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Opinion

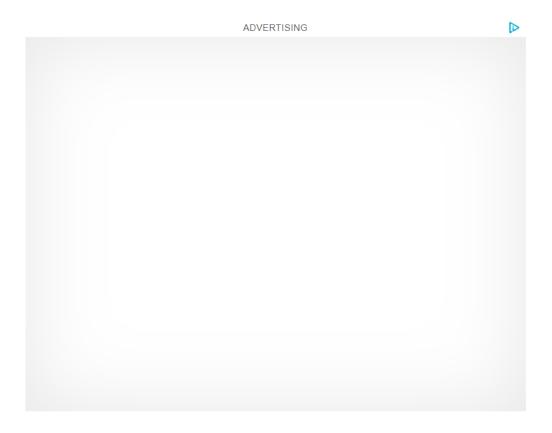
Guest columnist Dan Franch: For Ukrainians in Estonia, snowfall offers brightness in a time of darkness





Dan Franch

The calendar shows that it is officially winter and it has been a real wonderland here in Estonia. More than 16 inches of snow has fallen.



The streets are white. The sidewalks are white. The trees are white. Everything is white, which is welcome considering that there are only six hours of daylight this time of year. That's just when there's no overcast, which is rare. So, darkness is the norm.

Yet, with the illumination brought on by all the snow, I couldn't be happier for my Ukrainian students. It's a welcome and uplifting contrast to the darkness in their lives. Back home, things are not nearly as bright - figuratively or literally.

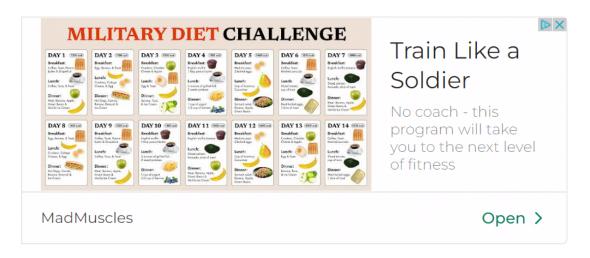
Figuratively, things aren't bright at all as the war in Ukraine rages on. Feb. 24 will mark one year since the war began. That's a long time of uncertainty while watching, listening and reading about your country being turned to rubble.

Outsiders might wonder why winning the war is so important not just for Ukraine but for the rest of Europe, America and beyond.

One reason is ideological - keeping a strong-handed leader from bullying his way into another country, taking it over in an attempt to regain Soviet glory and live out a fantasy of power and eternal praise of his people.

Another reason is pragmatic - realpolitik as the Germans call it. Ukraine is a bonanza of natural resources. It's a Top 10 in the world producer of eight metallic and non-metallic minerals and a world's Top 20 producer of three mineral fuels. On top of that, it has recently been learned that the country has some of the largest lithium reserves in Europe. Lithium is used for manufacturing cellphone batteries, computers and electric cars.

So, there's a lot on the line in Ukraine.



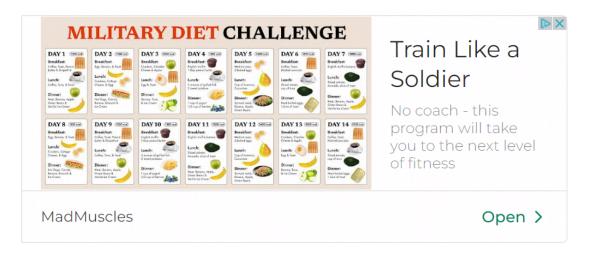
Literally, things aren't as bright either.

The temperatures in Ukraine are in the 20s and teens - and will most likely get colder. Nevertheless, electricity is rationed, coming in two-hour increments for two to six hours each day. That means it's cold with very little heat to keep warm. One of my students spoke of her mom's colleague's operation at a

hospital being put on pause till they hooked up a generator because the electricity went down. That's borderline dark humor ... to laugh or cry it's so surreal.

School-aged students find it hard to learn because classes are online, yet with intermittent power outages throughout the day, consistency and reliability are nonexistent. Combined with COVID a few years ago, a generation of undereducated people in Ukraine is a near certainty as long as the war continues.

Despite the darkness, despite the cold, the longing for extended family and the human touch of your husband are strong magnets this time of year.



One of my former students was home for 10 days to see her husband. Two other women are soon going back with their kids to see their husband/dad. Then there is another woman and her son. They're not going home, though they would love to. Their husband/dad is holed up underground near the front line.

As his wife wrote to me, explaining why she was too emotionally distraught to meet for lessons:

"My husband is in [the front line]. They live in the basement, no heating ... They are constantly bombarded. They work at night because it's safer ... They can't use technology at work, they use shovels ... and they work in total darkness. Every evening we say goodbye as in forever ... It's terrible. I try to keep hope."

Suffice it to say, it's dark in every sense of the word. But still, these Ukrainians

put on happy faces and get on with what they have to do. They keep moving forward - learning English, learning Estonian, finding jobs and integrating as best as they can for as long as they can, never knowing how long it will really be.



• Dan Franch, franchdan@gmail.com, a former Peace Corps volunteer, grew up in Addison and left for good in 1998. He has traveled to more than 50 countries, starting with a backpacking adventure around the world for a year in 1991. He currently lives and works in Estonia.