

The Wider Image

With lives shattered by war, Ukrainian teens build new dreams

Dariia Vynogradova, 17, from Kharkiv, looks on at Blue Trainers, a community space in a shopping mall in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

Photography by Kacper Pempel

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Two years ago, Ukrainian teenagers were busy with friendships, falling in love and trying out new things, just like their peers in other countries.

But plans and dreams were quickly shattered by the Russian invasion that began on Feb. 24, 2022, forcing many young people to flee their homes, friends and schools and build a new existence in a strange country.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian teens ended up in neighbouring Poland, some with their families and some without, among the millions of refugees who fled to other European countries. Nearly 6 million Ukrainians remain displaced outside the country, a World Bank study showed.

Two years on many of them have settled into new lives. But some struggle with anxiety, anger and despair, as well as a sense of limbo as they contemplate the possibility of returning to Ukraine one day if the conflict ends.



Graffiti is seen at the former shipyard area in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel



Andrii Nonka, 15, from Kharkiv, talks on the phone as he walks in the Old Town in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

Transition to adulthood can be a tough ride, and the danger and disruption caused by the war has made it harder.

Marharyta Chykalova, who turns 17 in March, left her hometown of Kherson in southern Ukraine with her mother in April 2022 after sleeping in a basement for weeks as Russian troops occupied the city, fearing for her life.

They fled to Moldova, then to Romania before settling in the Polish city of Gdynia. She started learning Polish, trying hard to fit in at her new Polish school, but the first six months were tough.





Marharyta Chykalova, 16

“I just started crying, crying really hard because at that moment I understood that everything I had just disappeared. It is simply gone, the home is gone, there’s nothing left.”



Chykalova said she kept in contact with some of her closest friends at home, but felt lonely nevertheless. In December, 2022, she was sent pictures of her flat in Kherson which had been destroyed by a bomb.

“I just started crying, crying really hard because at that moment I understood that everything I had just disappeared. It is simply gone, the home is gone, there’s nothing left,” she recalled, her eyes welling up.

To help cope with depression, the soft-spoken student joined theatre classes which allowed her to express her emotions on stage and helped her make new friends.

“Some people say that home is not a place where you live, but home is a place where you feel good and I feel good on the stage, with people close to me. This is my home.”



Chykalova dances during a stage movement class at the Atelier Theatre in Sopot, Poland, February 17, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

‘Waiting room’

Around 165,000 Ukrainians teenagers between 13 and 18 years of age are registered as refugees in Poland, according to January data from the Office for Foreigners.

Some gather in Blue Trainers, a community space in a shopping mall in Gdansk where they play board games, billiards and table tennis. Most of all they connect with their Ukrainian and Polish peers.

Dastin Suski, who works as a psychologist and is vice president of the Fosa Foundation that specializes in mental health support, said the arrival of Ukrainian teenagers initially led to conflicts with Polish kids.



A boy passes graffiti with the name of the soccer club ‘Lechia Gdansk’ on a residential building, near the former shipyard area, in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

With time, the sense of estrangement subsided as many Ukrainians learned to speak Polish.

Signing up for sports was a particularly popular way of coping with the shock of the war among youngsters.

“They found sports clubs here where they could train, they started building their teenage life, the life of a young adult here in Gdansk,” Suski said.



Andrii Nonka, 15, from Kharkiv, trains during a boxing class in Gdansk, Poland, February 15, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel



Nonka trains during a boxing class in Gdansk, Poland, February 15, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

“But I think the hope for going back (to Ukraine) is germinating in their minds. And it is sort of like being in the waiting room.”

Suski said that for many of the boys, the thought of fighting for Ukraine posed dilemmas that would prove hard even for adults to resolve.

“Those who reach the age of 18, they start thinking about it (the war and front line), they talk to us about it. I think it was much stronger right after the war started.”



Andrii Nonka, 15

“For now, it is hard to tell where my home is. For now, my home is in Ukraine.”



Ukrainians cannot be mobilised until the age of 27 under current law, but many younger men have volunteered to serve in the armed forces.

Andrii Nonka, 15, from Kharkiv, arrived in Poland on his birthday, March 6, 2022, with his mother. His father stayed in Ukraine. Occasionally, he feels a strong desire to go back home to see his friends and father.



Nonka greets a fellow student after he finishes lessons at a school in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

Joining a boxing club helped him find new friends and now he looks at Poland increasingly as an opportunity to find a good job, possibly in IT.

“I think because of the war, I have matured quicker,” Nonka said. “For now, it is hard to tell where my home is. For now, my home is in Ukraine.”




Dariia Vynohradova, 17

“I don’t want to go back because Kharkiv is destroyed so much, there is nothing to go back to. I will go back to visit my parents sometimes, but I want to stay here.”

Dariia Vynohradova, 17, also from Kharkiv, left her parents behind and said she no longer wanted to go back.

“I don’t want to go back because Kharkiv is destroyed so much, there is nothing to go back to. I will go back to visit my parents sometimes, but I want to stay here.”



 Vynohradova kisses her boyfriend Dmytro Demchevskyi during an evening walk in the Old Town in Gdansk, Poland, February 21, 2024. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

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