

Immigration attorney talks crisis in Ukraine

By Duriya Dhinojwala, member of Legal Aid's Board of Trustees

When she was 21 years old, Duriya Dhinojwala left her home in India and came here, to the United States. At the time, she was “simply a student’s wife,” in a new land, with no family or friends in this country.

And yet, she knew the day she landed in Chicago, that this was her home.

She and her husband have built their lives here. They’ve built a family, their careers. She went to law school and became an attorney.

She is an immigrant, and an immigration lawyer. And it’s with both of these perspectives that she’s been watching the situation in Ukraine unfold.

We sat down with Duriya to get her perspective on the war in Ukraine, and here’s what she had to say.

How does what’s happening half a world away affect us here?

Any conflict, any war, affects all of us because we live in a global world. Things get disrupted. For example, certain flights can’t fly to other countries from the U.S., because we can’t fly over Russia to get there. Gas prices have gone up. The stock market has fallen. There are many consequences of the war that affect us at the local level, and that will continue to affect us.

And among those most affected, of course, are the Ukrainian-Americans here in northeast Ohio, who are afraid for their friends and family members living half a world away.

What lessons can we learn from what's happening in Russia and/or Ukraine that we, as Americans, should be mindful of?

Of course, there are the people in Ukraine. They are focused right now on safety, picking up arms, fleeing, protecting themselves and their families. In war, civilians always bear the brunt of it. We all are watching that play out in the news segments, the images we see, and the accounts we read from reporters on the ground.

We also shouldn't forget the Russian civilians, who have been caught up in someone else's war. There are those who don't support the war, but who are living with some crushing economic realities as a result of it. And they may desire to leave and find a new home, a new way of life somewhere else, too. Whenever there is a conflict, there are people on both sides who are affected.

On a personal note, I have a friend from Ukraine, whom I've done some pro bono work for. Like my family, she and her husband are naturalized U.S. citizens. They have three children, all born in the United States. For the past year, I've been working with her to bring her parents here from Ukraine as green card holders. The next step for them is to go through processing at the U.S. Consulate in Ukraine.

That process, of course, was disrupted when the Consulate closed.

Their interview is now scheduled in Frankfurt. But she's obviously extremely anxious to get her parents out of Ukraine, and she's concerned about her friends and family.

I always think that history teaches us lessons, but we don't learn them at the time it's happening. It takes us time to process things.

We see this play out in our own lives -- learning from our past. We just have to deal with the day-to-day situations. We walk ahead, and maybe in a year or two, we look back and say, What did I learn from that?

War is just a huge, huge example of this. But while civilians are the ones who get caught up, it's the leadership that has to go back and reflect. I don't know that you or me learning the lesson helps anyone. It's the people in power who need to learn the lessons.

What is the world we want to live in? That is the question we all have to ask ourselves. And then we each just play our own role in trying to help create that.

As an immigration lawyer, what has been top of mind for you as this conflict has been unfolding?

As an immigration attorney, the role I can play is to help people adopt this country as their own, the way I did years ago. Whether refugees fleeing conflict are seeking temporary protected status in the U.S., or those seeking legal immigration under the employment-based visa process, or those in the U.S. facing deportation back to Ukraine have had their proceedings halted, or people like my friend are trying to help their loved ones get here safely -- this is my role to play.

It can be difficult for people who have never left their home to truly understand what that is like. This is my country -- my adopted country. We have a large support system and friends here. My children are first-generation U.S. citizens. I'm definitely sure we're better off here than we would have been in India.

We fit here, but it's never 100 percent. But I know I'll never go back to India, because I'll never fit in there, either. But that's okay. It's a choice we made, and we are happy here.

People forget what a unique country the United States is. I see that as an immigration attorney each and every day. We are still the number one destination in the world where people want to come. We have our squabbles, but I am proud and grateful to be an American immigrant, and that I get to help others become the same.

So, if you find yourself asking what role you can play, it may be as simple as: be there. Offer your thoughts or prayers and hold your fellow humans' hands. Just be there for those directly impacted. And be kind and welcoming when you meet someone new or different from you. Learn their story. And do what you can to help.

That is the America I have known and loved.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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