



By: Iuliia Mendel

Sights and sounds of Christmas in Ukraine—will the next Christmas be peaceful?



As my husband stokes the fireplace in our home in the Kyiv suburbs today, I find comfort in the warmth of the flames. Lighting the fire has become a ritual since the cold has crept in with the season—a romantic endeavour that now serves as the most economical way to heat our home.

Last autumn, our neighbours across the street expressed their anxieties about how they would cope with rising energy costs, which had doubled, and frequent power shortages that can last up to ten hours.

In our small village near Kyiv, we lack central heating. However, things are no better in the high-rise flats in the capital itself: during prolonged blackouts, those who live on high floors face the added burden of losing heating and even water, as pumps do not work without electricity.

Many of our friends chose to leave their flats, even if it meant downsizing to smaller homes, drawn by the promise of more heating options. Most of our neighbours have invested in generators and energy storage batteries; the wealthier ones have covered their roofs with solar panels, scrambling to adapt to a new reality fraught with uncertainties.

This evening, we are experiencing a rare moment of unity as my parents come for a visit—a testament to our family's resilience amidst the turmoil since my native region of Kherson fell under Russian occupation. Their decision to come was fraught with anxiety, particularly after yet another attempt by the Russians to storm the Dnipro River, complicating already hazardous travel conditions.

Traveling under the threat of drones

Drone attacks **targeting** civilians and transport make every journey treacherous, as the Russians become increasingly aggressive, seeking to seize as much territory as possible ahead of potential peace negotiations.

In Kherson, the celebrations are much more difficult. My parents came from a flat where there is almost never any heating or electricity, and often no water because of the constant shelling. These are the realities for millions of Ukrainians living in the south-eastern and northern regions under terrible Russian attacks.

Two-thirds of the city's residents have left due to the heavy shelling

My parents have remained steadfast in their commitment to their homeland, embodying a unique blend of patriotism and medical duty. As doctors, they provide care to patients throughout the region, often travelling to remote villages where there are no doctors left.

Despite the chaos outside, their noble, unwavering dedication shines through, a beacon of hope amid despair. Two-thirds of the city's residents have left due to the heavy shelling, leaving only about 60-70 thousand people living in Kherson, down from the previous population of more than 300 thousand.

Two Christmases

Traditionally, Christmas was celebrated by a minority of Ukrainians on 25 December, with most of us following the Julian calendar and marking the holiday on 7 January.

However, since the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine has allowed congregants to **celebrate** on 25 December if they so desired. By 2023, the Christmas celebration shifted entirely to December, with many families opting to celebrate twice. In these dark times of war, perhaps increasing the number of festivities can serve as a substitute for genuine joy lost to the harsh realities we now face.

No Christmas at our home is complete without kutia—boiled grains of wheat or barley mixed with honey, a traditional Slavic dish that has

accompanied our family's celebrations.

The war has reshaped the consumer habits of many

But, the rituals have transformed since the beginning of the war; we no longer prepare the classic twelve dishes, focusing instead on whatever brings us enjoyment.

The war has reshaped the consumer habits of many—the steep inflation and the skyrocketing cost of goods has us contemplating every meal, mindful of waste.

Yet, my mother's penchant for baking persists. She often prepares an abundance of sweets—her way of nurturing us all, which dates back to the time when she started baking for the soldiers who liberated Kherson. She still does that, with my father taking on the role of a delivery man for the Ukrainian military units. "They want home-cooked food too," my mother usually says, as if she has to justify her actions.

The sweet promise of a bright tomorrow

Gone are the celebratory New Year's Eve fireworks and the joyous carollers who once graced our streets; the vibrant ritual of singing Christmas carols, or kolyadky, has dwindled to a mere echo of memory.

Groups of singers once donned traditional costumes—sometimes even dressed as goats—and carried bright, handmade stars to symbolise the celestial light that guides us.

While this cherished tradition lived on in its purest form, it gradually transformed into residential neighbourhoods where children began to serenade their neighbours by simply going from house to flat in their costumes, seeking the warmth of the shared spirit.

With the change of calendar, new melodies emerged—carols known as shchedrivky, from

which the beloved "Jingle Bells" originated. During these festive weeks, the air was full of hope for the coming year as youngsters sowed wheat in their homes, a symbol of prosperity.

What was once a jubilant celebration now carries a heavy, sombre tone

In a whimsical manner reminiscent of Halloween, they received candy in exchange for their songs, the sweet promise of a bright tomorrow.

In western Ukraine, the tradition continues, albeit under the constraints of a curfew that dampens the nightly festivities. In Kherson, these songs have fallen silent, and Kyiv has not seen them for far too long.

What was once a jubilant celebration now carries a heavy, sombre tone, where the joyful melodies are overshadowed by sirens and the distant rumble of explosions. Each night, we brace ourselves for the wailing of air defence alarms. The echoes of laughter and celebration replaced by a pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear.

Fear of a protracted war

As we watch the fire in our hearth and the scent of burning oak fills the room, our thoughts drift momentarily from the present to the ominous future. Will today be different? Will those ominous warnings about the new Russian **missile**, dubbed "Oreshnik," prove true? Conversations across the country echo with the same apprehension—what will Putin's next move be?

Just last week, I woke up at dawn to the sound of missiles flying towards Kyiv. Meanwhile, Kherson endured another storm of bombardment, as the Russians attempted to cross the Dnipro.

Despite Ukrainian army crushing two of their brigades, the accompanying shelling inflicted

further devastation—more wounded, more dead, and countless homes damaged.



*In a season that should be filled with joy and connection, the realities of war have transformed our cherished traditions into poignant reminders of what has been lost –
A shelter in Kyiv*

My parents' window was shattered under the force of a Russian Uragan missile, and they refuse to replace it until the violence subsides, adopting a wait-and-see approach amid the uncertainty.

With the International Monetary Fund projecting scenarios for an end to the war between late 2025 and mid-2026, fervent hope is mixed with fear of a protracted war.

Every past holiday, every loved one missing from our gatherings, anchors us in the heart-breaking realities of our new world.

In a season that should be filled with joy and connection, the realities of war have transformed our cherished traditions into poignant reminders of what has been lost.

As we huddle around the flickering flames, grappling with the weight of uncertainty, the vibrant songs of our past echo faintly in the shadows. Yet, even in the depths of despair, the resilient spirit of our culture endures, a testament to our unyielding hope for a return to the jubilant celebrations that once lit our streets and filled our hearts.

We cling to the belief that one day, the melodies of joy will rise again and restore the warmth and unity that defines us.

Iuliia Mendel is a Ukrainian journalist and political advisor. She worked for several Ukrainian television channels, served as a communications consultant for the World Bank, and contributed to The New York Times. Her articles have been published by Politico Europe, Atlantic Council, Vice, Spiegel Online, and Forbes. She served as press secretary and spokesperson for Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine (2019-2021). In 2022, Mendel published the book "The Fight of Our Lives: My Time with Zelenskyy, Ukraine's Battle for Democracy, and What It Means for the World."