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The resilience of the university community in times of war – a view from Kyiv

Ukraine's universities have remained open to students throughout Russia's war on Ukraine. Drawing on a recent period teaching at the Kyiv School of Economics, Tomila Lankina reflects on the power of education to build a better future for Ukraine.

The first message that flashed up on the **Kyiv School of Economics** university communications platform was: "Please help, we're looking for blood donors... A KSE person's relative has been badly wounded." That week, Russia continued its relentless barrage of shelling of the Kharkiv region.

Over the Easter holidays, dozens of innocent civilians, among them children, had been killed and more than a hundred people injured in drone and ballistic missile attacks on Sumy, Kharkiv and other regions. Days before, some twenty people, among them nine children, had been killed after a missile struck Kryvyi Rih. And these were just the recent deaths from the last few weeks.

As I looked through the list of students who had signed up for my class, I wondered if anyone had relatives, loved ones or friends caught in the latest Russian assault. I had arranged to teach a course on politics at KSE. Over the last three years, I had admired the courage of Ukrainian people as they fought a highly unequal battle against an aggressor with a vastly bigger army. Now, I had a chance to experience what it is like for ordinary Ukrainians and the student community living in conditions of war.

Normality amid war

I arrived in Kyiv the first weekend of May. My Ukrainian students at LSE had told me that Kyiv is particularly beautiful this time of the year. Unable to resist the allure of the balmy spring weather and the aroma of the ubiquitous purple and cream lilacs, and the lush foliage that envelops the city

parks overlooking the majestic Dnipro River, I took a long walk from my hotel along Beresteiskyi Avenue towards the city centre.

As I walked, I saw families with small children coming out of a circus; kids queuing outside the entrance to the Kyiv Zoo enticing them with a life-size statue of a giraffe painted in bright colours. A theatre announcing the next performance. Couples embracing.

Old men sitting ponderously with their fishing tackles in groups by ponds. Retirees playing dominoes in a city square under the canopies of chestnut trees. Young people biting into the sumptuous Lviv Croissants with mouth-watering stuffings of whipped cream and home-made jams, washing them down with frothy cappuccinos. A normal Sunday in the life of a major European city...



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That night, like the night before, there was an air raid alert. And another one, and another one. Which meant that pretty much the whole night the people would spend in a shelter.

What is it like living under a relentless barrage of shelling and alerts? As the first alert blasted in the middle of the night, I dutifully proceeded to the hotel shelter. The place was eerily empty. How so, I thought? The hotel was full of people. I know because at daytime the lobby had been all abuzz with people – young Ukrainian men in military uniforms, women with children, foreigners.

Then, just as I resigned to solitude in the shelter, there was a slight commotion, a very young couple carrying what looked like a blanket (had they prepared to spend the night underground?) came. Later, I realised it was a baby they were carrying, all wrapped up.

This couple kept coming to the shelter with their baby each time there was a raid. They were fatigued, exhausted, but calm. They came because their bundle was too precious to take risks. As a mother, I could not stop thinking about what it must be like to care for a baby, worrying about its safety, for the countless other Ukrainian mothers and fathers living through the raids.

Death and destruction

Soon, I started weighing the same dilemmas that for Ukrainians must have weighed heavily in **the first weeks of war** and have now mutated into a fraught choice. Spending nights in the shelter and getting up all night to go down, waiting for what seems like an eternity for the app to tell you the raid is over, going back and crawling into bed, only to be woken up an hour later and instructed to proceed to the shelter again, and the same repeated over and over again, could drive anyone over the edge.

But the people of Ukraine have to work, prepare children for school, make sure children get a good night's sleep, prepare meals. What strikes a visitor to Kyiv is the incredible calm and fortitude with which the Ukrainian people go about their daily lives. The people in the Kyiv cafes, shops and metro are polite, friendly and courteous.

But death and destruction are never far away. Across the city, there are monuments to fallen heroes. There are seas and oceans of flags with the names of soldiers and photographs of men and women, young and old, with fresh flowers laid down to honour the dead.



With the windows all boarded up, it became a grim reminder of how close my students are to the trauma of death every day.



The night of 7 May, another battery of raids. After rushing out twice in the middle of the night and going down into the basement, the third time the raid alarm blasted, I gave it a pass. After all, most Ukrainians, I sensed, have stopped religiously going down into the shelter. Just as I drifted back into sleep a horrific thunder made me jump out of bed. Outside – I was on the 8th floor – I glimpsed what looked like a giant ball of flame.

A residential building burning, all in flames, opposite my windows. I rushed into the shelter, this time there were more people, aside from the couple with the baby. When the “all clear” beeped and flashed green on my app, I went upstairs. The residential block opposite was ablaze, thick black smoke billowing out into the sky, but now several fire trucks and ambulances had assembled.

Firefighters were desperately trying to hose the fires. I wondered if anyone in those gaping mouths of hell that used to be the windows in an upper floor apartment of a four-five-storey house survived. Later, news came that **a mother and her son had been killed**.



View of the damaged building in Kyiv, Credit: Tomila Lankina

The night before, I had walked with one of my students after class at the Kyiv School of Economics. We talked about her studies and her future, which she could not imagine anywhere but her native country that she loved. We talked about the war. She explained why all our classes are held in the evening. Most students work, just to survive, she said.

Approaching the metro station, we said goodbye. We were just outside the building that burned later that night. It also happens to be the same building with a corner shop where I would duck in for snacks each night after teaching. Now, with the windows all boarded up, it became a grim reminder of how close my students are to the trauma of death every day.

The future of Ukraine

Earlier that week, an air raid alarm rang in the middle of my lecture. Having to go down into the shelter in the middle of a lecture was a trifle compared to the sound of an exploding drone I was still to witness, the agony of the firefighters desperately trying to save residents inside, and the daily news of tragedy and loss in the university community.

Still, the efficiency with which the university colleagues handled the raid was astonishing. Everyone went ahead calmly to the “shelter” in the basement, which turned out to be a perfectly kitted out lecture room. I was given another set of wiry tech with a microphone – the same equipment I normally put on during my recorded LSE lectures back in London – and we continued.

Tomila Lankina teaching in a shelter at the Kyiv School of Economics, Credit: Tomila Lankina

At the end of the week, on Saturday, together with KSE Professor Volodymyr Kulyk, I gave a seminar for a different group of students, PhD students and early career academics. In the end, there was a deeply embarrassing moment for me when I invited students to come to LSE so I could show them around and answer any further questions.

We are not allowed to leave the country, they said. It reminded me that the conscription age young men in the room would have to wait for the war to end to travel freely like they would have done before. I wanted to hug all those students. I have a son too. So many lives disrupted, so many career paths broken, contorted. All because of the unprovoked Russian aggression.

Then it was time to say goodbye. The “live” part of my course was over. Now I will return to London and continue teaching the KSE course on Zoom. A journey to a European city that for the Ukrainian people would have been a couple of hours in peacetime now stretches over several days. On the train platforms and in the railway waiting area, I behold a sea of women, with infants, grandmothers and disabled men, dragging heavy cases, juggling bags.

There is an overnight train journey with long passport checks at the Polish and Ukrainian borders that drag on and on. We arrive at our first destination and wait for another transfer. An organised queue forms at the little kebab stall, one of the two places people can get food other than a little grocery shop across the road. We are at a town called Chelm. The rail station is completely unsuited for the role of a major transfer hub linking Kyiv to Warsaw and other European cities that it has become since the war.



As someone who has spent years researching what makes countries more open, more democratic, more tolerant, more civic, more participatory, I am confident that nothing beats education.



On my last day in Kyiv, I had coffee with a western journalist, a friend from university days now reporting from Ukraine. He talked about the trauma, the resentments, the fatigue. How will that all play out in Ukraine's politics after the war? I gave my own perspective as an academic.

Over the last three years, I have taught and mentored so many exceptionally bright Ukrainian students. Several have gone on to study at Oxford and other top universities after completing their undergraduate or Master's degree at LSE. And I could easily see every one of the students I am teaching now at the Kyiv School of Economics at a top university anywhere in the world and as high-skilled professionals rebuilding their country.

As someone who has spent years researching what makes countries more open, more democratic, more tolerant, more civic, more participatory, I am confident that nothing beats education. And Ukraine is managing to keep its universities going, keeping up the very highest standards of learning, all through the war. Ukrainians who have found themselves as refugees, torn from their countries, and who are studying abroad, will add to this resilient and highly educated generation. These young people are the future of Ukraine.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Tomila Lankina. Banner image credit: [rarrarorro](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)

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