

Searching for Truth to Rely On:

Ukrainians Making Life Choices in the Face of Uncertainty

My name is Kristina Malysheva, a psychologist from Ukraine. Today, I'd like to share my insights on how Ukrainians navigate life choices during wartime amid uncertainty. I will explore various types of truths—factual, emotional, narrative, pragmatic, moral, and spiritual—that guide people in making challenging decisions about their future.

Living in a state of war in Ukraine does not exempt anyone from life planning and decision-making. Yet, how can one make significant choices when the future remains an equation with countless unknowns? To begin, I'd like to clarify the scope of my presentation. While preparing a 10-minute talk on navigating life choices during wartime, I had to face several smaller choices myself. Covering the full spectrum of life choices in 1,000 words is impossible, so I focused on one critical decision: when your home is no longer a safe place to live, the question is whether you stay, leave, or plan to return after leaving. This choice varies greatly depending on where Ukrainians live—safer central or western regions, areas near the frontlines or Russia's border, or occupied territories. I chose to focus my discussion on Kharkiv, a city just 30 kilometers from the Russian border, which I deeply admire but was forced to leave at the onset of the invasion.

For the past three years, I have worked as a crisis psychologist and mental health specialist in the humanitarian sector in Vinnytsia, central Ukraine, providing psychosocial support to those affected by war. My goal has been to guide clients in transforming the pain of loss and forced displacement into strength, resilience, and new opportunities for personal growth. To understand the truths guiding decisions to stay or leave, I spoke with Kharkiv residents, many of whom relocated to Vinnytsia as internally displaced persons. In this presentation, I will draw on examples from my clients, the experiences of my friends, and my own reflections and doubts on deciding whether to leave or stay. As a practicing psychologist, I face the challenge of guiding clients to distinguish between irrational hope and realistic perspectives—a struggle I also navigate in my own life.

When people decide whether to stay or leave a city under war, they draw on **multiple and sometimes conflicting kinds of truths**, often simultaneously.

Factual or empirical truth was the first to persuade many Kharkiv residents to leave at the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Hearing explosions and seeing occupiers on the streets, they recognized the stark reality: “It’s dangerous here.” Combined with the **emotional truth** of fear, this drove urgent safety-driven decisions to leave, despite the pain of abandoning home. Yet, the truth of someone who had endured war before differed from those facing it anew: my friend, now presenting in another room, who fled Donetsk in 2014, acted swiftly, her war-torn experience prompting her to evacuate her family the morning explosions began. My family wavered for a week, clinging to the **narrative truths** of my Soviet-era upbringing—myths of brotherly nations, belief in a just world, and faith in diplomacy and treaties—before accepting the **factual truth** and prioritizing safety.

Since 2022, decision-making for Kharkiv residents has grown increasingly complex. After most of Kharkiv Region was deoccupied in October 2022, many forcibly displaced residents returned home, while some who fled abroad came back to Ukraine but settled in safer western cities. However, when the safety situation worsened significantly in May 2024 due to Russia’s renewed offensive, many who had returned were forced to flee again.

These are some of the conversations I have with my clients from Kharkiv who plan their future amid growing uncertainty of the last year.

“Let’s be realistic: Kharkiv will never be the same as it was before the invasion,” says a woman in her forties from Kharkiv, now living in Vinnytsia. *“I have two teenage boys, and I didn’t bring them into this world to die in a war. There’s no way back. They’ll finish school, and we’ll move to a European country.”* Her grounded, **pragmatic truth** resonates with me, yet it breaks my heart. When a client’s opposing truth challenges my own **personal truth**, my convictions waver. I cling to the hope of returning to Kharkiv, and choosing comfort and safety over a city under relentless shelling feels like abandoning a sick parent. Am I a dreamer, or deceiving myself, to hope for a peaceful future in a rebuilt city?

Every city has its symbols, some symbols are living persons. For Kharkiv at war there are two important symbols - a Poet and an Artist. The poet is Serhii Zhadan. He organizes humanitarian aid, evacuates civilians, delivers supplies, performs morale-boosting concerts, serves in the National Guard, and hosts cultural podcasts to foster resilience. The artist is Hamlet Zinkivski. He paints morale-boosting murals on Kharkiv’s damaged buildings, serves

in the Khartia Battalion, and preserves culture through exhibitions, hoping his art supports Ukraine's war effort. I also see architects envisioning Kharkiv's future, crafting inspiring projects for its post-war reconstruction. What drives them to stay in Kharkiv and to stand for its future? Are they truly optimistic, or do they embrace a Stoic moral duty to resist, even in the face of despair? I don't know, but I place my hope in theirs, trusting their **existential truth** to keep going.

"Let's be realistic: a place just 30 km from the enemy's border will always be a disputed territory," a couple in their fifties shares during a psychological support group for IDPs in Vinnytsia. *"We choose to live what's left of our lives in a safer place."* Their resigned pragmatism echoes the painful truth many Kharkiv residents face, leaving me to question whether their hope for a peaceful, rebuilt Kharkiv is naive or a necessary act of faith.

My friend, who struggles with feelings of lovability and holds skepticism about Kharkiv after living there for years, often jokes: *"If someone can love Kharkiv like you do, maybe one day someone will love me too."* Deep attachment to a home city can feel irrational and overly emotional, often seeming unreliable for making sound decisions.

Renos Papadopoulos, a distinguished psychologist, who is renowned for his extensive work with refugees, writes: "Involuntary dislocation is often accompanied by an idealisation of the lost home, which, in memory, becomes a lost paradise. This idealised home is not merely a physical space but rather a symbolic construct embodying safety, belonging, and wholeness". This sentiment resonates with many who, after a period of displacement, have returned to Kharkiv. *"For the first time since the war started, I slept deeply and serenely in my own bed, having returned to Kharkiv from a quieter city. Remarkably, the explosions didn't disturb my peace"* - my friend shares, and it's her personal truth.

As psychologists, we strive for the wisdom to distinguish truth from deception and to guide our clients in doing the same. Yet, no single truth universally directs our decisions. Often, conflicting truths coexist within the same individual, creating complex inner struggles.

Someone might *know* it's unsafe to stay in Kharkiv (empirical truth), but *feel* they can't leave their home and duties (emotional and moral truth), while *believing* God will protect them (spiritual truth). Understanding this can help us empathize with decisions that may seem irrational on the surface — they're rooted in deeply human logic.

To conclude my presentation, I want to share a quote from Ukrainian poet Maryna Ponomarenko, which resonates with my understanding of how challenging it is to find a reliable truth for making life choices during the war. In her poem, Maryna portrays a Grandma, a former circus tightrope walker, teaching her three granddaughters to hold on to the void when there is nothing left to rely on:

– To lean on nothing, on a big fat zero, on a bagel’s hole, –
Grandma said. – That’s what I learned in the Soviet circus.

– To hold on to the void, feeling with your foot
For a support, painful and so thin no one even sees it.
The void, girls, is what will stay with you
When the rest of the world burns to hell, –

And now the girls hold on, their fingers cramping,
Holding on as the enemy burns their lives away,
To the void left behind by their hometown and home,
Holding on, feeling with their feet for that thin, painful support”