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# Teens get break from nightmare in Ukraine

## Minnesota nonprofit offers educational summer away from bombs and sirens.



From the left, Kira Sukhoboichenko, Margaret Linnyk and Kamilla Detkina waved flags representing their country on Thursday at the daily parade at the Minnesota State Fair.

Story by RANDY FURST  
Photo by RENÉE JONES SCHNEIDER • Star Tribune staff

Sofia Pisna heard the bombs go off at the airport in her hometown of Boryspil, 18 miles southeast of Kyiv. It was Feb. 24, 2022 — the day Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

"I started shaking," recalled Sofia, 15. "I was scared for my life. ... My mother was in a panic. It was

really scary."  
"It's like a nightmare in which you can't wake up," said Maksym Kulynych, also 15, from Poltava in east-central Ukraine. "I don't understand why [Russia] did it. It makes no sense to me."

Sofia and Maksym are among 30 Ukrainian teens visiting Minnesota for five weeks this summer, experiencing American sights and sounds as they participate in programs to challenge their thinking, encourage greater self-expression and expose them to Western institutions.

See **UKRAINE** on B4 ▶

They were brought here by Global Synergy Group, a St. Louis Park nonprofit that's raising \$90,000 to cover the teens' travel expenses and related costs.

"The purpose is leadership development — developing their capacity to take responsibility for themselves and others, confidence in their voice so they can express their point of view, and skills to build a team around them," said Irina Fursman, co-founder with her husband Richard of Global Synergy Group.

Not to mention that the trip gives the Ukrainian youths, who are staying with local host families, "a break from the war," Fursman said.

On Thursday, the teens, draped in Ukrainian flags, waved to crowds who cheered and waved back as they took part in the daily parade at the Minnesota State Fair.

"It's very exciting, it's fun," said Olha Lynnyk, 16. "I love it," added Ehor Karanchuk, 15, who said she was amazed by the number of people watching them as they passed by in a wagon pulled by an SUV.

They were welcomed to Minneapolis in mid-August by Mayor Jacob Frey and City Council Member Michael Rainville before engaging in an exercise organized by Global Synergy Group, in which they pretended to run a regional government.

After electing 14-year-old Mary Severyn as mayor, the youths selected six city council members who took their seats where Minneapolis City Council members normally sit. They debated and then approved a resolution inviting

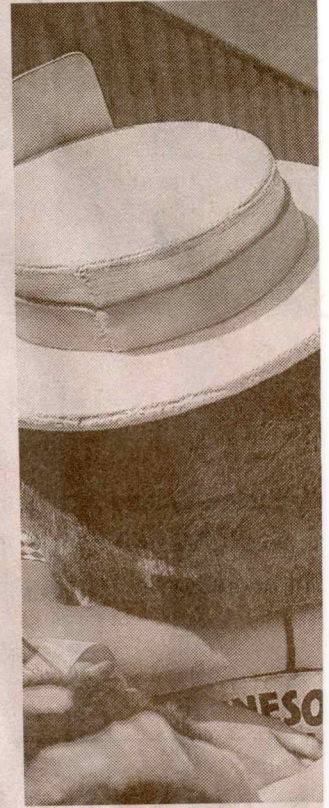
six regional Ukrainian organizations to send youths to Minnesota in 2024, rather than the current three.

"I like making decisions," Mary said. "I want to create a new leadership in Ukraine. That is my dream."

On another morning, they were welcomed to Bloomington by Mayor Tim Busse and broke into small groups at City Hall to plan and create an idyllic community, with waterways and shops and cultural venues.

"I'm really excited by this program," said Yelyzaveta Pylypchuk, 16. "It would be really great to change some things in our city and our country."

On Aug. 24, they attended a street gathering of several hundred people, many of Ukrainian descent, in north-east Minneapolis to celebrate their country's Independence



At left, Yaryna Hyrnchuk, v

# e from war, and a chance to learn



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visiting from Ukraine, hugged Fairchild the gopher mascot while walking in the fair's parade.

Day. There was face painting, speeches and music.

### Feeling empowered

One of the youths, Rostyslav "Rosty" Lysak, 16, lives with his parents in an apartment in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, about 25 miles from the Russian border. The day the war started, bombs fell within a quarter-mile of their home.

"In the first three hours of the war, our shelter was completely destroyed," he said.

The family hastily gathered some belongings and then fled by car to Chernivtsi, more than 600 miles to the east. They have since returned to Kharkiv.

"Every week there are at least two or three missile attacks and some drone attacks," Rosty said. "It's better now because of our air defense."

Fursman wanted to bring

the teenagers to Minnesota to help influence change in her native land. She grew up in Ukraine and emigrated to the United States in 2002 to marry Richard, whom she had met online.

"I lost all hope [at that time] that Ukraine would change," she said. "It was so corrupt."

Fursman's father was in the Soviet Navy when he was murdered on a remote military base in eastern Siberia when the Communist government was collapsing in the 1990s. At the age of 15, she said, she was twice jailed for writing a letter to a prosecutor on behalf of someone she felt had been treated unjustly.

Change in Ukraine, she said, "needs to start with young people."

Yosyf Sabir, a biologist and member of Stand With Ukraine MN, an organization for Minnesotans helping

Ukraine, applauded the idea of bringing the teens to Minnesota.

"This is a chance to inspire these children, to tell them despite the trauma that they are experiencing, there is a future filled with hope," he said.

Corruption in Ukraine is real, Sabir said. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine came under the control of ex-Communist oligarchs who "usurped all of the power, politically and economically and [took] control of the media," he said. Future leaders of Ukraine, he said, need skills and education rather than indoctrination in "Soviet ideas of corruption."

In interviews, several of the teens described how unscrupulous behavior had even permeated the school system. Sofia said that some students who failed school exams were

allowed to advance when their parents paid off school administrators.

The youths consider the Ukrainian soldiers to be heroes, and some said they are helping to sew camouflage netting coverings that make it harder for Russian invaders to spot Ukrainian soldiers. Several of their fathers have enlisted to fight for Ukraine.

"My dad joined the armed forces when the Russians invaded," said Yaryna Hyrnchuk, 16, who lives in Kyiv. "I didn't hear from him for a solid month. He was hospitalized after a battle."

Ukrainian  
At the First Ukrainian Society of Minneapolis, the teenagers met with a group of peace activists who opposed U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of them now support American military aid to help Ukraine resist the Russian invasion.

"Our thoughts are with you," Terry Burke told the youths. "You inspire us to redouble our efforts to fund raise and help the people of Ukraine any way we can."

The teens found the State Fair to be an eye-opener, and not just because of the crowds.

"There's a lot of food that's especially unhealthy," Rosty said. "When I saw the fried pickles, I thought, 'How was this even possible?'"

The youngsters seemed particularly happy to mingle at the Independence Day gathering with the crowd, many of whom were Ukrainian Americans.

"I feel empowered to meet so many Ukrainian-speaking people," Yaryna said.

"I'm so proud to be here and so honored that they are supporting Ukraine," said Andrew Sakhno, 17. "It's great to see so many Ukrainian flags. I feel like I'm in my Ukrainian home."

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