

Good afternoon, everyone.

Today, I want to share a deeply personal and challenging story - the story of what it's like to be a student in Ukraine during wartime. My name is Nataliia. I am pursuing a master's degree in English philology at Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University while living in Lutsk, a beautiful city in northwestern Ukraine. It's a place I've come to love and dream of calling my permanent home, yet the realities of war make this dream incredibly hard to achieve.

Just imagine waking up each morning not to the chirping of birds or the buzz of daily life, but to the grim uncertainty of whether the air-raid sirens will blare. Before I leave the house, I check my phone several times to see if there are any reports of airstrikes near my city. Imagine balancing the rigor of academic life with the constant anxiety of what might happen next. This is not a fictional scenario; it's the daily reality for students like me.

Sleepless nights have become an inseparable part of my student life. Not because of late studying before exams, as one might expect, but because of the sirens and the sudden attacks that tear the silence apart. I often lie awake, counting the seconds between alarms, wondering if I will make it to class in the morning at all. Sometimes I arrive to lectures with red eyes and a heavy head, carrying not only my books but also the weight of another restless night. And yet, even in this exhaustion, there is a strange strength - because every morning I still choose to get up, to go, to learn like every other student at my university.

I would say from my own experience that I really lack the feeling of "certainty in something". For me, the dream of staying in Lutsk and building a life there is complicated by the realities of war. Jobs are scarce, the economy is struggling, and the emotional toll is immense. Yet, this dream sustains me. It gives me a reason to push through the difficulties.

Pursuing a master's as well as a bachelor's requires focus, dedication, and an enormous amount of energy. Now, layer on top of that the stress of war

There are nights when studying by candlelight becomes the norm because electricity is unstable. We call ourselves, half-jokingly, a "blackout generation." But there is little funny about it. We study during power cuts, prepare for exams by candlelight, and sometimes an entire semester passes in darkness.

I often think of our university library. Once it was filled with whispers, the rustle of pages, and the quiet presence of students. Now, many such libraries remain locked, damaged, or simply empty. This silence no longer means concentration on studies - it is the silence of absence. Absence of students who fled abroad.

Some students volunteer, distributing humanitarian aid to those in need. Others organize donation drives and manage local shelters. Some even take on part-time jobs to support their families while continuing their studies. And yet, we persevere. For us, for me, education is not just a path to a career; it's a form of

resistance. By continuing to learn, we defy the chaos around us and show the world that Ukraine's youth refuses to be silenced.

Even the most ordinary symbol of student life - the backpack - has changed in wartime Ukraine. Alongside my English dictionary I always keep a power bank, a flashlight, a small first aid kit, a bottle of water, and my personal documents. These items have become as essential as lecture notes. It is heartbreaking to see how what should have been filled with the tools of learning is instead a symbol of survival. Our backpacks remind us of our double existence - we are students pursuing knowledge, but at the same time, we are survivors of war, ready for the next alarm.

The full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, shattered countless dreams and lives. Many young Ukrainians joined the army or territorial defense, learned first aid, volunteered, or fled their occupied cities in search of safety.

My heart belongs to Ukraine. This is my home, the land where I was born, where my roots are deeply planted, and where my future lies. I respect and admire all cultures and have a deep love for travel, but I cannot imagine living anywhere else.

For many, the war became not only a fight for survival but also a stand for freedom, justice, and the values they believe in.

The whole idea of leaving feels like abandoning a part of myself. I am a patriot, not in a shallow or superficial sense, but in a way that defines my choices and my identity. Ukraine is more than just a place to me; it is a cause, a mission, and a love that I cannot forsake.

For many of my peers, a ticket abroad was once an exciting opportunity—study exchange, adventure, discovery. But now, it has turned into a one-way ticket. Some of my closest friends left Ukraine to continue their studies in Poland, Germany, or the Czech Republic. At first, it seemed like a temporary solution, but months have passed, and the question of whether they will ever return home remains unanswered. One friend confessed to me that she keeps her Ukrainian house key on her keychain, even though she doesn't know if she will ever open that door again.

Nowadays, Ukraine's young generation is fighting two battles. One is against an external aggressor, and the other is for a future where we can live, learn, and thrive without fear.

Thank you for taking the time to listen and for standing with us.