

Ukrainians in Buffalo fear potential Russian invasion of their ancestral home

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Bohdan Cherniawski gives his view of how local Ukrainians are dealing with Russia on the Ukrainian border threatening a possible war and invasion.
John Hickey / Buffalo News

Like many Ukrainians living in Buffalo, Sophia Kenn worries about the 130,000 troops Russia amassed on the border of her homeland.

"I am just praying that we are all going to be safe and have peace in the world," said Kenn, who emigrated to Buffalo 30 years ago

from Ukraine. "We are all hoping. Nobody wants to have casualties – on both sides."

Kenn stays up late to monitor international news and the latest reports from Ukraine, where clocks are set seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time.

While many Americans worry about the effects of a war on combatants, civilians and its impact on Europe, local Ukrainians are absorbed knowing their ancestral home, where friends and family live, are under threat of attack by Russia at any time.

They say the buildup of troops brings to mind Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimean peninsula eight years ago. Like then, some residents are sending medical supplies to their ancestral home as one way to demonstrate solidarity against the Russian threat.

Several Ukrainians are planning to pick up medical supplies in Cleveland on March 19, which they'll repackage and send to medics to deal with potential casualties on the front, Yuri Hreshchyshyn said.

Hreshchyshyn, who grew up in Buffalo, is president of the Buffalo chapter of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America. He called the threat from Russia a prolonged one.

"It's been a grind for the last eight years," Hreshchyshyn said. "I'm worried over the long term. Russia started this proxy war, put in combatants without Russian insignia in both cases and took territory.

"I think the intent continues to – if not outright take the country by force militarily – to subvert it using all kinds of hybrid warfare techniques," he said.

The U.S. government's response has been effective in standing up to Russian President Vladimir Putin so far, Hreshchyshyn said.

"I think President Biden has done a fairly good job in coalescing the nations of Europe and getting bipartisan support here," he said. Hreshchyshyn blames Putin – not the Russian people – for what's happening.

"The Russian people are not our enemy," he said. "There are many families that consist of both Russian and Ukrainian roots even here in Buffalo."



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Alexandra Savka, who was born in Ukraine, gets emotional talking about the threat of war in her native country. Her mother, a brother and many cousins are there. "My heart is bleeding," Savka said. "I cannot sleep."

Savka, who emigrated to Buffalo in 1994, at the age of 35, also stays up late talking to family members and

getting the latest news.

"They are very patriotic, but afraid for their future," Savka said. "They want to fight for freedom because they know they are doing the right thing and have to protect our land for future generations."

Bohdan Cherniawski, a Canadian of Ukrainian descent living in Clarence, drew a parallel to World War II.

"It's the largest buildup in Europe since World War II, and if there's a war there will be a massive loss of life," he said.



Helen Cherniawski, Bohdan's wife and a native Buffalonian, compared what's happening to "a bad dream."

She hopes Putin is just playing a cat-and-mouse game to see how many concessions he can obtain from the West before retreating. If he doesn't, Ukrainians are prepared to stand their ground, she said.

"Knowing the scrappy Ukrainians as I do, they are not going to give up Ukraine without a fight," she said.

Helen Cherniawski at the Dnipro Ukrainian Cultural Center on Genesee Street.

John Hickey / Buffalo News

Myron Deputat, who grew up in Buffalo, also hears concern in the voices of family and friends he speaks with in Ukraine. "Everyone is tense," Deputat said. "The situation is grave, obviously. Our leaders are the ones who, hopefully through diplomacy, can bring down the level of escalation." Deputat said the threat posed by Russia doesn't reflect what Russians or Ukrainians want. "I know Russians in Buffalo and abroad in their country and no one wants war," he said. "It's not in anyone's best interests."