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Ukrainian Community at UMass reflects on the war in Ukraine as the three-year mark of Russia's invasion approaches

UMass' Ukrainian community shares their reflections on the war



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On Feb. 24, 2022, Russia initiated its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, over 10,000 Ukrainian civilians have died, and 18 percent of the country is still under Russian control.

Shortly after the war started, the University of Massachusetts partnered with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE), welcoming Ukrainian exchange students to the Isenberg School of Business, as well as online Ukrainian scholars that work with Isenberg faculty.

Anna Nagurney, the Eugene M. Isenberg Chair in Integrative Studies at UMass, also serves as a chair on the board of directors for KSE and has been working with them for the past eight years.

"I'm just so impressed by how you know, KSE has managed to sustain higher education in war time and even expand," said Nagurney, "they've increased the number of programs they've like doubled, if not tripled, the number of students."

"I think there's a lot of support here, and students are thriving, and I think that is huge and very, very important, and shows how much UMass cares, because technically we were only supposed to have four students, but two wanted to stay so badly. So, they found the funds, and they love our food and so on," Nagurney said.

There are currently five KSE exchange students at UMass who are receiving support from faculty like Nagurney. Despite the war, KSE is still expanding as a university and providing opportunities for their students to study abroad.

Professor Bogdan Prokopovych, a senior management lecturer at the Isenberg School of Management, works alongside Nagurney and the KSE students. He moved to the United States from Ukraine for education in 2006 and has been at UMass since 2015.

Prokopovych emphasized the strength of the Ukrainian people, saying, "despite all this, you know, Russian Imperial pressures, Ukraine still has its own identity."

He shared that he feels grateful for the friends he's made during this difficult time and support from colleagues and students surrounding Ukraine, but also frustrated about the upcoming election, and leadership change which he said, "may sell out Ukraine to the Russian dictator."

After almost three years of this war, not much has changed about the situation in Ukraine, said Propokovych, and it seems like Ukraine is not a number one issue for activists anymore.

"We, as a society, in a way, we have a short-term memory of the crisis," Propokovych said.

He also expressed optimism about the ongoing conversations regarding Ukraine, saying, "while the intensity of the conversation may decline, I hope that level of support will still remain."

Three Ukrainian exchange students from KSE shared their reflections about the war and their experience studying at UMass.

Artem's Journey

Artem Havryliuk, a new exchange student from KSE, faced an almost month-long journey to reach UMass. Leaving Ukraine by train, he stayed with friends in Europe until he could fly safely to the US. His arrival is significant, as men over 18 in Ukraine are generally restricted from leaving due to the possibility of being called to serve. Havryliuk received special permission to leave the country as an exchange student. At his first international student meeting, he felt warmly welcomed and supported, with everyone applauding his courageous journey and immediately making him feel at home at UMass.

When Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Havryliuk was just 16 years old, and he had not left Ukraine until his journey to UMass. He said the war feels like "a huge day that never ends."

After these two years and eight months since the start of the war, Havryliuk shared that there is a sense of collective trauma among Ukrainians. He said the war taught him what it means to truly be Ukrainian.

"You kind of realize that you are not just a human and citizen of Earth. You will realize that you're Ukrainian," said Havryliuk, "That's what you realize when the war started, like, I'm Ukrainian and I have to protect like, I have to remain to be Ukrainian."

He recalled his freshman year at KSE, where they had no signal in Kyiv. He could not contact his family and friends at home, which taught him how to survive and cope with different situations.

Explosions and blackouts are so common in Ukraine, that it's something civilians are used to and have learned to incorporate into their daily lives. The Ukrainian people show their resilience and love for life by still going to work, school and outings with friends.

When seeing his friends over the summer, Havryliuk shared that there was a major blackout; the weather was 104 degrees Fahrenheit and there were no working air conditioners. Everyone was in constant heat, but for them this was just another thing to get used to.

"You meet with your friends, and you're like, oh my god, it's so hot. It's so bad," Havryliuk said. "I saw that I survived, like, I got used to it. That's fine. But when I came here, I realized that, like, no, this is not fine. That's not okay. The problem is that getting used to it is not a solution."

Havryliuk said that Americans are always asking what life is like in Ukraine, saying that people don't understand that this war isn't like a "World War II Quentin Tarantino Movie, where everyone is dying and the front is everywhere," explaining that people continue living their lives.

"People be like, while you have a war, you go and drink coffee? You're going to the club while you have a war?" Havryliuk said he gets asked, to which his answer is "yes, what do you expect me to do?"

Havryliuk explained that being here made him truly realize the impact of the war and how supportive people outside of Ukraine are. "I felt such a support, like, I know from the whole world, because, yes, the situation is hard, but like, I'm here, and people aware of the situation, and they are trying to help," he said.

Asta and Marharyta's Experience

Asta Motrenko and Marharyta Nechytailo both originally came to UMass for only one year but decided to extend their exchange program for another year.

The girls shared that they feel a huge level of support from UMass staff and students, especially Nagurney and Propokovich, who built personal relationships with the students and set up numerous meetings with them, helping with their transition to UMass.

Many people in Ukraine did not believe this war was going to start—just the day before Russia's invasion, Nechytailo and her family were discussing how impossible such a situation would be. They went from speaking about what they thought was an impossibility to leaving their home, separating from her father and moving to Germany for two months.

Motrenko's hometown of Okhlyrka is located only 50 kilometers away from Russia. Motrenko and her family had to spend three weeks living in a shelter while Russians were in their hometown. She shared that sitting in the shelter with nothing to do pushed her to grow a greater appreciation and value for the small things in life that everyone takes for granted, like mobile service and drinking water. It also inspired her to start new studies like music and sparked an interest in economics.

"I feel like the war changed my mind to apply for especially economics, because I understood I want to, like, help Ukraine more deeply, and yeah, and then I realized that I have to, like, to start to do something," Motrenko said.

She was inspired to prepare for her exams and apply to universities that would allow her to help Ukraine's economy, which led to her studies at KSE and exchange program at UMass.

Nechytailo stated that the war has inspired her to keep a Ukrainian cultural connection at UMass. "I truly believe that this is who I am, and who I want to stay throughout my life," she said in regard to her Ukrainian identity.

"When I got this opportunity to go to UMass and study abroad in America, it just gave me an opportunity to share my own experiences and my values," Motrenko said.

She said that UMass gives her an opportunity to share values abroad about her home country and "open people's eyes to the reality of what is actually happening."

Motrenko got a chance to go back to Ukraine over the summer and see her friends and family. She shared her reaction to being back home: "I'm just like, wow, you cannot tell if the war is going on. Like, people are, like, living their lives, because they just, like, used to this. Like, I mean, everyone wants to live their lives."

Shared Perspectives and Ongoing Concerns

The KSE students all said they want to educate people outside of Ukraine on the reality of the war, and that along with understanding the severity of civilian deaths, people outside of Ukraine need to see "the real picture of what is going on in the frontline," Motrenko said. There are thousands of volunteers, many of whom are women going to fight, and serving as paramedics for injured soldiers, she explained.

Other than the struggles on the frontline, the KSE students want people to know about the constant daily struggles Ukrainian people are experiencing, like blackouts and heat waves with no air conditioning, and no service to contact family.

Prokopovych also explained that people outside of Ukraine do not understand the human cost of the war and the true aggression that Russia is sending towards the Ukrainian people.

A current growing concern regarding the war is the start of winter bringing months of cold weather. Due to power outages and poor conditions on the frontlines causing a lack of heating, all Ukrainians are at risk.

"I think this winter is going to be very, very challenging, because already the energy infrastructure has been damaged severely," said Nagurney. "Many days there is electric power only, you know, in certain cities, for only a couple of hours a day."

"The people who protect us, they're freezing to death on the frontlines," Nechytailo said.

"So, think about, you know, functionality of homes, elevators, hospitals, industry and so forth. If you don't have energy, you don't have heat, you don't have power, you don't have electricity, you can't charge your cell phones, your computers and so on. So, I think that's going to be very scary. And also, the results from the election," Nagurney said.

Looking Ahead

Overall, the Ukrainian students feel an immense amount of support from the UMass community and are looking for more ways to educate fellow students about the situation in Ukraine. They are planning on organizing educational lectures and events throughout the semester to raise awareness about the impact of the war on Ukrainian civilians.

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