THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITION OF UKRAINIANS DURING THE WAR. POST-WAR PERSPECTIVES

Cheremisin Maksym Volodymyrovych
Graduate of the Doctoral School of the Institute of Linguistics, PhD candidate
Jan Dlugosz University, Ukraine/Poland

Summary: The article discusses the human toll of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. As of the time of writing, over 8 million people have fled Ukraine, with 5.3 million displaced internally and 1.2 million deported to Russia, including 150,000 children. The conflict has resulted in numerous casualties, including half a thousand children dead and over a thousand wounded due to Russian bombardments. Additionally, about 15,000 people are missing, and Ukraine has become the most mined country globally.

The author highlights the devastating impact on the psychological well-being of Ukrainians, describing various psychological traumas such as survivor's guilt, paranoia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The prolonged war, lasting 646 days at the time of writing, has led to the development of a military mentality among Ukrainian soldiers, making it challenging for them to readapt to a peaceful society. The article notes the difficulties in maintaining mental health, both for civilians and military personnel.

Key words. PTSD, invasion of Russia, psychological condition

The country is not a territory. The country is people. With the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia, 8 million people left Ukraine. 5.3 million Ukrainians were forced to resettle within the country. 1.2 million Ukrainians were deported to the Russian Federation (of which 150,000 were children). Half a thousand children died. More than a thousand children were wounded because of Russian bombardments. About 15,000 people went missing (of which 3400 Ukrainian military are in captivity, 1500 of them defended the city of Mariupol and held the defense at the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine for 86 days in a complete encirclement). All these terrible numbers concern people, not taking into account destroyed houses, schools, kindergartens, hospitals, dead animals, damages caused by the act of ecocide (the blowing up of Kakhovka Dam by Russian troops on June 6, 2023). Ukraine has become the most mined country in the world, even more than Syria and Afghanistan: the amount of mining is equal to half the area of Germany or a third of the area of France. All these terrible numbers are constantly growing, there are many sources providing their statistics, but it is impossible to calculate the exact number during the ongoing hostilities. The war affected almost every Ukrainian citizen. Everyone has a relative, friend, acquaintance, or even a child who defends the state with weapon in hands or who has suffered from the actions of the aggressor state.
At the time of writing this text, the author carefully observes the news in the world paradigm and draws the disappointing conclusions that the world community is tired of the eternally negative news from Ukraine. This is a feature of the human psyche. A person cannot constantly live in a negative atmosphere, but this is a terrible everyday routine of the Ukrainian nation. At the very beginning of the invasion, events developed very dynamically, for most people from abroad it looked like an action movie, where Ukrainians acted as fighters for goodness and freedom. The reality is much harsher. There is no such price that Russia is not ready to pay for achieving its bloodthirsty goals (we can recall the 40 million Soviet soldiers killed during the Second World War). Therefore, the world has a rather twofold picture: the official authorities of the partner countries express support and even supply weapons, but on a personal and individual level, the citizens of these countries live their lives, some even think that the war has long been over and are not involved in any way. Calls to end aid to Ukraine have also become frequent. International law and world order were finally destroyed with the start of this war, which set off the trigger for other terrorist organizations to take more decisive actions to achieve their goals. Still, no one in the world showed the force that could force Russia to stop. Ukraine is left alone face-to-face fighting for surviving, but having western weaponry (in limited amounts, not to win as to hold the enemy).

Living in these conditions, various psychological traumas are spreading among Ukrainians. Every day in the central squares of cities and other populated areas, a moment of silence is held, in honor of those who died for Ukraine. Almost everywhere, a curfew is held every day. Sirens that warn loudly about the threat of a missile strike may sound several times a day, including nighttime. Many people constantly feel fear for their lives, someone was injured or lost a part of the body and does not know how to continue living. Someone was left without a home and means of livelihood. Someone lost a relative, a friend, an acquaintance. A problem of loneliness takes place (feeling of being alone in the crowd, when you speak, everybody listen, but do not hear). A lot of us feel paranoia or different phobias. The author feels the syndrome of ‘postponed life’ or ‘life in a flight mode’. I can explain this as mobilization of all my resources to help Ukrainian Army, concentrating exclusively at war actions and not paying enough attention to my life, health, etc. There is also a ‘survivor’s guilt’, meaning that there are lots of Ukrainians who are living in the western parts of Ukraine in relatively safe places while eastern and southern parts are in constant danger. Such mental state is the base for much worse health consequences. There is no need to talk about the psychological health of the Ukrainian military. Post-traumatic syndrome (PTSD) is the most frequent problem among defenders of Ukraine. There have already been recorded cases when military personnel, while on rotation, could harm their loved ones while sleeping or elsewhere. After the long living in the trenches, being under shelling every morning, day and night, a healthy psyche recedes into the background and is replaced by a military mentality. It is distinguished by the fact that a person accepts the fact that he/she can die at any moment and will become just a number in the reports. This person loses individuality. The body reacts in this way to long periods of stress, the impossibility of having basic needs (sleeping indoors under a roof, warmth, water, home-cooked food, family, etc.). We can also add here strict military discipline,
difficulties in communication with personnel, with heads of units (especially if they are Soviet-style managers), etc. The problem of a military mentality is that it is very difficult to regain one’s ‘healthy’ psyche back; such person will need to go through the process of adaptation to life in a calm and ordinary society.

Considering the fact that the war has lasted 646 days, it is becoming increasingly clear that this war has every chance to drag on for years, if not decades. From the awareness of this fact and from the recent narrative about ‘negotiations with the aggressor state about peace’ or ‘freezing of the conflict’, a period of apathy has come for many Ukrainians. However, we overcame this period of emotional instability. Many people have a feeling that, directly or indirectly, the world tries to persuade us to negotiate, but we stand steadfastly for our country. The ‘negotiations’ are unfair, at least because millions of Ukrainians still live in the temporarily occupied territories (20% of the country) and are waiting for their return to Ukraine. This is not taking into account what crimes the Russians have already committed. Feelings of injustice, hopelessness and loss of unity, struggles and disputes between Ukrainians only harm the successful conduct of this war and the mental state of Ukrainians. We must be united, respect, support each other and detect special information operations in time. The Ukrainian mentality is slowly moving from the regime of ‘life in peace’ to the model of ‘life in war’ (here you can cite the example of Israel, as a country that is always ready for war).

Humor is one of the most important components of the Ukrainian mentality, which allows us all to keep going, despite everything. ‘In order not to cry, I laughed’ (L. Ukrainka). Despite the catastrophic situation, Ukrainian culture has risen with new strength. Many people began to switch to the Ukrainian language, and foreigners even began to teach it. Many new Ukrainian songs, mass media, Instagram and YouTube sources, humorous shows, memes, anecdotes and even puns began to appear. The Ukrainian song “Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow” (“Ой у лузі червона калина.”) gained a new wave of popularity in 2022 after the performance by Andriy Hlyvnyuk in the first days of the Russian invasion and a cover version of the cult band “Pink Floyd” called “Hey, Hey, Rise Up!”.

Let us summarize the challenges faced by Ukrainians, which are caused by a psychological state:

1. Massiveness. There is no family in Ukraine that has not been affected by the war. In Ukraine, many people witnessed military actions, people who were or are under occupation, experienced abuse, torture, injuries, rape, capture, the death of loved ones (seen with one’s own eyes).

2. Traumatic experiences grow like a snowball. For example, the father of a 30-year-old military man found out that his son was left without legs and had a heart attack. The son is now in the hospital and says that he does not want to see anyone, does not want to be treated and does not want to live.

3. Children psychological traumas. Small children up to 3 years old refuse to start talking, show signs of anxiety and aggression. Older children and teenagers become more withdrawn, communicate less, have a regression in independence from their parents, and do not make new acquaintances because they are afraid of losing them. There is also a frequent issue of the fear of death, apathy, and depressive states. Children perform certain aggressive actions (for example, tearing toys) as a sign of longing for a lost parent.
4. **Low level of psychological culture among the population.** In Ukraine, people still do not have the habit of systematic work with a psychologist, psychotherapist, and sometimes they do not even start it. There are still many fakes and stereotypes about psychologists in society. People are often afraid to open up, shy to reach out, or self-confident – they think that the symptoms of a traumatic experience are temporary.

5. **Lack of professional psychotherapists who know how to work with war trauma.** Lack of training of such specialists. There are cases that one specialist has to work with dozens of soldiers with amputated limbs. Therefore, these specialists are very exhausted from the colossal amount of work and insufficient time for own psychological recovery.

6. **Lack of long-term recovery programs for people with traumatic experiences.** For example, to recover from PTSD for one person, it takes 15 sessions during 3 months of systematic work. Moreover, in Ukraine, the number of such people consists from 6% to 33% of the population (military and civilians). We will be able to determine the final amount only in the post-war period, when we will feel completely safe. If people with PTSD symptoms are not provided with psychological help in time, it can develop into personality disorders, depression, and suicidal states.

7. **Lack of quality equipment and approaches to psychodiagnosis of Ukrainians.** Scientific laboratories, hospitals, diagnostic and rehabilitation centers need new and high-quality research equipment.

8. **Unpreparedness of society, psychological and medical services for the return of the military.** Even now, families often do not know how to behave with military personnel who return home for a week from the front. The same applies to psychologists and doctors who do not know what PTSD is.

9. **Although Ukrainians are united, more than ever, in the fight against the enemy, at the same time, there are now signs of polarization in Ukrainian society on religious and linguistic grounds, between immigrants and native residents, people who remained in Ukraine, and those who went abroad, those who are fighting, and those who are not, etc.**

10. **Exaggerated expectations - life after victory.** Many Ukrainians postpone their lives for later, expecting victory. There will be no miracle - the war will not end in one day. I can say that, on the one hand, I personally very much expect victory, at the same time, I am somewhat afraid of that period. A lot of information will become open, and the mobilized state of Ukrainians will pass and we will have another psychological crisis - post-war crisis and, most likely, more lasting. Both psychological illnesses and those resulting from chronic stress will appear. Therefore, from the first days of a full-scale war, we are making every effort to minimize the consequences of the war period.

    What should civilians do about it:

    1. **Contact psychologists.** Now there are many programs at public organizations, or even in the phone applications, where you can get quality psychological help.

    2. **If a psychologist or psychotherapist did not suit you, contact another one.** It is like a doctor or a chef. You may not immediately find the one that suits you. This is completely normal.

    3. **Attend psychological trainings, psychological support groups.**

    4. **If you have questions about your psychological conditions, but you are not yet ready to contact a psychologist, it is normal to write your requests to the...**
community for a consultation. We are all in the same hard situation and there is nothing shy in discussion of a problem.

We will live with the collective war trauma for a long time after the victory. American psychologist Frank Pucelik, a participant in the Vietnam War, said: 'I was taken from the Vietnam War to the United States in 22 hours by plane. I got the war out of my head for more than 20 years'. We now have every chance to speed up this process of post-war adaptation, thanks to the zeal of Ukrainians and the generous support of partners from allied countries. Therefore, it is better to take care of your psychological health now.

**Conclusion.** Ukraine needs to build and maintain infrastructure for disabled people, conduct trainings on proper communication with them, cultivate respect for the military, show initiative in helping them, implement programs of psychological, financial and material support, develop a system of benefits, simplify bureaucratic procedures and organize an adequate system of medical commissions. Ukraine requires qualified military psychologists. The author urges not to forget to actively participate in helping Ukraine. Ukraine is currently the impenetrable shield of Europe that does not allow a terrorist country to encroach on the sovereignty and independence of other free countries. Let us stand together. Together to the victory.

**References:**

