

Letter to Rita Stephan,

Division Chief of Continuing Education Training, U.S. Department of State; Former Regional Coordinator, Middle East Bureau, USAID; Visiting Researcher, North Carolina State University

Dear Rita Stephan,

You recently gave a lecture "Fundamentals of the Peacemaking Process" for Ukrainian women - participants of the "Progression" project. Your lecture caused many emotions in Ukrainian women. It is easy to study the theory of war and the peacemaking process from textbooks. It is very difficult to see war with your own eyes. Our brain refuses to accept what forms this theory.

Your lecture was extremely interesting and useful for me. This lecture supplemented my knowledge about intergroup conflicts, about social psychology, about international and humanitarian law. The lecture strengthened my desire to contribute to the peace process.

You suggested that each of us write a letter and tell in this letter about everything that we think and feel. Thank you for this opportunity. I am addressing my letter to you - a person who works at the Division Chief of Continuing Education Training, U.S. Department of State.

Dear Rita,

My name is Larysa Pylgun. I am a specialist in evaluating social projects of non-governmental and international organizations. Since 2015, I have been evaluating social projects that helped rebuild Ukrainian cities and villages after the war and helped displaced people start a new life. The war in Ukraine began in 2014. I saw the terrible consequences of this war. On February 24, 2022, on the very first day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I saw the war with my own eyes. On this day, through the window of my apartment, I saw how the Russians were destroying Gostomel. However, I refused to evacuate from Vorzel, which is part of the agglomeration with the cities of Bucha and Irpin. After a few days, these cities were occupied, and their inhabitants were subjected to abuse and death.

On February 24, my colleagues and I agreed on what to do next. There were no soldiers among us, none of us held weapons in our hands. But we all wanted to be useful to our country in this war. We had many friends and colleagues in other countries. We decided to use all available opportunities to inform the world about everything that is happening around us.

Since the electricity and internet went out in Vorzel, my husband and I went to visit friends. We took documents, a dog and 3 cats with us. This, as it turned out later, saved all of our lives. We were able to return home only at the beginning of May, after the Armed Forces of Ukraine liberated the towns and villages around Kyiv from the Russian invaders.

We stayed with friends throughout March and April. All of us were in the zone of active hostilities. We saw with our own eyes how the Russians destroyed 2 cars with civilians - volunteers who tried to evacuate women and children were killed. Unfortunately, we will never learn their names - in an instant, cars with people turned into burnt metal with small human remains. That day we started documenting war crimes. Documentation of war crimes continues even now. Other volunteers, organizations and authorities joined the process of documenting war crimes.

My husband and I wrote about everything we saw, photographed everything that happened around us, collected all the information about this war from friends and colleagues and posted it on the Internet. Social networks blocked our attempts to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine, so we began to use other resources - websites and e-mail - to spread information. We appealed to our colleagues from other countries with requests to stop Russian aggression. We appealed to the Russians, with whom we celebrated family holidays, studied and worked before the war, with a request to stop their power and not to participate in the war against their relatives. We tried to explain to everyone that this is a war, not a "special operation", that there are no grounds for the introduction of the Russian army into Ukraine.

The whole of March was a real hell in the cities of Kyiv, Gostomel, Bucha, Irpin, Vorzel, Makariv and the surrounding villages. Everything around was on fire. From day one, the Russians destroyed civilians, their homes, and civilian infrastructure. We filmed destroyed hospitals, maternity homes, churches, schools, kindergartens, houses, cars. We spoke with people who saw with their own eyes everything that was happening around. The people who survived were of the same opinion - the genocide of the Ukrainian people is taking place around us, because we observed not the seizure of natural, energy and human resources, but their deliberate destruction, the burning of Ukrainian cities and villages with fire so that nothing alive was left there. This is still going on in other cities and villages of Ukraine.

Over time, we realized that it is also necessary to tell about how Ukrainians unite to fight the enemy and to survive in the conditions of war. People with military experience took up arms and did not let the Russians into the capital, they quickly liberated the occupied cities and villages in the Kyiv region. Many volunteers joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In the Armed Forces of Ukraine, you can see representatives of various professions, including people of science and art. People without military experience guard community property, help the elderly and sick, take care of domestic animals and farms. Everyone tries to be helpful. Everyone shares food and basic necessities. Government, business and civil society have done and are doing fantastic things to win. We thank everyone who helps Ukrainians survive these difficult times.

In 2015-2018, I assessed the results of the reconstruction of Donetsk and Luhansk regions within the framework of UN activities. Restored cities and villages are now uninhabitable again. Moreover, unique flora and fauna were destroyed, an industrial and energy complex with significant reserves of minerals and powerful production potential was destroyed.

I thought I was mentally ready for war. I saw the consequences of the war in the East of Ukraine, I communicated with forced migrants... But I was wrong. Even today, many months after the deoccupation, I cannot without tears look at the burned cities and villages of Kyiv region, hear how acquaintances and friends are dying, how the children of my friends are dying. Civil and energy infrastructure of Ukraine is destroyed every day, people die every day, hundreds of civilians are homeless. People die every day due to the fact that there is no light and communication and it is impossible to call a doctor or perform an operation, take care of the sick and newborns. I am as scared today as I was in the first days of the war, when I fell asleep and woke up to the sound of explosions, when I was carrying humanitarian aid through fields that had just been shelled. After another attack on the energy infrastructure, I can't work and pay taxes because there is no electricity and no internet. My day begins and ends with news of destruction and death.

I used to be a teacher of European integration and told my students about European institutions and other intergovernmental organizations. Later I became interested in social psychology. I am currently looking for an explanation for intergroup conflict and war. I have been cooperating with international and donor organizations for many years. My husband is a doctor of political sciences. He is a human rights defender. He works at the Center for Civil Liberties. This is the organization that received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. This is an organization that has focused its resources and efforts on rescuing Ukrainian civilians held captive by the Russians.

We often communicate with representatives of international organizations, who tell us that Ukraine's victory in this war is a challenge for the international community. Ukraine has a thousand-year tradition of statehood. Under the influence of external and internal factors, Ukrainian territories were many times under the rule of conquering states, Ukrainians were deprived of freedom and language. Ukraine has been an independent state for a little over 30 years, of which 8 years we have been in a state of war and occupation of part of its territory. The Ukrainian people have a long history of national liberation struggle and experience of civil disobedience. At the same time, the international community expresses surprise that Ukrainians do not want to return to the Russian Empire. And this already surprises Ukrainians.

We often tell representatives of international organizations that modern peacekeeping rules and measures to prevent and resolve armed conflicts are ineffective, and legislation and human rights protection algorithms need to be revised in accordance with current realities. We invite specialists to Ukraine in order to understand the problem from the inside, in order to develop new rules of the game. International organizations demand reforms from us, but we ourselves are not ready to reform humanitarian law, which does not meet today's requirements.

We initiated a study of the unity and self-organization of Ukrainian society in opposition to Russian aggression in order to explain the events in Ukraine. For now, we see that Ukrainians long for freedom and are capable of self-organization in the 21st century as well as in the 16th century (when the Cossack movement for freedom began). We want to change the attitude of the international community towards Ukrainians. We want to be perceived separately from the Russian Empire. We deserve it.

Since 2015, I have been involved in research on the impact of Russian propaganda on the international community regarding Ukrainian issues. What scares me at the moment is how lies influence decision-making, how officials do not want to see the obvious, how leaders of international organizations are manipulated and create the conditions for further violence. I am afraid of the readiness to sacrifice millions of Ukrainians for the sake of the business interests of individual people. I am afraid of the silencing of the ecological and humanitarian disaster in the center of Europe. We want to liberate Ukraine not only from military, but also from informational aggression on the part of Russia. We strive to get rid of the threat from our eastern neighbor forever. We want to fulfill the dream of our ancestors - to have sovereignty and freedom.

I am writing this letter from the capital of Ukraine - Kyiv. I am among a large number of Ukrainians who live and work in spite of war, uncertainty, lack of living and working conditions. In March, Ukrainians hoped for help from international organizations. Now Ukrainians rely primarily on themselves. They are filled with pain and hatred, but these emotions make them strong, able to withstand any trials. I am proud that I am one of them. I don't wish the ordeal I had on anyone, but I don't have tears or pain. I have a desire to go to victory without any compromises. I realize that my every word could be my last. But I am doing what I agreed with my colleagues on February 24 - to tell the world the truth about Ukraine. This is my understanding of peacekeeping. This is my contribution to peace on my land.

With respect and wishes of peace to you and your family

Larysa