

## How Ukrainians are learning to live with the war sirens

By Tamar Jacoby

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President Biden's visit to Kyiv this past week was met with jubilation across Ukraine. Ukrainian friends messaged me with glowing thanks. A bartender who knows I'm American offered me a drink on the house. The president's trip underscored what Biden has often said – that America will stand by Ukraine "as long as it takes."

Nothing made this point more viscerally for Ukrainians than the way Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy ignored the air-raid siren screaming in the background as they walked across the square in front of golden-domed St. Michael's Cathedral on Monday. For Ukrainians, air raid sirens are a weekly if not daily scourge, and everyone knows what it's like to decide, *should I heed this one or not?*

In the first days after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, air-raid shelters were full. Many of the Ukrainians who crossed the border into Poland in those early weeks spoke of seeking refuge – sometimes successfully, often not – in a basement or subway station. Indeed, for many, it was the lack of a suitable bomb shelter – their building had no basement, the metro too far away – that drove them to leave the country.

But by the time I arrived in Ukraine in early April, people were already ignoring the air alerts. I sat one morning in a crowded university lounge, an elegant room with a long glass wall, as cellphones around me began wailing – by then, virtually everyone had downloaded the app warning of incoming missiles. Had a rocket landed nearby, we would have been injured – if not killed – by glass and shrapnel flying into the lounge. Yet no one moved. People were now tired of the sirens, or had devised their own way of deciding whether to find refuge – or not.

A year later, there's still no rhyme or reason to who seeks shelter and in what circumstances. Some people go to the basement every time a siren sounds. Others never do. A third group makes the decision case by case. When their phones start buzzing, they scan a handful of chat channels to learn what kind of plane, missile or drone is incoming before determining what to do. Businesses are supposed to close, and some – international chains, downtown boutiques – actually do. But most neighborhood places remain open – and often packed.

Patterns vary from place to place. In cities near the front line, many live underground for weeks at a time. And even those who typically ignore the sirens make exceptions. I'll never forget the video from October when Moscow began pounding Kyiv with drones. A carefree university student who boasted that he never sought shelter was now living around the clock in the corridor of his dorm. His hope in that fearful moment: that the so-called "rule of two walls" – one wall between you and the outside stops the projectile, the second protects you from shell splinters – would keep him safe.

Still, idiosyncratic and even random as these decisions are, they've helped me understand how Ukrainians are truly managing a year into the war. Every family knows someone fighting on the front lines. There have been more than 100,000 military casualties, and 13 million people – roughly one-third of the population – have been displaced from their homes. Virtually all Ukrainians, even far from the front lines, have made some adjustment to their life or work: moving their family to another city, giving up their job to volunteer, postponing a business launch or a wedding or a plan to study abroad. And people admit they are tired – some worn down by the constant stress, others just fed up with the disruptions. "I'm not scared by the air alerts," one friend texted me a few months ago, "just tired of the nuisance."

But that doesn't mean people are giving up – on the contrary. Polls show that between 75 and 95 percent of Ukrainians are in favor of continuing to fight until every inch of their nation has been reclaimed. One active-duty soldier told me recently about two severely wounded comrades sent home for treatment – one had lost an eye – who were itching to return to the front. Very few seem to see the war as something worth complaining about or panicking over. "People are losing their lives and their homes," another acquaintance explained. "I don't have the right to feel frustrated or sad just because some little thing in my life isn't going right."

The mood has admittedly shifted in recent weeks as the anniversary of the invasion approached. Intelligence services warned that Moscow was planning a surprise attack, and rumors swirled in Kyiv. The barista in my local café asked worriedly if I'd be staying through the anniversary, and people started querying each other when was the last time they went to a shelter. Then Biden showed up and ignored the siren.

"Do Ukrainians have a breaking point?" I asked in a series of interviews geared to the anniversary. "Of course, we do," one woman, a middle-aged professional with two grown children, answered, "but we're not there yet. We've survived all winter without heat or electricity, through weeks of nonstop air alerts and bombing. The only thing we can't handle would be an end to American support. Without your help, we can't win the war."

*Jacoby is director of the New Ukraine Project at the Progressive Policy Institute and author of "Displaced: The Ukrainian Refugee Experience."*

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