

2022 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

Values against violence

(Original)

Polina

(Age 23, Russia)

I begin writing this essay on the hundredth day of the war my country has waged against Ukraine.

My grandfather was born in Kiev in 1926. The other day my family and I were looking through old photo albums and I could not hold back my tears when I saw the pictures of my grandfather with his parents before the Second World War. They look happy and calm, not yet suspecting that soon they would have to flee under bombing, leaving this peaceful life behind. My grandfather's family traveled for two months on trains through Ukraine and Russia until they were in the Urals, where they were safe and where they had to rebuild their lives.

Grandfather sometimes remembered their summer house in Svyatoshinsky district as the last place where he was truly joyful. Now Svyatoshinsky district is a part of Kiev, which borders with Bucha and Irpen, the cities the whole world has heard about because of the atrocities of Russian soldiers.

It's incredibly painful to realize that now people in the same places are experiencing the same thing as my grandfather did and even worse things.

News about the shelling of Ukrainian cities, war crimes, as well as news about arrests, beatings, fines, and prison sentences for anti-war protesters in Russia have become habitual, if three months ago I opened the news every morning in fear, not knowing what I would see, now I see the same thing every day.

Russians are now faced with many moral questions. How could this happen? How could we allow this to happen? What can we do to make it stop?

I have no answers to these questions, but I will try to describe what values prevailed in my mind, and most likely in the public consciousness. It seems to me that in many ways the

values of Russian society explain how we could have overlooked the moment when Putin's regime became truly cannibalistic.

For a long time, most of my high school and college years, I cared about my personal well-being, about my family, about my education, about my career, about my relationship with friends and about my physical and mental health.

Meanwhile, In Russia opposition politicians and activists are persecuted without any legal basis, people are tortured in prisons. Every seventh citizen of Russia lives below the poverty line. However, those people who (like me) were not affected in one way or another by these problems continued to hold personal well-being as a core value.

It is hard to say whether we would have seen a different picture if we were not such an atomized, fragmented society. If we paid attention to the problems and suffering of others, would we find ourselves in a very different country after a while?

Political system affects values in society, but the values of those who live in society also affect political systems. Even if competitive democratic elections are not yet possible in our country and there are no safe ways to indicate our disagreement with what is going on, I believe if we all have an epiphany and realize our responsibility for this war, we can stop this nightmare and take the path of redemption.

In this perspective, I am redefining my values. The best way to stop evil is not to become part of it and not to remain silent when confronted with it. My choice right now is to be empathic, not indifferent; to be reasonable, not reckless; to be reflexive, not stubborn; to be on the side of peace and kindness, not aggression or ignorance.

I hope I'm not alone in this.

I hope we will be able to resist propaganda, dictatorship, and unfreedom because we will know that we are not alone, that we are fighting for peace and justice, and someone will fight for us too.

I hope we will be able to do everything in our power to help Ukraine recover and help Russia form intolerance of any form of violence.

I hope we realize how our views and actions have repercussions in society.

I hope we have the sanity and the courage to embrace more just and humane values.