Opinion
Guest Voices



Pedestrians walk along a popular street in Kyiv, Ukraine, April 27. (AP/Francisco Seco)



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Our little delegation has returned from Ukraine.

Four of us went to that war-torn country, at our own expense, to bear witness to the suffering of the Ukrainian people and to listen to their voices regarding the war. Our focus was on the trauma of war and the mental health of the people, two years after the full-scale invasion by Russia. We also wanted to meet people working with the Ukrainian military, to see how they are holding up and what they need.

Our delegation included a Catholic priest (myself); a psychologist, Eric Trupin; a former U.S. congressman, David Bonior (D-Michigan), who is also on NCR's board of directors; and a community organizer and executive of a nongovernmental organization, Brian Brady. In Ukraine, we were joined by Bob Wood, an adjunct professor at Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. We were in Ukraine for 12 days.

We visited three cities and spoke to dozens of groups and scores of people. We went to Lviv, in the west of Ukraine; Kyiv, the capital; and Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv, where the Russians committed horrific war crimes. We had to cancel plans to visit two other cities, Odesa and Mykolaiv, in the south and east. The day that we were scheduled to take the train south, both cities came under heavy attack from Russian rockets and drones.

What can we say?

The mood in Ukraine is determined, resolute — but also realistic. People seemed less optimistic now than they did during our visit to Ukraine in March of 2023. The stalemate of the spring offensive in 2023 was a disappointment. The Russians dug in deep. They put land mines over a vast area. It paralyzed the battlefield. (Ukraine is a big country, the size of Texas. Apart from Russia, it is the largest country in Europe.)



Ukrainian servicemen of the 28th Separate Mechanized Brigade fire a 120-mm mortar toward Russian troops at a frontline, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, near the town of Bakhmut, Ukraine, March 15. (OSV News/Reuters/Oleksandr Ratushniak)

But the Ukrainian people we met with are still convinced that they will win. The idea of sacrificing territory or provinces is seen as treasonous. People still say, "after our victory," but they know it will not come easy.

The $61 billion in U.S. military aid finally approved after a six-month delay will help. But there is still anxiety. People in Ukraine were following the debate in Congress closely; they spoke of House Speaker Mike Johnson as "the obstacle." (The aid package was approved after we returned home.)

Even with the aid, the whole country is "traumatized" in one way or another after a decade of war. The conflict actually began in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea and two other eastern provinces.

In Lviv and Kyiv, we spoke to students, mental health workers, priests, teachers, social workers and soldiers. Everyone has been touched by the war. They have lost loved ones to death or severe injury. Some are handicapped for life.

Many people have lost their homes and businesses. Some cities, like Mariupol, have been leveled and almost completely depopulated after Russian bombardment. Everyone has adapted to frequent electricity outages, and most have seen some physical destruction.

A constant cloud of anxiety hangs over everyone in the country. No one knows when or where the next Russian missile or drone might hit.

Even in the capital, Kyiv, where the air defenses are the best, people live with daily air raid alerts. We were awakened twice in the middle of the night and told to proceed to shelters. People know that they should at least get away from windows and flying glass. There is a "two wall" rule in Ukraine: Put two walls between you and a missile.

> 'War drains you. People cannot get proper rest. We do not feel safe anywhere.'
>
> —Ona
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Air alerts have become so common that people often ignore them. One day at about noon there was an alert — when we couldn't find a shelter, we just went to a coffee shop.

During an air raid alert at night, I made it to the hotel shelter, which was the employee's locker room in the sub-basement. I took my pillow and lay down on the concrete floor to sleep. Without my C-pap machine, I snore very loudly. Some women sitting nearby in the locker room got up and left the shelter. It seems that they would rather take their chances up on the street with the Russian missiles than listen to me snore. Sensible women.

We had about 30 meetings. One of the most illuminating was with Professor Bob Wood's English conversation class at Ukrainian Catholic University. About 75

students crowded into a classroom to tell us their feelings about the war. Even at the end of 90 minutes, they did not want to leave. They had more to say.

The class was mostly women; the young men are away in the military.

One woman, Sasha, told us that even if you are not touched directly by the war yet, you are filled with uncertainty because you cannot plan ahead. "You don't know what will happen to you next week."

A psychology major, Ona, said, "War drains you. People cannot get proper rest. We do not feel safe anywhere."

She also said that older people and men and boys won't go to mental health professionals. They think it is a sign of weakness. Some older people do not trust psychiatrists, because they remember the Soviet period when psychiatrists could lock you away for political reasons. Ona said that older people tell the younger ones, "You should just stop crying."

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Another young woman, Marcha, said, "I have been moving most of my life." (Almost 10 million people have been displaced since 2014.) "I had to evacuate my city. When I am having fun here, I feel guilty because other people are in the army defending me. But you cannot think about the war 24 hours per day."

Some had lost boyfriends and spouses to death.

Some knew of people who had been raped.

A student named Anna said, "The most horrible thing happening to us is that we adapt to these horrible things. I cannot process it anymore. If one of my relatives does not respond to my text message, I think that something must have happened."

Ola, a fourth-year psychology major, said there is much survivor's guilt here. "We all know people who have sacrificed their lives. I keep asking myself: Have I done enough because other people have sacrificed for me?"

At the end of the class, I suggested to the students, nearly all Catholics, that we should look to our faith for some solace.

"The church has been doing 'guided meditation' for thousands of years," I told them. "Even if it is just for a few moments each day, put yourself in a place of peace. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you. Ask God to give you peace, even if there is no peace in the world. Say to God, give me peace in my soul, peace in my heart."

Easy for me to say. A couple of weeks later, I would climb on an airplane and leave Ukraine. They would still have to live with the daily trauma of war.