

OPINION

I traveled to Ukraine to teach sociology. It left me amazed.

BY NICHOLAS A. CHRISTAKIS

I'd never taught in a war zone before. But when the rector of the Kyiv School of Economics called last autumn, I found it impossible to say no. Three days in a nice hotel with a fortified bomb shelter while the rest of the country endured daily attacks? The visit seemed like a small show of solidarity with scientific colleagues and the Ukrainian people.

It felt, too, like an opportunity to witness theory in practice. Having spent my career studying the biological and social roots of collective human behavior, I understood that wider circles of people exchanging ideas can make groups tighter and more inventive. I also knew that shared adversity leads to cohesion. Still, I was amazed at what I saw.

My first impression of the Ukrainian people came during the journey from Warsaw to Kyiv, a 12-hour road trip. Entering a country at war is bracing. Sandbags, anti-tank defenses, burned-out buildings and fresh burials with black crepe in newly enlarged graveyards lined the highways. Cars stopped on the roadside as a military hearse with a police escort passed. My driver got out and fell to his knees in respect for the fallen soldier.

When I arrived at my hotel late in the afternoon, it felt as if I'd stepped into "Casablanca." Soldiers, dignitaries and waiters traversed the lobby. A saxophonist played "La Vie en Rose" with a computer as her backup band. A regular later told me she performed alone because "the men are off fighting."

As my chaperone from KSE, Alina Shmaliuk, came to escort me to the university, the first air raid of my stay sounded. "It's just a little Shahed drone," she said breezily, adding that you can hear them coming from far away, "like old crappy Russian motorcycles." The ones you really have to worry about, she averred, her voice dropping, are "the missiles, which you don't hear at all."

We felt safer thanks to her countrymen's genius and altruism. The ever-resourceful Ukrainians have developed a system — a sort of crowdsourced Waze app — for weapons detection. Using Telegram channels, residents on the eastern frontier report a drone's trajectory, which observers in the following villages update as they watch its path.

Relying on this local knowledge, we left the hotel for the university as night was falling. Once there, I was met by Sergiy Kozerenko, a professor of computer science, and a few of his students, who gave me a tour. Having long complained about scheduling and space constraints in the United States, I was immediately humbled. My hosts told me of a wartime law requiring Ukrainian universities to provide room for all students to relocate underground in the event of an air raid. To maintain a proper student-to-shelter ratio, KSE has had to double the length of its school day, meaning the university is in session for more than 12 hours at a stretch.

On the hallway monitors used to announce campus events, one image recurred. It was a black-and-white photograph of a young woman — and her obituary. Her name was Daria Lopatina, 19, a KSE student who had died while volunteering on the front lines three weeks earlier. Her death had a big effect on the student body, prompting a number of young men to consider interrupt-



The author lectures in a bomb shelter at the Kyiv School of Economics.



Classes take place in a basement corridor at KSE, with chaperone Alina Shmaliuk in the foreground.

ing their studies to enlist. Several KSE professors told me they were struggling to balance a commitment to the Ukrainian cause with their duty to mentor students and prevent them from making rash decisions.

I soon found, though, that the student body's interest in defending their country was matched by their yearning to learn. Whatever anxiety I felt by the raids was overtaken when I saw the university in action, buzzing. The campus was unfazed. Students occupied every available space — classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, even the stairwells. Their resolute faces immediately energized me.

My teaching began on day two. In the middle of a lecture that afternoon, the sirens began to wail. The university's rector, Tymofii Brik, calmly announced that we would move from the lecture hall to a nearby shelter. Two IT technicians appeared instantly to pack up my computer. We walked across the street to an underground bunker — a facility dating to the days when the Soviets feared a chemical attack from the U.S.

After winding our way down two

stories of musty cement stairs, the technicians got us up and running. I delivered the rest of my remarks behind a thick blast door. There we were, more than 100 of us squeezed together under fluorescent lights. And the students were positively beaming as I shared my research on how groups arrayed in certain types of networks can take on properties like cooperation that transcend the attributes of individuals.

It dawned on me that this group was the embodiment of my work. They were engaged, leaning forward, rapt, eager to ask questions in accented but fluent English, listening to their peers and building on each other's comments and energy. As a social scientist, I could see that they were also animated in part by the presence of an outsider who had come to witness their experience, one who could see what their lives were like as they were going to college each day, worrying and grieving for their families and country.

After we exited through the blast doors, I had more meetings with faculty and students, punctuated by more air

raids, loudly announced by the app on my phone. "Overconfidence kills; take this seriously," it warned, displaying an image of a red bomb falling.

After only 48 hours, I could see how one might start to ignore the messages, inured to relentless bombardment. One professor told me about a recent visit to Kharkiv — Ukraine's second-largest city, 20 miles from the front lines and heavily damaged by Russian attacks — where he saw people going about their business, sitting outside and drinking coffee during raids.

The contrast with the U.S., where for years people have debated how to make the university a "safe space," was striking. The American desire for safety cuts across a surprisingly wide swath of ideologies and backgrounds. Increasingly, it seems, students in the U.S. like to be comfortable, surrounded by like-minded peers. Not so in Ukraine, where students seek a different kind of safety — to be able to learn, to imagine a future.

I'm now home, 4,500 miles from Kyiv, yet our shared work continues. My Ukrainian colleagues and I are researching how artificial intelligence might be harnessed to build social cohesion or to counter Russian propaganda.

Since my visit, their circumstances have become more perilous. They log on to our Zoom calls from darkened cafes — or miss them entirely if the internet cuts out. More than 350 students and staff at KSE have been without heat during the winter thanks to Russian strikes on the country's energy infrastructure. A bomb destroyed the top floors of the apartment building one of my colleagues lives in. Still, they keep going.

My time in Kyiv wasn't merely an opportunity for good science. It allowed me to see what was happening to ordinary people at war, and to bond with fellow humans under attack. The Ukrainian students and faculty demonstrated that learning and discovery are transcendent values — worth reaffirming in a time of chaos and fear, even in our own country.

Nicholas A. Christakis is a physician and sociologist who directs the Human Nature Lab at Yale University. He hosts "For the Love of Science" on YouTube.

help accessing healthy food.

Medical training should also emphasize screening for food insecurity. Social determinants of health are an integral part of a patient's medical history, and students can be taught how to ask these questions and what to do with the answers. Ideally, clinics would have clear protocols to ensure that when patients screen positive, help is available right away. In the best systems, that support would be accessible in the same clinic, allowing patients to meet with a social worker or another staff member who can connect them with food resources during the visit.

Meanwhile, medical schools should teach future physicians how to work effectively with dietitians. Registered dietitians receive specialized graduate-level training and at least 1,000 hours of supervised clinical experience. Medical education should emphasize team-based practice and show physicians how to collaborate with dietitians to help patients develop healthy, realistic and sustainable eating plans.

Finally, if the Trump administration truly wants to prioritize healthy eating, it should reconsider policies that make it harder for people to afford food. Its dramatic cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which helps low-income families pay for groceries, will leave more families struggling to put food on the table. At the same time, halting the government's annual survey on food insecurity only makes the problem harder to see and address. When people are hungry, even the best nutrition education in the world will not help them become healthier.

Physicians lack both the training and the time to help patients translate general recommendations into actual meal plans.

Fortunately, some strategies already exist. A few hospitals run food pantry programs that provide groceries to patients and their families. Municipalities and community organizations combat food deserts by delivering fresh foods to senior centers, libraries and schools. Medical schools should train future physicians to connect patients with these resources and work with public health departments to develop local guides so that clinicians know where to direct patients who need

JIM GERAGHTY

When the Iran war ends, the mullahs will be broke

How did we get to war in Iran? There are a few answers. You could point to the Oct. 7, 2023, massacre in Israel by Hamas, the Islamic Republic's long-running terrorist proxy. There's also the 1979 hostage crisis, when Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held Americans captive for 444 days. Or there's the U.S.-aided coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, and Washington's support for the shah.

But the most immediate cause of the ongoing operation was the Iranian people's protests against their regime. On Jan. 13, President Donald Trump declared on Truth Social, "Iranian Patriots, KEEP PROTESTING - TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!! ... HELP IS ON ITS WAY!" It took 46 days for that help to arrive, but when it did, it was on a massive scale.

Among the reasons the Iranian protesters were furious with their thuggish rulers in Tehran: As 2025 ended, the country's economy was collapsing. According to a local dispatch, the Iranian central bank stated in late December that "point-to-point inflation rose to 52.6 percent in the month to late December, up 3.2 percentage points from the previous month, while average annual inflation climbed to 42.2 percent." It got worse yet. "Prices of food, beverages and tobacco up 72 percent year-on-year, compared with 43 percent for nonfood goods and services. Monthly inflation reached 4.2 percent, led by sharp increases in staples such as dairy and bread." That report comes courtesy of the Tehran-based Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In other words, it's possible that those numbers are the *positive* spin.

Rebuilding their military will be expensive, and handouts for Hamas or Hezbollah, or a nuclear-weapons program, will look like unaffordable luxuries.

In February, Iran's central bank began distributing the country's largest banknote, a 5 million-rial. When it was issued, it was worth about \$3.10. Last week, Forbes rated it the least valuable currency in the world.

Though international sanctions hamstringing Iran's economy, the country also has real problems with corruption and policies favoring the regime's cronies. As Ali Ansari, director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, wrote in January: "Iran's economy is shaped by short-termism, opaqueness and a lack of accountability that determines, and is itself defined by, the absence of the rule of law."

"As one foreign businessman noted to me," Ansari added, "why should we invest when the Iranians don't? Any investment, certainly of a strategic nature, tended to be handled by the state, which of course served to strengthen the state further against any embryonic private sector."

We've seen other protests against the Iranian regime over the years — 2009, 2011, 2017, 2018, 2022. What made this worse was that average Iranians were watching their currency become worthless and food get increasingly expensive. Never mind that the mullahs weren't exactly overflowing with ideas to solve the problem. Even if the regime brutally suppressed the protests — which it appears it has, at least for now — the same economic problems are waiting on the other side of the conflict. Only then, they will be worse.

Earlier this year, the Financial Times reported that Iran's Ministry of Defense Export Center is "prepared to negotiate military contracts that allow payment in digital currencies, as well as through barter arrangements and Iranian rials." It's a lot tougher to sell arms to other countries when your munitions and weapons manufacturing plants have been blown to pieces.

Iran's "shadow fleet" of tankers is no longer so reliable either. Beyond the U.S. Navy hunting down and seizing them, some aren't so eager to sail through the Gulf when missiles and drones are flying. Lloyd's List reported that "at least six ballast shadow fleet tankers made U-turns after the start of the conflict on February 28. Four tankers diverted while sailing westbound towards the Strait of Hormuz, presumably to load Iranian oil, however most of these are now drifting in the Gulf of Oman or the Arabian Sea."

The Iranian mullahs weren't exactly known as economic savants before the shooting started. Even if they retain power after the war, they're going to be broke. Rebuilding their military will be expensive, and handouts for Hamas or Hezbollah, or a nuclear-weapons program, will look like unaffordable luxuries. The war is causing economic stress for the U.S. and its allies, but it's worsening an ongoing economic nightmare for the Iranians.

LEANA S. WEN

RFK Jr. wants doctors to push healthy eating. Here's what he forgot to ask.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s latest supposed victory is persuading medical schools to teach more about food. Last week, 53 of the nation's roughly 160 medical schools announced they would revise their curriculums to support his push for at least 40 hours of nutrition education during medical training.

On its face, the idea is hard to oppose, even if Kennedy's tactics used to secure it — namely threats to withdraw federal funding — are far from ideal. The relationship between diet and health is beyond dispute. Poor nutrition contributes to conditions such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease, while healthier eating patterns are associated with lower risks of cancer, dementia and premature death.

But perhaps Kennedy should have asked why nutrition has not already been a central part of medical education. It is not because physicians don't want to learn about healthy food; rather, it is because knowing the science is only the beginning. The much harder task is helping patients act on that advice and overcome the practical barriers to healthy eating.

When I was a medical student in the early 2000s, I remember learning about diet. Lectures about the cardiovascular

system, for instance, stressed the basics of heart-healthy eating and the importance of reducing sodium intake. But the obvious follow-up questions were rarely addressed: What comes next? What do you tell a patient who lives in a neighborhood without a grocery store that sells fresh produce? Or someone who cannot afford fruits and vegetables and therefore relies on cheaper ultra-processed products?

Doctors also lack both the training and the time to help patients translate general recommendations into actual meal plans. Physicians might suggest that patients see a dietitian, but availability for such specialists is limited and securing an appointment is often difficult.

Kennedy's curriculum, which includes a list of 71 "core nutrition competencies," does not address these problems. To be fair, it proposes many mainstream topics that medical students should learn, such as recognizing nutrient deficiencies and managing food allergies. Other elements are more questionable, including recommending use of unproven dietary supplements and continuous glucose monitors, a technology favored by surgeon general nominee Casey Means, who co-founded a company promoting their use.

But diagnosis alone is not enough if there is no practical way to offer treat-