling of ownership that restores a sense of control. This is especially important because the inability to influence daily events and plan ahead makes it hard to envisage a bright, better future. As a coping mechanism many displaced youth have started focusing on small routine tasks like brushing their teeth, choosing which t-shirt to wear (even if choosing between only two options) or deciding where to shelter during missile attacks. Being part of a community of young people and seeing the results of their work gives them hope, whether they are internally displaced or refugees abroad.

Changing priorities: Young people affected by war have started to review their priorities. Facing events such as air strikes, bombing, flight, violence and loss, they gained a clearer understanding of what they want from life, their dreams and aspirations, which people care about them and who they can rely on. In these extreme conditions grey areas disappear and bolder decisions happen. The number of weddings and divorces increases, many people start new professions, some people decide to stay in Ukraine and rebuild, and some decide not to return.

This process of reassessment also applies to personal values. During our discussions, participants mentioned that they no longer fear starting new projects which they had previously postponed due to fear of making mistakes. There are many young people who are still struggling and in need of professional psychological support; on the other hand, those who have overcome severe difficulties may be feeling more resilient and able to achieve higher goals.

Material belongings are not considered to be so precious. After spending weeks in the same pair of jeans, living in metro stations and packing only essentials into a small backpack, we reconsider minimalism. And reflecting on what things we have put into our backpacks while being evacuated gives new insights into what is really important to us.

Building trust in Ukrainian society: Ukraine's history of repression and mistrust resulted in the widening of the gap between people, State, businesses and other stakeholders. But since establishing a visa-free regime with the EU in 2017, the number of Ukrainians visiting European countries has increased. Cultural exchange has reinforced the idea of strengthening democracy and developing clearer relations with the government. We can see how best practices and solutions can emerge from – and be implemented by – both the State and its citizens. Many Ukrainians now have more trust in the government from seeing it act effectively and from seeing how it has gained diplomatic support from countries around the world.

I am convinced that trust in all these forms can contribute towards fostering a safe space for dialogue, towards accepting different war experiences among Ukrainians, and towards building a strong democratic society.

The coping mechanisms and life strategies that help Ukrainian youth to keep going may be recognised by those who have fled other countries and continents, and thus the dialogue may help all these people to heal. The Russian invasion has brought death, destruction and violence but the bravery and dedication of Ukrainian youth offers hope for a bright future. After victory there will be so many questions to be answered and so many topics to be discussed. The key to it all is to respect others' experiences, life choices and coping strategies for they are what have helped them to survive.

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1. This article was written in January 2023 and reflects on the context at this time.

2. theyouthhouse.org/

3. vostok-sos.org/en/opinion-festival/