

Seven Years of Rising From Infantilism

Oleh Andros

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Let's talk about seven years.

Today I "celebrate" not quite a "round" date (seven is not a "round" number, ie. it is an awkward number). In the beginning of March 2015, I set out on the months-long path from being entirely a pacifist Kyiv civilian to becoming an active "participant of the ATO (anti-terrorist operation)."

We, the drafted soldiers and officers, left our sheltered and comfortable lives in the Kyiv region behind and traveled first by train, then by bus to the "division line" in the Donetsk region.

(After the active battles of the previous summer, in 2014 the front line between Russians and Ukrainians was established as a division line between Ukraine-controlled territories and pro-Russian separatists areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. This line appeared in April 2014, after Russian colonel Girkin-Strelkov ignited the Russo-Ukrainian war in the city of Slovyansk in the Donetsk region. Minsk treaties (first and second their variants) declared the status quo. The line (not an official border, Kyiv and Moscow didn't recognize the newly "established" so-called "people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk") was "completed" in February 2015, after capturing of the Ukrainian city Debaltsevo by the Russian regular army and pro-Russian separatists. So from February 2015, until the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, the division line was relatively stable, except capturing of small Donbas villages by Ukrainian forces and the battle in Avdiyivka in 2017).

There was a cold wind from the fields that day, and the same wind is blowing today.

Back then, we filled our magazines with the proverbial thirty rounds per "horn" (Soviet slang name for magazine), and today I have one of my supporters in this unsustainable world besides me again, the AK-74 rifle. Back then, I slept in a sleeping bag on a makeshift bed of empty boxes of artillery shells... and tonight I will sleep in the same familiar position.

I would have a lot of helpful advice for myself eight years ago, when I first encountered political violence. I brought cobblestones to the rebels on Hrushevsky Street on January 19, 2014. And one month later I watched the news from Crimea unfolding in silent helplessness, feeling too weak and incapable to face the Russian invading forces.

More precisely, I was a prisoner of learned helplessness – I thought that Ukraine had enough armed forces to repel the Russian occupation of Crimea and then Donbas by force. But this was precisely the moment when we, Ukrainians, needed to give up our hopes that "the state would save us". It turned out that the state and the armed forces are ourselves, not some abstract structures far away.

In 2014 I was not ready to face the cruel reality which meant that a newborn Russian dictatorship wants to destroy everything that I love, all the values that I appreciate, democracy, and freedom too.

(For the foreign reader, I am referring to the Hrushevskogo street riots which were part of the famous Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity protests in 2013-2014. For us, it was a fight for democracy against the corrupted, pro-Russian, authoritarian regime of the Ukrainian leader, and Russian puppet Yanukovich. In response to anti-protest laws in Ukraine (announced on 16 January 2014 and enacted on 21 January 2014), a standoff between protesters and police began on 19 January 2014 that was precipitated by a series of riots in central Kyiv on Hrushevsky Street, outside Dynamo Stadium and adjacent to the ongoing Euromaidan protests.)

One year after that, in February 2015, I became a newly drafted soldier. It was not a voluntary decision, but rather compulsory, because I remained the same scared childish person as in 2014. But it was a necessary stage in preparation for my volunteer act now, in 2022. Now I see the bitter truth: nobody except us will defend us and my values.

Russian invasion showed me that it isn't ok to just sit by passively and wish that the authoritarian dictatorship and bully would act civilly. That bullies only understand violence. And I didn't ever want to feel helpless to defend my freedom and my way of life again. Like I felt hopeless in 2014 as an untrained civilian.

Seven years is a long enough time, both for the spiritual development of one person and for a radical change in the world. Babies born in 2014 are already in the first grade. People have amassed capital and started families. States had time to start and end wars.

What of significance was happening to us?

First: of course, the COVID-19 panic of 2020, which continues to this day (but has been all but forgotten about it in Ukraine), when checkpoints appeared for a rather far-fetched reason all over Ukraine, and barriers appeared all over "united" Europe. Regarding my pragmatic worldview and looking back now, the scale and need for lockdowns that destroyed the global economy seem exaggerated. I'm not a COVID skeptic, I trust evidence-based medicine and am vaccinated, having two doses of Pfizer. But I believe that some governments worldwide abused their position and took advantage of the virus to enforce more control over their people. And the COVID shock factor was used to the advantage of governments that have long been preparing for war, like Azerbaijan in 2020 and the Russian Federation in 2022. Any excuse would do, and some regimes saw COVID as good a cover story as any.

Second: the relative rise of the Ukrainian economy in 2016-2020. The well-to-do "we", the conditional middle class, had enough money to support with their cash not only the lower rungs of the Maslow pyramid but also the music industry, up to festivals of thousands of audiences like "Atlas Weekend". There was even a movement of "Burners" (Burning Man US festival fans) in Ukraine. And my social circle in Kyiv visited nightclubs in Podil (a district where the techno scene flourished, often compared with places like Berghain in Berlin). Entirely new to politics, young men and women even fought against the far-right and cops, who were scourging these clubs. (Police tried to control drug trafficking in the Kyiv techno scene, and far-right NGOs made self-promotion on "fight against drug dealers").

The Corona Crisis showed acutely how the middle class really needs to be culturally filled. I mean, the middle class felt a lack of music, any type of entertainment, etc. during lockdowns. So before the crisis of 2020, the Ukrainian middle class was ready enough to pay for the cultural needs, not only for the basic needs.

Taken together, it shows that Ukrainians during the “hybrid” Moscow invasion, unnoticed anywhere but Donbas, were thinking not about survival, but about the attributes of material prosperity, and cultural needs, too.

This comes strictly in contrast with Russian propaganda in 2014-2022, which claimed that Ukraine is a country drowning in poverty, corruption, nationalists lynching, suffering from “Nazi junta” etc. We were not “in poverty”. Of course, a lot of Ukrainians couldn’t find jobs in Ukraine and instead moved to the EU, especially Italy and Poland.

But in general, the Russian “hybrid”, unofficial invasion since 2014 didn’t lead to starvation and economic fall in Ukraine, as Putin expected (maybe it was his “plan B” for this war, in case he did not win immediately).

Certainly, the darkness around Ukraine and the world was creeping in. The failed uprising against the Chinese dictatorship in Hong Kong, 2019. Syria in ruins, with Putin’s active assistance. Behind the ever-expanding Iron Curtain, in Belarus, Luka (this is how Belarussian opposition calls Lukashenko) suppressed an uprising against himself. More precisely, the 2020 protests in Belarus were similar to the Orange Revolution 2004, the pacifist way of protest, which did not work against the KGB, whose workers literally set prisoners on the bottles. (This is a type of torture used in Post-Soviet prisons when a prisoner is raped by a bottle or police baton etc.).

Orange revolution 2004 in Ukraine and Belarussian failed revolution 2020 were totally pacifist and hippie-style. This doesn’t work against dictatorship. Rebels have to use violence against violence (unfortunately for non-violent activists and philosophers).

Lukashenko’s victory over the opposition in 2020 led directly to enslavement of Belarus by Putin’s dictatorship, and, finally, to the 2022 war: Luka gave Belarussian territory for the free use of Russian invaders.

Exactly one year ago Putin suppressed the rather timid protests in support of Navalny in a few cities of Russia. Back then I worked as a news journalist, and I could hardly believe my eyes when I read that the Russian Foreign Ministry’s invectives against the West were written in 2021, and not at the height of the Cold War. Even then, in April 2021, we experienced another chill of suspicion when the “bunker grandfather” (a nickname for Putin coined by Navalny) stationed troops around Ukraine under the guise of exercises.

All together, both Lukashenko’s brutality and the violence of Putin, who went completely insane in quarantine, were forming a noose, tightening and ready to choke Ukraine. But when Putin tried to kick the chair from underneath he didn’t account for the will of the Ukrainian people. We are holding it in place and will not let Ukraine hang. We are still holding on, keeping Ukraine from falling.

And when it comes to my personal development over the past seven years, I gradually rose from infantilism to an awareness of myself, my needs, and my level of responsibility to the future of Ukraine.

I am more prepared for the war of 2022 than my frightened self was in 2014-2015. Eight years ago, I was chasing away the idea that the unfolding war was about me. Now it is absolutely clear that it’s about me. It is about freedom, respect and democracy for me and for future generations of Ukrainians.

My fellow service members in the army are also similarly affected. We are all from entirely different walks of life, from IT specialists to sommeliers, plumbers, and tractor drivers. Some of us are IT “teamleads” with \$3k salaries (an unbelievable amount for ordinary Ukraine citizens), and some of us have nine years of education and can’t code to earn such money. But what we all

have in common is living on the edge and doing what needs to be done. We are not victims, but we are standing up to this bully, Putin. We possess the place that we need to, and we certainly have nowhere to retreat. It is not Donbas around us, as unfamiliar as it was to us Kyiv dwellers back in 2014, but... we look around us and fight to protect the places where we worked, rested, and loved.

There are “hardships of the life of a serviceman” mentioned in the Charter of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In the Soviet times, nobody understood for what ideological reason servicemen had to face dangers in Afghanistan and other countries. (The same feelings had US soldiers in Vietnam – their war was aggressive and unfair). But in the ongoing war, the dangers of war for Ukrainians turn out to be not hardships but just a part of ordinary life.

I no longer wish to write satire about the people around me in the style of Jaroslav Hašek, which I did when I observed the tragicomic situations at the brigade headquarters in Volnovakha city in 2015. There is no more tragicomedy, and there are no more understatements, doubts about the legitimacy of the drafting, and two-faced stories in the Russian propaganda style of “not everything is so unambiguous.” There is no more hypocritical “ATO” instead of war.

(For foreign readers: a massive problem of recognizing war by Ukrainian society was the official naming of the Russo-Ukrainian war. From 2014 to 2018, it was called “ATO”. From April 30, 2018, until February 24, 2022, it was called “Joint Forces Operation”. Ukrainian officials seemed very hypocritical doing this naming, maybe for some diplomatic and international law reasons. Anyway, thousands of people died and were injured not because of “total war” in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but because of some unclear phenomenon called “ATO”. This is why feelings of mistrust of Ukrainian officials were widespread in society – until the beginning of total war in 2022).

There are no more orders not to return fire to the enemy (typical order for the Ukrainian army after the first and second Minsk treaties in 2014-2022). There is no surrender of Crimea to the Russian “little green men” (March 2014) and Sloviansk to incomprehensible “intruders” (April 2014). The enemy is no longer “hybrid” and no longer “ih-tam-net” (a quote from Putin’s speech in 2014, which means “there is no Russian army in Ukraine”). There is no more pretending, this is all-out war. No one is pretending it is anything else. The masks have been removed in February 24, 2022 – now only will against will and weapons against weapons remain.

I have the privilege of knowing several fine people in the Russian Federation. They are a ray of light in the darkest realm of totalitarianism. They are now writing desperately from there, from the center of evil. They write me messages and make anonymous blogs. Because any voice against Putin and war in Russia became a punishable crime, and free speech in blogs too.

We, Ukrainians, and a few non-zombified Russians who took to the streets are alive, vital.

We are the very roots of Polissya, the Wild Steppe, and Slobozhanshchyna (historical regions of Ukraine, well-known because of Cossacks, guerillas, Anarchists, and rebel movements). We are sprouting through the flames, through the asphalt and concrete.

We are the living versus the lifeless (non-living).

The zombified, intimidated, or indifferent population of Russia is the embodiment of the dead.

I know of only a few people in the Russian Federation who are still “living beings”, and not yet dead.

We are now at the center of the Hollywood narrative of the war of good versus evil (and universal, inherent in all fairy tales). Only intense emotions. Only hatred, outrage, and anger. Only life on the edge as we hide in the dugout from the firing of self-propelled artillery and

Grads rocket launchers. And each time, this feels like a new birth, as you realize that you risk not writing the next lines of your article after another shelling.

Of course, according to the laws of the psyche, you cannot live for months with these emotions only. As in any fairy tale, the narrative within which we find ourselves is dramatized with valleys and peaks of tension.

But let us remember our present feelings. Not all generations are privileged to be actors in a poignant play.

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