

Welcoming Ukrainian refugees

Suffering together

Beatriz Lauenroth

After living for many years in Austria, Italy, and Russia, German focolarina Beatriz Lauenroth currently lives in the Netherlands. As a part of the International Secretariat of Together for Europe – a network of communities and movements from various Christian confessions – there is a shared commitment to build a more united, more ‘fraternal’ Europe. The author writes here about her own personal experience in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Together with others, Beatriz has worked to welcome a number of Ukrainians to the Focolare Movement’s ‘little town’ in the Netherlands.

I was in Russia for almost two decades and love the Russian people and their country deeply. It is hard to describe the anguish I have felt in this period. In the Focolare Movement center where I currently live in the Netherlands, we have offered hospitality to people arriving from Ukraine who have fled the Russian invasion of their land.

From West to East

I arrived in Moscow in 1991 at a time when words like *glasnost* (opening) and *perestroika* (restructuring) were commonplace. However, there was also resistance and reservations about these during that new, uncertain era. ‘Gorbachev sold our country to the West’, some would say.

As Western Europe continues down its historical path of liberalism and self-determination, some Eastern European countries are still fighting politically and culturally for recognition and their identity in the new world order that emerged after the Cold War. Countries which were part of the former Soviet Union are struggling above all to claim their national identity and territorial sovereignty.

When I think of Russia, I think of its strong sense of national pride. I also think of the Russian people’s overarching sensitivity which reflects a culture that is still profoundly Christian, despite the decades-long attempts to eliminate it because it was considered the ‘opium of the people’.

From spectator to participant

In the beginning I lived with my Focolare community in an apartment which was located in a working-class district of Moscow. It had a dark staircase and extremely simple décor. However, this did not affect us because what we were living together with others in the local community was so much more powerful.

It seemed to me that during this time I was nothing more than a *Western spectator and unskilled observer* who had opinions on everything but in reality, I knew nothing about

anything. Historically, I was aware of the centuries of subjugation and humiliation which ordinary people had lived firstly under the tsars and later under the Communist Party. These experiences created a widespread sense of isolation and estrangement.

However, I also discovered the Russian people's powerful capacity to bear suffering and experienced it myself on a smaller scale.

Tomorrow is for fixing things

I learned to stand patiently in line for hours to get bread, only to endure disappointment when my turn arrived and I heard the words, "Sold out!" I also learned not to save from my weekly earnings but rather to spend it right away on what was needed. This was because those kitchen chairs or that laundry detergent might not be there the next day if we waited. I learned that what counts is the present moment: the rest we will resolve tomorrow. Creative solutions could be found for every problem with the help of friends, prayer, and the great art of improvisation.

Over time I also grew to respect the other person's freedom more - without persisting in my requests when they clearly said "No, I don't want to".

I discovered the deep religiosity and a kind of popular mysticism there that despite its weaknesses bore witness to the reality: "We are people of God". My faith grew, too. During the hours-long Russian Orthodox liturgies, I often felt closer than ever to God. And in the Tretyakov art gallery I let myself be drawn into the history of the Russian people...

More than anything else, though, perhaps what Russia taught me was a form of dialogue that consists above all in listening, in entering into the other's skin. For this reason, intense friendships developed during my time in Russia that have remained deep and enduring, even fourteen years later.

The "New Russia"

I lived in Russia for almost twenty years. Looking back, I often think that "those were my happiest years so far." I wonder why . . .

Friendships were built with many people during my time spent in places like St. Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, Chelyabinsk and in Moscow where, for example, an Orthodox priest who was a reformer because of his ecumenical openness. In all these places I saw something of the promise of this country: for a "New Russia" rooted in the Gospel, where cultural and historical roots are rediscovered and which is humbly proud of itself as a nation. It is a Russia that rediscovers its life in the Word of God, in its small communities. The plurality of this nation will resonate and it will remain open to others, open to Europe and open to the world.

Seeing a 'New Russia' from this perspective enables one to see a sovereign community of small "domestic churches" spread throughout the country. Each is present in the most diverse environments and living conditions and resists being swallowed up by political or other influences.

I came to know *this* Russia and could share my life with these men and women, old and young, parents and children. I will remain forever linked to Russia, especially now that an entire country risks isolation from the larger international community due to the actions of

some individuals. The New Russia that I came to know cannot be separated from the Ukrainian people in their search for self-determination and freedom. Without this, there can be no peace.

Ukraine

I now live in the Focolare 'little town' in the Netherlands, where we recently welcomed 42 people from Ukraine. Because I speak Russian, (like most Ukrainians), I assist with concrete needs. Above all, knowing the language allows for the possibility of sharing in their pain and in the sufferings they have endured.

I feel immersed in a raw, powerful school of life, so to speak. We speak in Russian and all are grateful to be able to speak about their tragic experiences in their own language. I've realized in a new way how much language can create a feeling of home and security.

I am shocked to hear about husbands, children, brothers and grandchildren who remained at the front and who are often unable to contact their loved ones. On one occasion Masha told the story of a young Russian soldier banging at her door and yelling: "Madam, you must immediately leave the house!" "I did not know," Masha continued, "if it was a trap. But my intuition told me to take two icons next to the door and run out the door with Tania, my daughter. Immediately afterwards - behind us - the house exploded! We owe our lives to that young Russian."

Dimitrij, the only man in the group, arrived with his wife and four children. He has a tall, imposing stature. He also saw many die around him including children and he carries those terrible memories with him. "When my little daughter smiles at me and gives me a kiss, I burst into tears because I remember all the children and fathers who are no longer able to hug one another because of the war.", he shared.

I feel helpless as I speak with these people. I cannot take away their pain. I can only listen and try to take on their suffering as my own.

But I have also seen that love calls forth love. Dimitrij, an electrician by trade, is working with a group of Dutch people to repair the solar panels on the roof of the house. Svetlana offers her skills as a beautician and Natalia is part of the kitchen team. Yesterday, I saw Masha just after she learned that one of her sons had been shot. Oksana, mother of two young children, was crying with her. Last week her husband had been killed at the front.

In seeing Masha and Oksana, I did not know what to do in that moment, but I approached them. We all embraced one another. One woman was on my left and the other on my right. In that moment the image of Jesus on the cross with arms wide open flashed before me. Who will console these sisters of mine? The words of Isaiah came to mind and I tried to repeat them: "Lord, send me. Even if I am weak: I want to be your arms."

Perhaps this is the lesson I am now learning: God gave me a heart for loving and placed people next to me to love. It doesn't matter if one is Dutch or Russian or Ukrainian. By embracing each without distinction, I can contribute every day to building peace in the *here and now*. And I know God will console us. God among us now weeps with us. But one day He will wipe away all our tears.