Blog



Signs by Ukrainian Americans support Ukrainian independence during a celebration of Ukrainian Independence Day, Aug. 24, in Lower Manhattan, New York City. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



by Chris Herlinger

View Author Profile
cherlinger@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

March 5, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

For those of us who care about Ukraine, its people and its survival, last week was a series of repeated gut punches.

No one summed it up better than Ukrainian American Sr. Ann Laszok, a sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great who is based in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

"My heart breaks again and again," she told me in an email, "every time I listen to the news these days."

Heartbreak is right. Fresh from President Donald Trump's suggestion that Ukraine, rather than Russia, is responsible for the Russo-Ukrainian war came a U.S. vote at the United Nations against a resolution condemning Russia for its February 2022 full-scale invasion. That put the United States, astonishingly, on the side of Russia, North Korea and Belarus.

Then came the startling Feb. 28 Oval Office episode during which Trump and Vice President JD Vance delivered a loud— and to many Americans, embarrassing — dressing down of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for what they deemed was insufficient gratitude for U.S. assistance.

> 'My heart breaks again and again every time I listen to the news these days.'
> —Sr. Ann Laszok
>
> Tweet this

Like many, I saw Zelenskyy as rightfully defending his country and stating basic facts about the war.

By contrast, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, a once-dependable supporter of Ukraine, was among those calling for Zelenskyy to resign and lauded Trump's attempt to humiliate the Ukrainian president. "I have never been more proud of the

president, " Graham said of Trump. "I was very proud of JD Vance standing up for our country."

(The narrative got even messier this week when Trump ordered the suspension of U.S. military aid to Ukraine, and Zelenskyy said that it is "time to make things right" after the explosive meeting and called for a partial ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia.)



U.S. Vice President JD Vance, right, reacts as President Donald Trump meets with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House in Washington Feb. 28. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

Give Trump credit. He was certainly correct in calling the episode riveting television — it made headlines across the world. On March 1, I spoke to Sr. of Charity of Nazareth Teresa Kotturan from her native India about the incident.

For years, Kotturan represented the Sisters of Charity Federation at the United Nations, and she still takes a keen interest in global affairs. Our interview focused on another subject, but it was inevitable that we would discuss Ukraine, Zelenskyy and Trump.

She supported the Ukrainian cause during her time at the United Nations and said she was shocked by the Oval Office blowup and the 180-degree turn by the U.S. and its sudden alignment with Putin and Russia.

"Incomprehensible," Kotturan told me. "My heart sank."

She paused. "It doesn't seem to matter now who will suffer the consequences. It is not now what is best for the world, but what is best for 'Mr. T.' "

That points to the relentlessly transactional style of our president. Zelenskyy had come to the U.S. to sign an agreement over Ukrainian mineral rights. The terms of the deal were still being thrashed out, and apparently some of the tougher U.S. demands had been dropped.

But the agreement — now in limbo — would still give the United States "access to its [Ukraine's] deposits of rare earth minerals," the BBC reported, noting that Trump still hoped "a deal would help U.S. taxpayers 'get their money back' for aid sent to Ukraine throughout the war."



A resident is seen at the site of an apartment building in Odesa, Ukraine, March 4, hit by a Russian drone strike. (OSV News/Reuters/Nina Liashonok)

About this, a Ukrainian soldier I know who is stationed along the Ukrainian-Russian border texted me last week and poignantly said that he is saddened that, in effect, "many young guys [will] have died for billions of dollars."

The mineral deal is one issue. But as Kotturan noted, there are others — including the fact that Ukraine has not been invited to the initial talks between the U.S. and Russia about the war. "They are on the menu, but not the table," she said of Ukraine. Kotturan added: "That's not upholding dignity and human rights, particularly when the aggressor becomes 'The justifier.' "

It does feel like we've entered an unwelcome, disorienting and just plain weird (Orwellian?) era when the U.S. takes Russia's side in a war in which Russia has grievously violated Ukraine.

About this, Yale University historian Timothy Snyder has perceptively said that today's political divide is "between unreality and reality."

As Putin sees it, Snyder writes, Ukraine does not exist: "Ukraine is just a misunderstanding that can be corrected by the violence and propaganda. And so the country was to be occupied, the children were to be reeducated, and everyone with any sort of political involvement was to be murdered."

Advertisement

That belief is supported by observers in Ukraine's small but vibrant Catholic community.

Dominican Fr. Petro Balog, who heads the Institute of Religious Sciences of St. Thomas Aquinas in Kyiv, took stock and surveyed the recent landscape a few days before the third anniversary (Feb. 24) of Russia's full-scale invasion.

"Hundreds of thousands have been killed, even more wounded, millions have become refugees, and thousands of Ukrainian cities and villages have been destroyed," he told me — and the culpability is Russia's, not Ukraine's.



Dominican Fr. Petro Balog, seen in a 2024 photo, heads the Institute of Religious Sciences of St. Thomas Aquinas in Kyiv, Ukraine. web (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

But what alarms Balog most is the pernicious influence of Putin's propaganda. Such propaganda suggests that somehow, the cleric told me, it was wrong for Ukraine to pursue membership in NATO after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Donbas regions.

"In other words, it should have allowed itself to be devoured by Russia without resistance, despite Russia's long history of disregarding agreements," he said.

Similarly, to Sr. Ann Laszok, Ukraine's "lifelong enemy" has manipulated the Trump administration "into doing its bidding because of greed and power."

Yet in the face of this reality is another fact. "Ukraine has fought bravely in preserving Ukraine's freedom against a giant that most countries feared to engage,"

she told Global Sisters Report.

"Independence is important to every country and person for growth and prosperity. Only in peace can one develop one's gifts and talents and grow into a prosperous entity."



A memorial in central Kyiv, capital of Ukraine, commemorates fallen Ukrainian soldiers who have died since the full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine in February 2022. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

However, because of what Laszok calls "its rich cultural, geographic and spiritual heritage, Ukraine has been coveted by many over the years. Ukraine has preserved its language, art, history and talented people despite the bloodshed and martyrdom it experienced over the years. Russia wants to claim Ukraine as its own so it can add to its checkered history."

Total genocide, she argued, is Putin's ultimate goal — "destroying all signs of our independence, culture, people and history."

Proponents of the new American position may say this is hyperbolic. But it isn't. The personal and collective experience of Ukrainians, both now and in the past, is testament to that and deserves respect and a hearing.

I know this a bit myself because during reporting assignments in the last three years, both in Ukraine and in neighboring countries like Poland, I have listened to their stories.

Theirs are narratives of displacement and loss, of hurt and anguish, of historical wrongs begetting menace, death and grievous tragedy — but also of grace, solidarity and compassion. (Compassion coming in often small but generous and important ways by sisters, clerics and lay humanitarian workers.)

I have said this repeatedly during the last three years: the resolve and commitment Ukrainians show in wanting to keep the hopes of a democratic and independent Ukraine alive — even in the face of a stronger invading enemy and now, a betrayal by its key ally — is nothing short of astonishing.



A serviceman of 24th Mechanized Brigade named after King Danylo of the Ukrainian Armed Forces fires a 2S5 "Hyacinth-S" self-propelled howitzer toward Russian troops at the frontline near the town of Chasiv Yar in Donetsk region, Ukraine Nov. 18. (OSV News/Handout via Reuters/Press Service of the 24th King Danylo Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces/Oleg Petrasiuk)

But resolve and commitment are the norm for Ukrainians who know what Russian oppression is like.

They have lived it.

They lived it during the early Soviet era, when Ukrainian nationalists, writers, artists, journalists and clergy were either wiped out, banished or exiled.

They lived it during a 1932-1933 famine known as the Holodomor, in which millions of Ukrainians starved under Soviet rule in what has been described by many as a genocidal act imposed by the Kremlin. (Kremlin leaders, especially Joseph Stalin and now Vladimir Putin, have long been fearful, and even paranoid, about the possibility of an independent and flourishing Ukraine.)

And they lived it during the later Soviet times when quieter, everyday Russian-led repression became the norm — when, as two Ukrainian Catholic sisters told Global Sisters Report last year, it was taboo for young students to even paint the Ukrainian national colors of yellow and blue for school art assignments. Or for children to wear articles of yellow and blue clothing together. Such innocent acts became cause for parental worry and concern.

More soberly, the Ukrainian Catholic church was repressed and its priests exiled or killed because of fears that the church was an independent foreign agent of the Vatican, a threat to the Kremlin.

Last year, when I was writing *Solidarity and Mercy*, my book on the Christian humanitarian response in Ukraine, Ukrainian Catholic Archbishop Borys Gudziak, the metropolitan archbishop of Philadelphia, told me as the full-scale invasion grinded on into its third year that the stories "of devastation at the hands of Russians have been a part of my family history and of virtually every Ukrainian family for generations."

For this reason, he said, "Ukrainians want to put a stop to Russian colonialism once and for all. This has been passed on from generation to generation, this fear of the Russians, the persecution at the hands of the Russians. We do not want to pass this on to our children and grandchildren, and for that we're willing to die. And that is kind of the rock on which Ukrainian resistance stands."

When I reminded Gudziak last week of this quote, he asked me to be sure that I added this:

"Make no mistake about it: There is nobody who wants peace more than Ukrainians," he said. "They were the first nation ever to give up a nuclear arsenal in 1994, one that was bigger than those of the United Kingdom, France and China combined in exchange for security guarantees that are [now] not worth the paper they were written on."



Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia (left) listens as Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, patriarchal head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, responds to questions following a Feb. 18 lecture he gave at the Catholic University of America in Washington, on a just peace in Ukraine amid Russia's full-scale invasion. (OSV News/Gina Christian)

Gudziak continued: "In the first 20 years of independence Ukraine reduced its army by over 90% from some 900,000 troops to 15,000 battle ready soldiers. Militarily Ukraine was a threat to no one and made every possible move to demonstrate its peaceful identity and intentions. No contemporary country has done so much for geo-political peace in the nuclear age.

"Sadly, Ukraine's very existence is something that Russian neo-imperialism cannot accept and therefore resorts to crimes against humanity and genocidal policies to erase Ukraine, its culture, history and religious life."

That baleful legacy always lurks in the shadows, as it did during a poignant coda to last week's events. A few days before the Trump-Zelenskyy-Vance kerfuffle, a delegation of Ukrainian Catholic Church leaders visited the White House to open doors, promote dialogue and make the case for the Ukrainian cause.

On Feb. 25, His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, eschewed direct comments about the week's events, but said that "these days felt as if a skyscraper had collapsed after an earthquake, leaving a cloud of dust that covered everything. There is much uncertainty, fear, and disorientation."

The same day, Shevchuk appeared with Timothy Snyder during an appearance at St. Michael's University in Toronto. The Ukrainian church leader said, "Ukrainians will never revert to the colonial subjugation. Ukrainians will never submit to the genocidal policies." Nor will they give up, he said, their cultural, religious and social freedoms.

Shevchuk added: Ukraine "will stand firm against the darkness that comes with lies and violence and preach with unwavering confidence: Evil will not win. Truth, love and justice will triumph."

Remember that if Ukraine continues to be denied a place at the Trump-Putin "great powers" negotiating table. And remember, too, Sr. Teresa Kotturan's wise and apt reminder: If you are not at the table, you're on the menu.