



# Overcoming the trauma of conflict

**Larissa Sotieva** examines some of the long-term, generational effects of conflict and other traumas that communities in Ukraine have experienced, along with projects that are providing psychosocial support to help communities heal

**O**n my first trip to Kiev after the political protests in Maidan – in which more than 100 protesters and police were killed, eventually leading to the downfall of the government, along with the outbreak of violence in Eastern Ukraine – the first things that struck me were the loud music blaring out in Khreshchatik, and the unusual number of couples kissing in the streets. All this felt surreal, fake. The country was embroiled in military action, and the romantic scenes and carefree, festive atmosphere were the last things I expected to encounter.

In fact, this was a normal social reaction to abnormal events. Individuals and societies alike tend to go into denial when confronted with a reality that is shocking and hard to accept. Incapable of dealing with what has happened, we subconsciously choose a more comfortable imaginary world. In this way, we are able to find calm and harmony, to

*In Ukraine, International Alert's peace education camps aimed to help children and young people to cope with the trauma and violence experienced during the conflict*

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be at peace with ourselves, and with our imaginary reality.

Since then, much has changed in Ukrainian society. The conflict no longer involves military action, and yet there is no peace, or any clear idea of how peace may be brought about.

Many people experienced a total collapse of the value system that they had spent their entire life building up, and which was the main mechanism underlying their actions.

Individuals and societies may have different responses to traumatic events. This reaction depends not only on innate psychological makeup, on life experience and on various social norms and traditions, but also on the particular stage of life at which a person finds themselves, and on how much they anticipate new challenges at this stage.

For many, the shock of the events in Maidan, the outbreak of conflict with a friendly state – as well as with part of the population of their own country – and the chaos that ensued, proved unbearably traumatic. Ukraine, after all,

had previously been peaceful and relatively well-off. Not everyone saw themselves as victims, however. In many, those events triggered post-traumatic growth, enabling them to believe in themselves and in their ability to bring about change, helping them to realise that ultimately they were responsible for their own lives, those of their loved ones and of society itself. Those who took this sort of approach and acted on these beliefs, became volunteers. Responding to society's urgent need, their actions ranged from offering humanitarian aid and other help to victims of the conflict, to taking part in military action.

Thanks to such volunteers, the entire makeup of Ukraine's civil society was transformed. The country's professional NGO sector turned into a huge community of people, actively involved at all levels of social and political life. One should not assume all this activity was constructive: not all of it was strategically aimed at positive change.

For many, volunteering brought an opportunity to influence the state governance system. Those who sought a still greater degree of influence became part of the government itself. However, like much of the population, these people were prone to avoiding problems. Wary of raising difficult questions, they feared revealing the true picture of the conflict and thorny social issues, which might differ from those commonly shown on television.

In many cases, post-traumatic stress manifests through excessively radical opinion or general emotional instability. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and ex-combatants repeatedly had their hopes dashed.

Despite the huge social capital and resources available, ex-combatants remain the most vulnerable group in terms of openness to influence and manipulation. With their experience as fighters, they are willing and able to take rapid, radical decisions. For instance, they may back proposed coups when confronted by talented adventurers who appear to offer a convincing path to end injustice and corruption and to live happily ever after.

In examining the consequences of trauma in Ukraine, it would be wrong to focus exclusively on the traumatic events around the conflict itself. All of us have trauma from past events, which impacts all areas of our current life, shaping our decisions and the way we make them.

Today's Ukrainian society was in part formed by the trauma of the USSR's collapse, as well as by the trauma of the USSR itself, of the Holodomor (the brutal artificial famine imposed by the Soviet government in 1932–33, where millions of people were killed in Ukraine) along with other events. A number of Holodomor experts have suggested that the most traumatic aspect of that tragedy was not the hunger itself, nor events that unfolded as a result, but the fact that it was not possible to talk about it.

The Holodomor was not commonly known across the USSR. Society had no opportunity to reflect upon it, and the people who survived its horrors died without ever being properly heard or understood. Unable to share their stories with the outside world, many did confide in their children and grandchildren who, in turn absorbed this narrative.

In Soviet times, a notorious serial killer held the entire country in terror for years with phenomenally cruel and unpredictable actions. He evaded capture for a long time but when finally apprehended, he turned out to be a simple teacher who had grown up in Ukraine during the Holodomor.

The experts who analysed his mental state said that

when he was a child, his parents had forbidden him to go outside, for fear he would be eaten by hungry attackers.

We can never know how trauma will manifest in the future, which makes trauma transformation work all the more vital, and it is not only up to psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers to carry out this task. It is the task of all those who work with people.

Journalists, for instance, can play a huge part in the rehabilitation of society through covering the conflict from different viewpoints, and through making known, without bias, the stories of specific people and families who lived, or still live, in the conflict area. This helps them to feel heard, and offer them the hope of being understood. The importance of this kind of interaction for individuals and society alike is impossible to overestimate. Besides relieving the general sense of trauma, it can help restore a sense of justice and offer people some hope of peace.

## Cosmic justice

When our basic human security is under threat, however, we are unlikely to respond in a rational manner, to be sensitive towards the needs of others, or to think strategically about conflict transformation in the future.

In such moments, our only focus is survival, self-defence. We do attempt to improve the situation, to help others. But if our efforts bring no tangible results and we lose our sense of perspective, we might, as the just-world hypothesis suggests, find ourselves resorting to a sense of 'cosmic justice'. Unconsciously, we might find ourselves deciding that people deserve their sorry fate, which justifies our own inability or lack of desire to act in order to help them. Unfortunately, this phenomenon can affect both internal and external stakeholders.

Psychologists working with ex-combatants tell us that this group faces tremendous problems reintegrating into society. In trying to access the benefits they are due, virtually all encounter a lack of understanding, and sometimes even aggression from social services and doctors.

It is my deeply held conviction that in the absence of strategic intervention, society will eventually end up spiralling over and over through the same dead-end scenario. This is an important point for all actors working in Ukraine to bear in mind.

In partnership with the Global Initiative on Psychiatry, and with assistance from the EU, International Alert has established three psychosocial rehabilitation centres and eight mobile emergency support groups in Ukraine. With psychologists, medics, social workers, lawyers, teachers and other experts working together, these offer a multi-disciplinary approach to rehabilitation.

Working on the consequences of trauma in society is more challenging than working with individuals. Although society is made up of individual people, it has its own functional mechanisms, some of which are shared with individuals, some of which are not.

Ukraine is a big country. Our contribution is a drop in the ocean, but the approach that we have developed has enabled us to formulate the following message: The most important pre-condition for the rehabilitation of individuals and society, is the involvement of each and everyone in the process of healing.

And we very much hope that the incredible human resource that Ukraine has, will enable it to break out of the vicious circle in which it is currently caught.

## Author



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