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BREAKING NEWS NEWS

# Russian invasion leaves Ukrainians in Orlando in shock, fear

By NATALIA JARAMILLO  
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Christina Kuzemirka lights candles at the St. Mary Protopresbiterian Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Apopka on Thursday, February 24, 2022. Christina, who is Ukrainian and moved to the United States 5 months ago, has family members, including a brother, that are still in Ukraine. She lit the candles before a vigil was held at the church for the victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She said, "My heart is in Ukraine." (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel) (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

Iryna Vashchuk Discipio, president of Revived Soldiers of Ukraine, a nonprofit dedicated to funding rehabilitation for Ukrainian soldiers, lives in Orlando but spent Thursday fearing for her brother, who still lives in their home country.

Her brother was a Ukrainian soldier before an injury prompted him to retire two years ago. But after Russia's early-morning invasion Thursday, rest and recuperation will have to wait, Discipio said.

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“It’s bad,” Discipio said. “My brother and most of my team are in Ukraine fighting in Kyiv.”

After months of U.S. intelligence warnings, Russia invaded Ukraine about 5 a.m. local time Thursday. This came after Russian President Vladimir Putin said he would begin a “special military operation” in a video released on Russian media late Wednesday.

Ukrainians living in Central Florida said Thursday that the invasion had left them in shock. Local community leaders spent the day coordinating plans for vigils and rallies to show support for their homeland as reports of explosions and fighting spread.

Discipio said she currently has two wounded Ukrainian soldiers receiving medical care through her organization in Orlando and one in Jacksonville. The war in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014 but Putin’s recent acceleration of hostilities still came as a surprise, she said.

After the news broke, Discipio **launched a fundraiser on Facebook** to buy supplies and drive them through Poland into Ukraine, as it’s the only way into the country right now, she said. In less than a day, her support drive had collected more than \$55,000.

Banks and store closures, along with massive traffic due to Ukrainians trying to flee, will make getting aid into the country difficult, Discipio said. And even the flood of online support she attracted will take time to benefit those suffering back home, she said.

“The problem with Facebook fundraisers is that they take a month and a half to pass you the money,” Discipio said. “In a month and a half, we aren’t going to have a country.”

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted as the invasion began that it was a full-scale attack on many Ukrainian cities.



In a speech on Thursday President Biden announced stronger sanctions against Russia while also saying that the U.S. will not send troops into Ukraine. The sanctions include controls on Russian exports that will have a “severe” impact on the Russian economy, Biden said.

“Putin chose this war,” Biden said. “And now he and his country will bear the consequences.”

Central Florida officials also denounced the invasion.

“A career in law enforcement taught me that the only thing a bully understands is strength,” U.S. Rep. Val Demings, D-Orlando, said in a statement. “The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an outrage.”

Said Orlando police Chief Orlando Rolón, “We join in concern and heartache for the citizens of Ukraine and to the brave men and women of their military who are fighting to protect their sovereignty against unprovoked aggression.”

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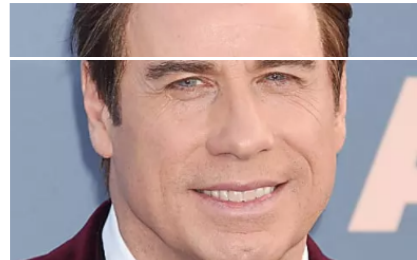
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## 'It's a different world now'

Iryna Sytnyk, a fitness instructor who moved to Orlando seven months ago, said her younger sister and mother are still living in Ukraine, just outside Kyiv.

"My sister heard the bombs but got up to go to work. Then, when she was walking to work, her job texted her saying to stay home," Sytnyk said. "They haven't left the house since then other than to wait for two hours to get cash."

Sytnyk said her sister and her 10-year-old niece got to the bank and were surprised at the line and the limit on cash. The gas pump had a similar hours-long line and limit on how much you could buy, Sytnyk said.

"I was scared and surprised when I woke up to my sister texting me at 6 a.m. that the invasion started," Sytnyk said. "It's a different world now."

UCF marketing senior Krystyna Bekhvandi, whose family lives near the Kyiv airport, found out about the first explosion at 10 p.m. She called her dad to seek confirmation. After a couple of tense hours of waiting, he replied, "It's happening. War started."

She's still worried about her loved ones, especially given their proximity to the airport, critical infrastructure that could be targeted for attack.

"My mom is saying tonight is going to be like hell."

Bekhvandi, who moved here in 2017, is glad to have found a supportive community in Orlando. She said it is important for everyone to understand the current situation extends well beyond Ukraine, affecting "the world's community."

"The most important thing is to be united against cruelty," she said. "Russia is not our enemy. Our enemy is their leader, who is also Russia's enemy."

Sytnyk said a friend living in Kyiv and her young son have been sheltering inside the metro station for five hours. Her Russian friends are also upset at Putin's invasion and worried about the U.S. sanctions hurting them, she said.

FEEDBACK



Iryna Sytnyk's friend was inside a Ukrainian metro station for five hours sheltering from the Russian invasion with her son Thursday. (Iryna Sytnyk)

"It's impacting people who live normal lives because their dollars are going so low," Sytnyk said.

But Konstantin Ash, an assistant professor at UCF's School of Politics, Security and International Affairs, said Biden's sanctions will be more likely to stop Putin if their effects are felt by the Russian people.

"I know that sounds wrong but that would encourage the Russian population to fight Putin on this invasion," Ash said. "Putin's approval rating within his own country would fall."

Ash predicted Putin's invasion will ultimately fail.

"I think this is going to end with Russia withdrawing because no one can hold off insurgent fighters forever," Ash said.

At the rally, at Lake Eola, Kateryna Gallego walked alone wiping tears.

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Gallego was the first to warn her family

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that Russia had begun its invasion.

"I couldn't stop crying the whole night," Gallego said. "They didn't even know it had started when they got up in the morning."

Gallego felt angry because she feels the U.S. and NATO didn't do enough.

"The sanctions aren't going to stop a man like Putin," Gallego said.

Ivanna Polusmak, who moved to the U.S. from Ukraine when she was 22, said she couldn't smile as she walked alongside her Ukrainian friends making one loop around Lake Eola.

"I'm just very sad but I hope that Russia underestimated Ukraine," Polusmak said.

Polusmak believes [Friday night] will be worse than the initial invasion because there are now Russian troops on the ground.

"The Russian soldiers won't spare civilians," Polusmak said. "I'm scared for [Friday night]."

Rally organizer, Vasyl Boichook had a rally downtown in early February, but this time 10 times more people showed up because now people believe in the invasion, he said.

"I think at this protest we got what we came for," Boichook said. "We need more support but are thankful for the action."

*Daniela Vivas Labrador contributed to this report as part of a partnership between the Orlando Sentinel and UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and Media.*

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