

## On Ukraine's front lines, frustration and determination

By Anna Husarska    April 19, 2024



A hospital volunteer from Estonia crafted this monument in Kostiantynivka to honor those who died on his watch. It is made of their photos, parts of their uniforms, tourniquets and equipment. (Anna Husarska)

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KHARKIV, Ukraine — There was something surreal in discussing the possibility of a wider Middle East war while outside, in the most exposed of Ukrainian towns, the air-raid sirens were wailing, signaling a threat of a wider European war.

Last weekend in Kharkiv, as in so many other places, [Iran's attacks on Israel](#) were the talk of the town. Standing on the city's empty Freedom Square, my friend Olga Shpak — a volunteer with [Assist Ukraine](#) — and I were weighing what the possible scenarios mean for Ukraine. The optimistic approach went: If Israel hits Iran, perhaps there will be fewer [Iranian-made Shahed drones](#) for Russia to use against Ukraine? And, if Iran continues its attacks on Israel, perhaps the U.S. Congress will expedite a military aid package for both Israel and Ukraine? Then pessimism crept in: What if House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) separates the package, and military aid is sent to Israel but not to Ukraine? Ukrainians understand well that the two countries are not equally important to the United States and its allies.

Over the next few days, I traveled north of Kharkiv toward the Russian border, south to Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka and then to Kyiv, speaking with Ukrainians about what they consider a betrayal of the U.S. promise to help for ["as long as it takes."](#) They did not attempt to be diplomatic; they were bitter, sad and worried. But they were not giving up.

Here is what I heard:

The soldiers I met north of Kharkiv, just 15 miles from the Russian border, did not say much, but they did not have to: A [Polish volunteer group](#) had just provided them an excavator for digging trenches, and this spoke for itself. With no weapons or munitions to launch any attack, they could only dig in, trying to withstand the advancing enemy. The excavator was brand new and they were grateful to get it — but they were distressed at having to take shelter instead of launching a daring attack.



Soldiers north of Kharkiv receiving an excavator for digging trenches. (Anna Husarska)

My next stop was near Kramatorsk, about 150 miles south of Kharkiv, to see a military unit I know from several past visits. The previously playful and optimistic soldiers gave me a sobering litany of their limitations. Their commander spoke of their frustration as they observe the Russians with drones. Without 155mm artillery munitions from the United States, the Ukrainians can engage the enemy only when the Russians come close enough for locally made, short-range drones called FPV (first-person view) to attack as a sort of “replacement artillery.” His unit has some munitions, but “for half a year we have been able to respond only when there is a force of at least 40 or 50 Russians: we cannot waste our 155s for smaller groups.”

Calling up new troops will change little, he said, if there is no artillery to offer a cover for the infantry. “A month ago, of the 14 newly trained soldiers that we sent, all were ‘200,’” he said using military jargon for killed in action. “The Russians know that they can come really close to us, plus they have the REB, [an electronic warfare system](#), which takes down our drones. We don’t have enough REB to do the same to them.”

Another soldier from this unit told me the armored personnel carrier that they have cannot go anywhere close to the town of [Chasiv Yar](#) — because, since they don’t have much artillery and REB, the Russians would destroy it within minutes. Chasiv Yar is the target of a sustained Russian offensive, presumably because Vladimir Putin would like to boast of taking this small town at the annual May 9 parade celebrating victory over Germany in World War II. “I see their Grad (multiple rocket launcher), but to neutralize it I would need to use 10-15 shells, and I cannot spare this many.”



Drones presented by Assist Ukraine to the intelligence unit in Kostiantynivka under a blooming cherry tree. (Anna Husarska)



I met another unit's intelligence officer under a beautifully blossoming cherry tree, but the news he gave me was equally gloomy. Russians often sacrifice their soldiers to provoke the Ukrainians to reveal their positions, he said. It's a [“meat-grinder” tactic](#), he explained, in which inexperienced Russian troops are sent forward, followed by a detachment — the “zagrad otryad,” infamous since World War II — whose sole purpose is to block the young Russians' retreat.

In [Kostiantynivka](#), Olga Alexandrovna, another old acquaintance, welcomed me with flowers: “Ania, how could I evacuate from here?! Look at my tulips, they are so gorgeous this year.” We went inside the house, where she was born more than 60 years ago. Looking at her colorful packages of flower seeds, she said resolutely: “I need to sow all these, and care for our strawberry, black currant, tomatoes. And my orchids all have two stalks. ... No, I cannot leave.” Artillery pounding could be heard, but Olga Alexandrovna assured me it was outgoing fire because if it were incoming her fluffy white dog would panic. “Mishka can tell the difference. He is my guardian.” She knew that buses were available if she wanted to evacuate; she has even prepared a small bag “just in case,” but unless Chasiv Yar — six miles to the east — falls, she wanted to stay.



Olga Alexandrovna's seeds. (Anna Husarska)

Next I went to Kyiv where, a few days earlier, a Russian missile had destroyed the [Trypil'ska power plant](#), the largest supplying the capital. Insufficient Ukrainian air defense is yet another shortage that costs human lives every day. We were lucky to have electricity in our area, and Mikhail Reva, a sculptor from Odessa, gave a master class on art and politics for young community leaders. Afterward, he was asked by a journalist what, in his opinion, was the source of so much determination in the Ukrainian ranks. I listened as he quoted Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir: “Our secret weapon,” he said, “is that we have no alternative.”

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