

'IT'S BAD EVERYWHERE'

Ukraine Natives Worry For Family, Friends Who Remain As Russia Invades

By JILLIAN LYNCH and IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Feb 25, 2022 Updated Apr 18, 2022

In the middle of the night, Alex Lagoda was stirred out of his sleep to disturbing news. His native country had just been invaded, his friends and family told him.

"I was awake after 1 and 2 a.m.," the Harrisonburg man said. "I got a lot of messages from Ukraine that it started already, it [was] happening."

Russian forces began bombing targets in cities around Ukraine early Thursday morning. Lagoda and other Ukrainian immigrants who now live in the Shenandoah Valley have expressed concern for family and friends back in their home country and frustration about the conflict that has turned lives upside down.

"If I could describe [how I feel] in one word, I would say angry," said Artem Kalinchuk, of Rockingham. "We have this bully, a big nation, attacking a smaller nation trying to live in peace and mind their own business."

Some local Ukrainian immigrants are finding varied levels of success in contacting families and other loved ones.

Kalinchuk's family lives in his native town of Vinnytsia, in west-central Ukraine. He said his family hasn't reported much military action, and he hasn't yet heard about his wife's family, also in Ukraine.

"They are totally against this invasion," Kalinchuk said.

Many of the Valley's Ukrainian immigrants have friends and relatives scattered throughout different cities and regions of the country, which is commonly referred to as the breadbasket of Europe for its expansive farmland and large grain output.

Ben Stupak, owner of Dynamo Transport, a Mount Crawford trucking company, is one of these people.

"Yesterday when I heard this news, I couldn't sleep," Stupak said. "I started to call my relatives."

With his voice cracking, he said he had family near the capital Kyiv and an aunt and uncle in Kharkiv, another eastern city that's been heavily bombed in the Russian offensive.

"It's very hot over there, even right now," Stupak said. "We saw through [video] our aunt, an hour ago, they can hear bombs and missiles and all that. They're sitting in the bathroom hiding right now, they cannot go out in the street."

His uncle is sheltering in a separate house, with Stupak's elderly great-aunt. She can't walk very well, and it's not safe to go out in the street.

"There is no food, no gas over there. Like, it's bad everywhere," Stupak said. "There is nowhere they can go."

Kalinchuk eschewed President Joe Biden's address scheduled for Thursday afternoon. He said it's difficult to listen to political talk knowing there are innocent people in harm's way.

“At this point, I don’t think the Ukrainian community is very happy with Biden’s response,” Kalinchuk said. “In my opinion, it’s been nothing but words, and words do not deter the dictator in Russia.”

Members of the community said it will take international support to deter Russia. Actions, not words, are what President Vladimir Putin will respond to, they said.

“We are so close [culturally]. We can understand each other, we watch the same movies, we listen to the same music,” Stupak said. “There is no ideology [behind Russia’s actions].”

Max Volokitkin was born in Russia in 1991 — just before the fall of the USSR — to a Russian father and mother from Kazakhstan, another former Soviet Republic east of the Caspian Sea and south of Russia. Volokitkin works at International Foods, a grocery store on the south side of Harrisonburg.

“We shouldn’t be doing this or resorting to this,” he said, echoing the sentiment of how much the residents of former Soviet Republics have in common — both culturally and economically.

“There’s arguments between people — brothers and sisters — like when the 2014 conflict happened,” he said.

In late February to early March 2014, there was pro-Russian upheaval in Ukraine that culminated in Russia’s annexation of Crimea following the Euromaiden protest against the Ukrainian then-government’s attempts to draw closer to Russia.

Two of Volokitkin’s co-workers at the store on Thursday are Ukrainians who have lived in the U.S. for years.

Karina Savulyak, 20, first came to the U.S. at the age of 1 and grew up, but has spent much of the last couple of years back in her native country doing missionary work in places such as Kyiv, where fighting is underway or near. One such place she worked was an orphanage for disabled kids. Savulyak said she worries for their safety.

“To me, they were like my own kids,” Savulyak, of Harrisonburg, said.

Like many others in the Ukrainian immigrant community, she uses apps to help stay connected with family and friends back in Eastern Europe. On Thursday afternoon, Savulyak pulled up videos on her phone shared by friends and family of people gathering to pray and recordings of the sounds of distant explosions.

Aliesia Nezda, of Harrisonburg, followed her family to the U.S. from Ukraine in 2015.

“Everyone’s praying in their homes,” she said.

Leaders of Valley congregations that include Russians and Ukrainians have also spoken about the importance of prayer as a response to the conflict.

“Everybody is shocked, and it’s a tragedy,” said Yuri Suslaev, a pastor at First Russian Baptist Church in Mount Crawford. “We’re also still trying to pull ourselves together, and we’re praying for the people.”

“It’s truly a tragedy because we’re all one family, and we have people that have family in both places and people that have already escaped from [Russian and Ukrainian conflict],” Suslaev said.

He said they are hoping and praying for a speedy and peaceful resolution, even though the current prospects for such an outcome seem dim. He said similar videos and texts about prayer have been circulated by members of the church community and their family in Ukraine.

“I just keep praying and hoping that God will protect our country,” said Andriy Bogachuk, a deacon at Slavic Christian Church in Port Republic. “Nobody [else] can protect the country, not even the army.”

Julie Katykhin, 32, is a Ukraine native who lives in Rockingham County. She said she has a unique perspective since her husband is Russian.

She pointed out the problem did not emerge overnight and emphasized how complicated the political situation is.

“There’s nothing much to say,” Katykhin added, in a text message. “Just heartbreaking that innocent people involuntarily become collateral of politics.”

Stupak said he feels like it could be anyone in their place.

“I’m so glad that I’m here, but I know I didn’t deserve to be here, not even my kids,” Stupak said. “We are not better than those people.”