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McEntee in scramble to strengthen security as threats grow

● Plan to fast-track new legislation

CÓNAL THOMAS AND ALI BRACKEN

The Government is racing to protect the country's maritime security ahead of Ireland hosting the presidency of the Council of the European Union this summer.

Defence Minister Helen McEntee is bringing forward new legislation as a matter of urgency to bolster the ability of the Defence Forces to police national waters.

Ms McEntee and her department are working to ensure the Defence Forces have the necessary enforcement powers at sea, given growing threats.

The legislation will form part of a broader overhaul of Ireland's approach to maritime security.

Former TD Cathal Berry, who was a former member of the Defence Forces, told the *Sunday Independent* the Government is "scrambling for a solution".

"We're in damage-control mode. This should have been done years ago," he said, describing the country as a "sitting duck" from a naval security point of view.

Mr Berry said he welcomed the forthcoming legislation, but stressed that assets are needed. "When you have so few assets, it's very important that they're co-ordinated. With the drone incident [during the recent visit of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky] we saw a lack of co-ordination from an operational point of view. "You can have all the legislation you want, but if you have no assets, it's a highway to nowhere."

Assets outlined in the Government's €1.7bn Defence National Development Plan, announced last year, include drones, new helicopters, an enhanced naval fleet and major capability upgrades across land, air, maritime and cyber domains.

Security analyst Declan Power said

the Naval Service needs to be given "primacy" in policing Irish waters, and added that the new maritime strategy was "long overdue".

Government sources have stressed that the biggest challenge to building up maritime security is the recruitment of members to the Defence Forces, and the speed at which Ireland can acquire the necessary capabilities.

Ms McEntee wants to see the 7,756 personnel currently employed across the Defence Forces increased, and has set a target of 850 recruits for this year.

Her cabinet colleague, Justice Minister Jim O'Callaghan, is also facing a looming crisis, with gardai now considering implementing work-to-rule at key events.

The Garda Representative Association (GRA) had a meeting with Garda Commissioner Justin Kelly in recent days over a long-running pay dispute.

At its annual conference in Westport, Co Mayo, in April, the GRA will decide on what action members could take.

"Nothing is off the table, and there could be a motion about 'blue flu'. There is an appetite for action," said a source with the GRA, which represents more than 11,000 frontline gardai. Any disruption could potentially have an impact during the EU presidency.

As part of the latest defence drive, the Government will also explore plans to either lead or take part in wider monitoring operations along with other countries, with the aim of protecting critical undersea infrastructure in the North Atlantic. Greater investment in radar and sonar technology is already being considered.

Ms McEntee said the Defence National Development Plan has been expedited ahead of its 2028 deadline, "with a specific focus on the

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MY JOURNEY HOME REFUGEE KSENIA SAMOTIY RETURNS TO UKRAINE, FOUR YEARS ON



'When I left, this field was nearly empty. Now there is a sea of graves'

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Ksenia Samotiy travelled from Dublin back to her home city of Lviv. Photo: David Conachy

Brendan O'Connor

To a man with a hammer, every child is a nail

The news doesn't often make me cry. Journalism hardens you a bit to news. So I was surprised, walking along with my headphones in, when I found my chin scrunching up and my mouth turning down, pouty. Then I was wiping away a tear. And then I rang my wife, and it was when I started talking that I broke, just a little. "Are you hearing this? What they did to those children in Kerry?"

The Kerry Camhs scandal is, of course, very complicated on the one hand. But it's also very simple.

One part of it that is very simple — the part that perhaps hit me — is that children with intellectual disabilities are still regarded by too many in the medical field as a problem to be solved. Shut them up and make them go away. Zonk them out, put them in the corner — then they won't be a problem any more. That'll solve them.

The children inquired into in North Kerry Camhs with "moderate" to "profound" intellectual disabilities had no access to non-medical interventions. Drug them up and shut them up.

What would be the point in trying to talk to them? Or to listen to them? They can't talk properly anyway. People haven't time for this.

"Moderate", "profound", "mild" — the understandable but horrible categories the system uses to classify our children, as if grading potatoes.

But it's complicated too. Because we all know kids with autism who might get some peace from agitation, and some sleep, and whose family might get some peace and some sleep, with a bit of judicious medication. And who can't get next or near a psychiatrist.

Equally, we know parents terrified at the very mention of Camhs.

And then we all know that kids in general are being over-medicated, that even parents with education and means are paying good money to medicate their troubled children, because they see no other answer.

And then there are parents without the education or confidence to question the experts. It's clear there were many parents like this in Kerry, who deferred to and trusted doctors, even as they saw the child they used to know slip away, never to come back in some cases. Doctor knows best.

And then we see that word again: "moderate". What did "moderate" harm mean to those children? For some, it meant they stopped having friends, stopped leaving the house, stopped talking to their parents after they found out what happened to them. An eight-year-old was suicidal.

So hence, maybe, the tears. Crying is about powerlessness. Because I have nothing useful to say here. I don't know the answer. Do you? The system doesn't work. The people in it are too busy to do real healing.

Children are simple too in one way. They just want us to look after them. And in other ways they're so complicated, each one of them a different story, a different set of reasons they ended up in distress, a different answer and different help needed.

But it sounds like we're a million miles away from that kind of help.

In Kerry, a man had a hammer as his only tool. So every problem was a nail. And the system assumed he was right.



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‘As I hug my dad, all my confusing feelings retreat’

Four years ago this month, **Ksenia Samotiy**, then 19, fled her home in Ukraine as war loomed and found refuge in Ireland. Her father stayed behind in Lviv. Last week, she made an emotional return. Photos by **David Conachy**

There’s a weird comfort in knowing you can survive something you’ve been terrified of, even when in a better world you would never have to experience it at all.

Air-raid sirens freaked me out as a child. Once or twice a year, one would suddenly go off. The adults in the room kept their cool, explaining they had heard something on the radio that morning about a precautionary test. But I would freeze — not just physically, but emotionally. In that minute, I would feel like the wailing siren had taken all the air in the city hostage. Nothing could circulate, nothing could move. I felt powerless. There was absolutely nothing I could do, just hope that it would stop soon.

And it would. A minute later, it was over, and normal life resumed. The grown-ups went back to their mysterious responsibilities. And I sheepishly tried to recover from the inner panic I had felt moments before. Then the

other thoughts would start. What if one day it wasn’t just an exercise? What if the danger was real and there was no point in hoping it would go away after a minute? Would I see or hear the rockets through my bedroom skylight? Would the bombs drop the way they do in World War II movies?

Since dawn on February 24, 2022, these are no longer hypothetical questions for any Ukrainian. And since returning to my hometown of Lviv last week, I also know the answers.

The city I’m returning to feels different after four years of war. It’s not just the ever-present cold — it’s -15C as I step off the train — but the knowledge that life does go on, even through war, air raids, death and electricity blackouts. That Ukrainians are resilient. That the air will still be there, no matter what. That I too can cope with this, at least for a few days.

But I’ve got ahead of myself. Let’s start with coming home.

Back in Dublin, I spent a lot of time mentally preparing myself for

this trip, though there aren’t many manuals about how to come home to a country at war, to a city that is regularly being hit by long-range ballistic missiles. There is no guide to dealing with all the emotions that come with returning to a place that is so familiar yet so different to the place you left four years ago.

Three days before the war started, my parents decided that my mum would take me and my siblings out of the country “just for a few days”, until the uncertainty passed and the threat of war was over. Better safe than sorry, but surely the Russians wouldn’t actually invade. None of us could possibly have imagined that the war would run for four years and counting.

I return last week in the middle of the night, but the snow makes everything look brighter. The drive through familiar streets brings back scenes and sequences from a past life: first dates; walks with grandparents; my lovely nanny taking me to lessons in ballet/French/fencing — or whatever else my current obsession was; showing the town off to friends

from elsewhere. Although at first glance not much has changed, every memory from “before” underlines just how much time has passed.

As the car turns on to my street, everything looks so familiar, but I feel like I’m separated from it by some invisible curtain. As if I lost the rights to the feeling of being almost home.

The code to the door at the bottom of the building hasn’t changed, yet it takes me three tries before I key in the correct sequence. I can’t let it faze me. I focus on walking up that familiar spiral staircase. No amount of fear or overthinking can hold me back now.

My dad opens the door and I’m home.

As I’m hugging my dad — who I haven’t seen in nearly a year — the rest of the world, and all my confusing emotions, retreat into the background. It’s not that they disappear, but, for a minute at least, everything else doesn’t *matter* quite so much.

And then I take stock. I see every detail in my dad’s face. I look around the apartment. It feels the same, even if it looks different. For the past four



years, my dad has lived alone here. It has become not just a playground for the interior designer in him, but also a place of huge emptiness and loneliness that he has tried to fill as best he can.

I look down and see the same carpet I was standing on when we said goodbye almost exactly four years ago, quietly crying and hoping everything would blow over in a few days. The joy of being home and the pain of everything that has passed here are tightly intertwined. Four years is not a lifetime, but it is long enough for everything to change.

And then the pain recedes again. I see a small, black figure appear from around the corner, wearing an expression that says: “What is this racket? Can’t you see I’m trying to sleep?” It’s our cat, Gabi — my dad’s one remaining housemate and companion. I hug her and hug her, until she is sick of it and breaks away, but happily. She doesn’t go far and I reassure myself that the connection is still there.

Sleep does not come easily that first night. The floor creaks in familiar places, the pipes knock faintly, and somewhere outside a car door slams in the cold. Every sound carries memories.

I’d like to say that my room is exactly the same as when I left it, but that wouldn’t be true. In the months following the invasion, when people were fleeing eastern regions and coming to Lviv unsure what to do or where to go next, my dad hosted a number of families. They would stay for a few days or weeks, catching their breath and making plans before moving on.

These short stays have left their mark on the apartment. There’s a hairbrush on my dresser that I don’t

recognise. The anti-stress colouring book on the table has been enriched by some child’s drawings. There are cosmetics in the bathroom that don’t belong to me, my mum or my sister.

I’m glad this place was a safe space for someone in my absence. In a way, in those first few months of war, my father did what several families in Ireland did for me: offer a safe harbour away from home.

Yet, as I lie in my bed in the early morning, trying to reconcile the girl that left with the woman that returned, I do cry. Because this place was supposed to be *my* safe harbour. I was never supposed to leave in the first place. At least not the way I did.

Morning arrives softly, filtered through snow. Coffee waits on the table. My father, who was never the best sleeper, says he didn’t want to go back to sleep “in order to fully live through the joy” of having me home. The realisation of what he has just said makes my eyes water and my heart sink, but I hope I’ve hidden that well.

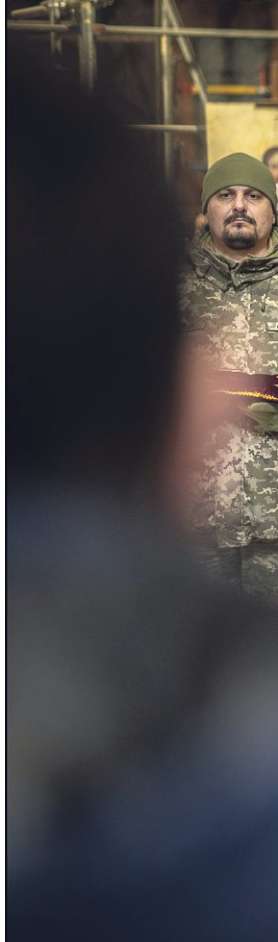
We chat, but we operate cautiously at first: him protecting my memories of a routine we have not lived together for a long time; me trying not to ruin the routine he has established in my absence.

Conversation begins with practicalities such as electricity schedules and the technicalities of the washing-machine-sized power bank he has bought to see him through the many hours of blackouts. We move on to people: neighbours who have left, neighbours who have stayed. But we dance around the deeper stuff. What’s the point of talking about loneliness if there’s nothing you can do about it?

The family exists now as a map rather than a household. One child in



Left: Ksenia and Oleh at the Memorial of Ukrainian Heroes in Lviv; soldiers attending a funeral





● Clockwise from far left, Ksenia Samotiy in Lviv at a damaged military vehicle that now serves as a memorial; Ksenia and her father Oleh enjoy a meal of borscht at home; photographs of local soldiers who have died in the war displayed in the Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church; Ksenia with Oleh; and, inset, reunited with her cat Gabi. Photos: David Conachy

one country, another elsewhere. Birthday songs sung over videochats, New Year’s celebrated across time zones, Christmas dinners conducted alone at separate tables. My siblings, my mum and I even attended my grandma’s funerals via FaceTime. The heartbreak of that moment will stay with me forever. But what is there to do?

For my father, the family being on the map rather than at the dinner table has meant learning to cook for one. For my visit, he spends the day cooking my favourite version of borscht (everyone’s borscht is different, but I really only like the one my dad makes). As I’m having the second plate, I look at the man sitting next to me and I wish I got to hug him so much more often.

He has endured nights of sirens and navigated blackouts alone. Even when it’s been calmer, he has had to go through life without the background noise of his children.



He does not complain. We all did what we had to do. Really, he would not have it any other way. But that knowledge doesn’t make it any easier to talk about.

When I’m finally brave enough, I go outside. That bravery has nothing to do with physical danger. After all, most of the time, it’s no more dangerous outside than inside. It’s just that leaving the house means I will have to acknowledge that there’s more to the war than my own pain.

As I walk, I look into people’s faces, trying to understand what they feel. Are they “tired of this war”, as so many news outlets want the world to believe? Are they exhausted, angry, indifferent? Frankly, I don’t see any of it. What I see is people persevering.

So much of life goes on as normal. Coffee shops are full of customers, students are smoking outside lecture halls. New shops have popped up. Kids are on their way home from school, shouting and laughing loudly as they attempt to play snowballs with the crusty snow.

Lviv itself feels both familiar and expanded. It was always a city with a strong sense of itself. But now there are new faces and unfamiliar accents. Kharkiv. Mariupol. People from cities that are no longer safe — or from cities that are essentially no longer there. Lviv has become a city that carries other cities within it. It has become a refuge, and a reminder of loss.

There are many more uniforms than I remember. Men, and occasionally women, wearing camouflage is no longer an unusual sight, but something that is woven into the fabric of ordinary life. They move through the city with a quiet concentration that makes it impossible not to imagine

that their thoughts are still on the front line.

At coffee shops, you can “buy soldiers a coffee” — meaning you pre-pay a soldier’s bill, so that the next one who walks through the door can be shown a little appreciation.

One way or another, life continues, but it does so with regular interruptions. The first time I witness a funeral procession, I almost miss it. Traffic stops with little ceremony, conversations pause. Three hearses appear, escorted by police, and people step out of their cars and kneel on the frozen pavement. There is no spectacle in it, just a shared understanding of what is owed.

I hesitate for a fraction of a second, aware that I am still reacquainting myself with the choreography of a city at war. Then I kneel too. The cold seeps through my clothes. I think how cold it must have been in the trenches where these men have spent many a day and night.

Photographs of young men are on the windshield. One catches my eye for being extremely good-looking. He looks like someone who should be enjoying his life, not being escorted through his own city in mournful silence. They all do.

When the procession passes, engines restart and life resumes, but a sensation remains suspended in the air. The next day, it happens again. And again. It is not a singular event. Funerals happen every day. The city’s central square features banners proclaiming “Lviv says goodbye”. Every day they are updated with the faces, names and stories of the men and women who are being buried that day.

As I walk to the cemetery, I know what I am expecting to see. I have

When the sirens inevitably sound, we run to the shelter down the street

spent many hours telling people about the memorial, showing photos, explaining the scale of what is going on. Yet when I turn the corner, it’s like someone has punched me in the chest and I can’t breathe.

When I left, the field was nearly empty. Now there is a sea of graves for all the local men and women who have died in the war, replete with flags moving restlessly in the winter wind. The guard tells us that a few days ago, this burial ground ran out of space.

As I walk through the endless rows, looking at the photos of the heroes buried here, I recognise familiar faces and see dates of birth that force me to do arithmetic that I’d rather never have to do. The grief that overwhelms me cannot be contained by words.

I see so much sacrifice in the lives ended and the lives forever changed. Parents sitting on the graves of their children and kids leaving drawings on their fathers’ graves. This is only the most central of five cemeteries in Lviv alone. Seeing the scale of it, and picturing this multiplied across the country, is almost unfathomable.

At the same time, I know that all the men and women laid here to rest knew exactly what they were fighting

for, what they gave their lives for. And standing here, I also know why Ukraine cannot and will not give up.

As I return home that evening, my dad prepares me for a difficult night. Another round of peace talks is due in Geneva the next day, and the Russians like to start their negotiations by bombing Ukraine with everything they have got.

Not for the first time, he takes me through the detailed plan of action. If the sirens go off, we get up and get ready. We monitor the variety and direction of the incoming danger through various online channels. If something is heading towards western Ukraine, we go to ground level. If there is even a hint that it might be ballistic missiles, we run to the proper shelter down the street.

Many have given up on further disrupting their sleep by walking to shelters. Instead, they take precautionary measures at home: closed off windows; positioning themselves at least two thick walls away from the outside (which often means the bathroom); sleeping dressed and ready to go.

My father, however, believes it is better to be safe than sorry. That night, when the sirens do inevitably sound, we run to the shelter down the street and spend the following three hours there.

Sitting there cold and tired, you have a lot of time to think. I remember the girl I once was, frozen in panic during those precautionary tests, imagining catastrophe as something cinematic and immediate. I think she is still in me, scared to be caught outside by an attack from the air.

But that fear no longer has the same power over me. As you live through war, whether for years or in my case

just for a few days, you eventually learn there are things worse than death, let alone the death that so often happened in my nightmares.

Next morning, I have about seven espressos to get myself going. I meet some friends, I have lunch with my dad, and then I do some shopping and walk around reminding myself how much I love Lviv. I imagine a time once the war is over when I can show my Irish friends and wonderful host families around the place. Introduce them to the city that made me and point out the places that so often feature in my stories.

It’s been four years and I know it will be another while yet. But one day I will come back here and my childhood home will once again be the safe harbour I so desperately want it to be. I will be able to walk around without thinking about the sharp contrast of life and death. We’ll honour our heroes and we’ll owe them all for the fact Ukraine remains free and independent, but life will be *normal* again. But it’s going to be another while yet.

When my dad takes me to the train station, we’re in traffic and it’s 9am. The radio suddenly goes quiet, the cars stop and everyone gets out. Every morning, there is a minute of silence for fallen heroes. Every morning, Ukraine stops everything to remember those who make our being here possible.

There are tears on my face as I hug my dad and get on the train. As the platform starts moving, the city behind me is grieving and breathing at the same time. As am I.

Ksenia Samotiy is a regular columnist with the Irish Independent and Sunday Independent



The funeral of a soldier in Lviv; (right) Mayor of Lviv Andriy Sadovyi pays respects

