

36 Hours in Kyiv

Between War and Big City Life



Background

Last week, on March 19, 2024, I travelled to the capital of Ukraine to kick-off the cooperation between the Cosmikk-Foundation and our new project partner, [Future For Ukraine Foundation](#) (FFU).

The [Cosmikk-Foundation](#), founded by my colleague Uwe Achterholt and myself, provides NGO leaders free access to high quality coaching.



FFU provides prosthetics to wounded soldiers, psychological counseling to women who experienced sexual violence, and social support to children with mental health issues.

Olena, president of FFU, and I had met in Warsaw back in January of 2024. Our teams had been working on finalizing the agreements to work together for some months. When we first met, Olena had invited me to join the premiere of a documentary on their work in March, and we agreed to combine it with a signing ceremony to kick off our joint project.

Here are some of my impressions from this trip that changed and widened many of my perspectives, brought me new friends and simply changed my life.



The Journey

I flew into Warsaw and then took a night train to Kyiv. The sleeper cars were from around 1950 I reckoned and had a very particular smell to them. However, that went away after a little while.



I shared my two-bed cabin with Riccardo from Boston. He had first fallen in love with a Ukrainian girl before the war and later, when the relationship was no longer, had continued to come for a month at a time to help the people by helping rebuild their houses after Russian missile attacks.



The train ride took 17 hours, so we had ample time to chat, sleep, doze, and repeat.

With the gravitas of an expert, he mentioned that I would most probably experience a totally quiet Kyiv with almost no visible signs of war.

I fully agreed with him because I wanted to believe that too. I had planned to stay 36 hours in Kyiv to minimize my risk exposure – and felt almost bad for being so overcautious. Little did we know.

I managed to sleep through the most exciting part of the journey: at the Ukrainian border, every railcar was lifted in the air and then the wheel sets were exchanged to sets with Russian standard width - all while people were sleeping.

The train arrived in Kyiv around noon, and I got right into my first air alert. Since I saw nobody rushing to shelters, I did the same: continue as planned. The Intercontinental hotel had been recommended to me by FFU because of its bomb shelter. So, I figured it would be best to get into the hotel asap. When I arrived, the alarm had already stopped. I freshened up and after a while met my colleague Olya who lives on the left bank of Kyiv. I had asked her to show me some of the scars that the war had left in the city and its surroundings. We took a taxi to a suburb called Irpin and met Ksana there, one of our coaches who will work together with FFU people.

I knew that Ksana was an experienced coach, certified as MCC with the highest possible certification. What I had not known was her personal involvement in the war. She told us her story when two years ago, the Russian tanks on their way to take over the capital were stopped here by Ukrainian military veterans and volunteers several hundred meters away from her



home. Her husband had been one of them. During the fighting in the first weeks of the invasion, her laptop was hit by a fragment of a building that was under artillery fire 500 meters away. That could have been her or her daughter.

She showed us the bridge that had been demolished to stop the Russian tanks (see title page). And she told the story of how she and her 10-year-old daughter had to flee in March 2022 through the ice-cold water of the river while artillery shelling was taking place from different sides and there was no green corridor for evacuation at that time.

They had gone to Berlin and stayed with friends for two months before coming back as soon as the Russian soldiers had been forced out and the most basic infrastructure was up and running again. She showed us a place where the flamed-out car wrecks from the occupation were stacked up forming a bizarre monument.



Also, we walked by destroyed houses and severely damaged University buildings and with some pride she often mentioned that people still live and work there as if she was saying: "We have not been defeated by the aggressor!"



We were about to enter the neighboring suburb Bucha to visit more scars of the war, when Ksana realized that I could take no more and she was right. All this violence, the destruction, and the attempt of the Russian military to kill

and terrorize as many civilians as possible made me feel physically sick. I was sad, angry, and simply shocked.

It rained and I was freezing. We said goodbye to Ksana and went back to Kyiv. Olya was very motivated to show me the city, which used to have about 3 million inhabitants once, but I just wanted to return to the illusion of safety of my hotel and have dinner pretending everything to be ok.

During dinner, of course with Ukrainian specialties like Borscht and Varenyky, I tried not to talk about the war. But our conversation always came back to it. Around eight, Olya went home to pick up her son and I went to my room hoping for some sleep.

Around three in the morning, the sirens went off announcing an air alert. I got my stuff and went to the shelter which was the garage on the third basement layer. It had been dug into the rock and was probably 20m underground.



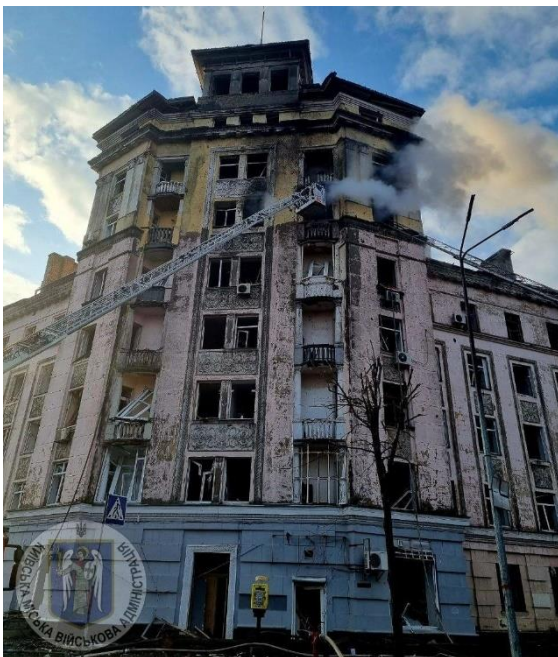
Later the next day, my local colleagues would make fun of me when I was talking about "my" full-service shelter with bean bags, chairs, beds and free water and coffee. A shelter for them was oftentimes the next Metro station or the corridor of the apartment if a proper shelter was too far away or they were simply too exhausted to bother.

Around 30 international guests had gathered in the shelter, amongst them staff members of the Dutch embassy. I figured that many other guests must have ignored the alert since the hotel seemed pretty full. Everyone acted super normal without any visible fear.



After one hour, the severity of the alarm was increased to critical level and a few more guests showed up. Via different Telegram channels one could follow that a total of 31 cruise missiles were apparently en route to Kyiv following different routes. Via an app called AirAlert one could see the trajectory of the missiles. It was like a video game except that this was real.

Thanks to the Ukrainian artillery, none of the missiles could fulfill their deadly mission. They were shot from the sky creating a lot of noise and debris. However, some falling down fragments caused damages and fires in several buildings.



All of this I only learned the next morning since in our shelter deep down in the rock it was perfectly quiet.

After three hours I went back to my room but couldn't get back to sleep. I did not feel much but there was a high tension in me.

So, I went to the gym and later met Olya, her colleague Yuliia, and her husband Dima. They

had taken a night train from Odessa to meet us here.

It was a bright sunny day, and the golden cupolas of the surrounding churches were beaming with reflecting sunlight. On a place next to it was a collection of Russian tanks, missiles and flamed out cars. In the sun it looked like an art installation. The contrast to the day and night before could not have been greater.



The team showed me some of Kyiv by foot. It was beautiful, vibrant, and full of life. Some corners reminded me of Vienna, others of Prague, Budapest or Berlin.

We stopped at the famous "Maidan Nezalezhnosti" which means "Place of Independence". Here the Ukrainian revolutions of 2004 and 2014 had their origin.



Today, there is a corner of the place where there are many small Ukrainian and international flags stuck into the ground, each one reminding of a person killed during the war.

After a late breakfast we went to the FFU office which was in a tall business building. There we met Joanna, another coach colleague.

At one point we talked about the relentless positivity, the strong resilience, and the grim optimism that the women in our group and also inside FFU had in common. Joanna said "Yeah, we are like Khaleesi, the mother of dragons".

While waiting in the lobby the sirens went off again announcing another possible air strike.

Olena came down to take us to the nearest shelter. Before we could get there however, it turned out that it was a false alarm, so-called electronic warfare. These are drones that are not dangerous per se, but they have the same electronic signature as a cruise missile.

After clarifying some last administrative details, we signed the collaboration agreement and discussed next steps.



After that the team of FFU got together to meet our coaches. Olya explained how coaching works and every coach introduced herself to the almost entirely female team of FFU. It was a lively dialogue in Ukrainian of which I could only understand parts.

However, the mood was great, and everyone was looking forward to starting the coaching.

Since today was a big day for FFU, we left Olena and her team to it and found a traditional Ukrainian place to eat. I had “Chicken Kyiv” which was another must-try-item as recommended by my local guides.

At 6pm we met the FFU team again at Blockbuster, a large entertainment complex on the right bank of the city. In its cinema the premiere of “Manifesto of the Strong”, a documentary on the life of wounded soldiers and the work of FFU was about to air. Much to my surprise the cinema was totally filled with veterans, friends and family, and partners like us.



After some opening words by Olena, the film showed the story of a soldier, a former dancer, who had lost his leg in the war. He was living in a house that had been heavily demolished by artillery. He was cold and lonely. Everything was very dark and desperate.

Then the transformation began as he was receiving his prosthesis and a lot of training to learn to trust it and walk again. The time of training was painful and full of setbacks. In the end, however, the protagonist could not only walk again, but he was also able to dance.

It was a powerful film about despair, hope, and about making a difference. I was really moved. Unfortunately, it was in Ukrainian and without subtitles. But Google Translator helped.



After the end, there was a panel discussion about how to integrate the about 100.000 amputees from the army back into the labor market after the end of the war. Next to the physical scars almost every soldier is suffering from PTSD which only adds to the complexity of this humongous challenge.

We said goodbye to Olena and her team and went for a farewell drink. With every get-together our conversations became more personal. This time, everybody shared how they experienced the beginning of the war. And we joked about how Ukrainians nowadays like to play around with their names. Traditionally, most first names have a Russian origin. But since this is the language of the aggressor, there is a tendency, to rather use the Ukrainian version for everything. So, “Julia” become “Yuliia” and “Elena” becomes “Olena”. While this is perfectly understandable it can be very confusing for a foreigner like me. And it’s always good for a laugh anyways.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Yuliia, Dima, and Joanna. At 10pm, Olya accompanied me to the train station so that I didn’t get lost.



Olya is the actual driving force behind this project. She had proposed to work with FFU, and she had recruited all our 10 great coaches in Ukraine and had done much of the heavy lifting with regards to the contractual setup. I thanked her for all her work, promised that I would be back, and we parted ways.

Inside Kyiv main station, there were long lines in front of metal detectors, x-rays, and soldiers with machine guns. Tension was in the air.

However, I got through security and got onto my train ok. This time, I was in a four-bed compartment which I shared with two young ladies. I briefly spoke to Katharina, one of them, who had visited her family and friends for two weeks. They lived just 30km away from the current frontline. It had been her first visit since the beginning of the war. Now she was on the way back to Norway where she lived for 12

years. She was very sad and tearful, and I noticed her chatting on her phone all night long.

But I did not think much. Rather, I was so tired that I fell asleep right away. During the night, another lady joined our fancy compartment. She snored like a bear all night.

Around 11am we arrived at Chelm in Poland. While we were packing up, Katharina and I started talking. She mentioned that during this night the Russian military had launched the largest offensive against infrastructure in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. 151 different missiles had been launched against targets in Ukraine of which 96 had been destroyed by Ukrainian military. The remainder hit power plants, buildings, bridges, a dam, a tram full of people and many other things.

Compared with that, the attack on Kyiv the night before had been nothing.

I was shocked and felt stupid to think that there was such a thing as a calculated risk or predictability in times of war.

Chelm is small place directly at the border between Ukraine and Poland. Katharina and I kept talking while exiting the train and decided to have lunch together in a nearby restaurant which was full of fellow travelers. Katharina was a service engineer working for a Norwegian company that produced fertilizers. She had seen a fair bit of the world and had a very analytic mind.

She was devastated because of the recent missile strikes and showed me pictures of her hometown where power plants were burning. She was well-read and had a broad base of knowledge on geopolitics and history. I asked her many questions about Ukraine and recent history and enjoyed the conversation.

Her analysis of the last couple of decades after the end of the cold war was summarized by the following quote that most certainly belongs to the school of stoicism which is fairly common in Eastern Europe.

Hard times produce strong people.

Strong people create good times.

Good times create weak people.

Weak people produce hard times.

Yes, it is clearly simplistic, but it can also explain a lot. The three hours that we had as a stopover went by rapidly.

As it was time to leave, Katarina invited me for lunch with some authority. She said she wanted to give back to someone who is trying to help the Ukrainian people.

I was perplexed and thankful. What our foundation was doing felt like pouring some water drops into an ocean.

Outlook

Now that our collaboration agreement is officially in place, we can get to work and start with the coaching. So far, 16 team members of FFU have expressed that they would like to work with a coach.

Just before I left for Kyiv, we started training our coaches in Ukraine in the FiRE model, this is our approach to strengthen the resilience of leaders and their teams.



Conclusion

What I simply can't get my head around is "Why all this violence?"

As a human race we undoubtedly have quite some real challenges to address like the climate crisis, rising sea levels, poverty, migration movements etc..

A war like the one in Ukraine or in Gaza or anywhere else bundles so many resources starting from human intelligence & creativity, money & manpower, leadership & teamwork and yet it goes in the entirely wrong direction. It does not solve any of the real problems, quite the contrary it makes all the existing crises worse!

I realized that now more than ever. But it was better than doing nothing and looking away.

The rest of the trip was comparatively uneventful. I got home 24 hours after my departure in Kyiv and was exhausted, happy, and also confused. It will take a while to stomach all the impressions.

In the first series of workshops, the team became Certified Practitioners of our resilience measurement inventory, the Executive FiRE Index. Also, we have translated the instrument into Ukrainian, so that it can be used with a wider audience in Ukraine.

Going forward, we will conduct further training sessions on coaching interventions targeted for improving resilience with our Resilience Journey.

It goes without saying that all of this training is taking place at no cost to the Ukrainian coaches.

Helping coaches and NGO leaders in a war zone to improve their resilience in order to stay grounded, strong and positive - I can't think of a better application of our models and tools.

When will we humans be able to unite and tackle our real problems without needing the illusion of an external enemy for this?

From a distance there is a simple explanation: If it is not logical –it must be psychological!

Wars are fought because an external enemy is needed to unite the people and stabilize the existing leadership. And they are used to distract from internal problems and stop any opposition.

This means that the psychological driver of hostile aggression is not just the urge for power.

Behind this is fear, more concretely, the fear of losing control and potentially becoming marginalized!

If only the leaders who are behind all this would be working with a really good coach. What an impact this could have!

Would I do it again?

All in all, I am very happy and grateful that I have travelled to Kyiv. I widened my horizon, made new friends, and it was totally necessary to establish trust with the team of FFU and our coaches in order to kickoff the project successfully. From this perspective, I would do it again anytime.

And yet, I realize that the actual risk for my health had been bigger than expected and that is scary. Nobody of my contacts had been seeing this large offensive coming. Everybody I spoke to had their own piece of war intelligence, yet their conclusions and predictions had close to no overlap. Would I do it again from that perspective? Honestly, I am not sure.

But on the other hand, the people in Ukraine experience this every day since over two years. If nobody bothered to take a risk for people in distress, what kind of world would that be?

I once read a post that went like this: *The definition of bravery is to be scared of something and do it anyway. Unfortunately, the definition of stupidity is exactly the same. The only distinction is created by the outcome.*

To be continued ...

About the author

Karsten Drath is one of the leading resilience experts in Germany. He holds a degree in engineering and an MBA, is a certified executive coach and a naturopath for psychotherapy. He is also an author, lecturer at different business schools, podcast host and around-the-world-cyclist. He is one of the managing partners of Leadership Choices GmbH and co-founder of the non-profit Cosmikk Foundation. This charity is focused on helping leaders of selected NGOs in crisis areas like the German Ahr Valley or Ukraine by providing free access to high-quality coaching whereby paying the coaches fairly for their valuable work.



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