

Ukrainian crisis threatens peace and democracy in Europe, observers warn

PHILADELPHIA (CNS) – Ukrainian-American Catholics warn a Russian military buildup on Ukraine's border poses a grave threat not only to that nation, but to Europe and democracy itself.

"It is a question of life or death for thousands, who will be massacred by an escalated invasion," said Archbishop Borys Gudziak, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia. He said he expects 3 million to 6 million refugees to flee to Western Europe.

Speaking Jan. 16 by telephone with CatholicPhilly.com, the news website of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the archbishop described Ukraine as a "bulwark of freedom" against what he called an authoritarian regime that is "moving toward totalitarianism" under Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"If Russia succeeds in subjugating Ukraine, chances are the process will continue in the Baltic countries, Central Europe and beyond," Archbishop Gudziak said.

For Ukrainians, "the reality of war ... is not a new story," Archbishop Gudziak said. "Our priests (there) have been burying war dead regularly for over eight years."

Eugene Luciw, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, echoed the archbishop's concerns.

Putin's demands – including that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet states – show that he wants "to reestablish the sphere of influence the Soviet Union had

(by bringing) back the rest of Eastern Europe,” said Luciw, a member of Presentation of Our Lord Ukrainian Catholic Church in Lansdale, Pennsylvania.

In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, with Russian-backed separatists proclaiming “people’s republics” in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The move came 23 years after Ukraine gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, of which it had been a part.

Clashes, shelling and sniper attacks have become common in eastern Ukraine since the incursion. The United Nations reported nearly 1.5 million internally displaced people in the country in 2021, with more than 3,350 civilian deaths and more than 7,000 civilian injuries between April 2014 and March 2020.

In recent months, about 100,000 Russian troops have amassed at Ukraine’s border, with as many as 175,000 poised for a military operation in the coming weeks, according to U.S. intelligence officials.

A Jan. 14 cybersecurity attack, regarded by observers of the region as a prelude to military action, crippled approximately 70 Ukrainian government websites with an onscreen message warning users to “be afraid and expect the worst.”

The breach, which occurred hours after diplomatic talks between Moscow and Western allies stalled, showed signs of Russian involvement, said Kyiv’s state security service.

The online assaults are far from unprecedented, Archbishop Gudziak said.

“The energy grid, businesses and political institutions have been subjected to malware and cyber warfare,” he explained. “And all this because Ukraine wants to be free, and Ukrainians insist on their self-determination.”

Although “the reality of war has become part of the fabric of life,” he said, “the prospect of escalation into war is leading people into a kind of deeper anxiety.”

The U.S. provinces of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great released a statement that expressed “great concern” for the safety of 165 members of the order’s Ukrainian-based Holy Trinity province.

“We are equally concerned for a number of other religious communities in Ukraine,” the congregation said.

Leaders of Manor College, a Catholic institution in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, released a similar statement.

“The mounting Russian forces on Ukraine’s border have the community throughout Manor College very concerned for the safety and well-being of families and individuals in Ukraine as well as the peoples of all of Eastern Europe,” Jonathan Peri, president, said in the statement.

Economic and political sanctions against Russia are not necessarily sufficient to deter “what appears to be an imminent, large-scale invasion of Ukraine,” Peri wrote. “Although we see the wisdom in responsive transactional diplomacy, it is imperative that the United States stand firm in communicating and enforcing its resolve to protect the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine.”

Former college trustee Leonard Mazur told CatholicPhilly.com his family members in Western Ukraine feel as if they are “living with a comet about to collide with (them).”

Archbishop Gudziak described the logic behind Russian aggression as “quite simple.”

“Ukraine is one of the democratic success stories after the fall of communism. And a democratic Ukraine with a free press, a growing economy, vibrant ecumenical relations, a political

system that is modified by the vote of its citizens, and which is found on the borders of Russia, is a great threat to the system that President Putin has set up," he said.

As "a witness to the freedom that Putin has crushed in Russia," the archbishop said, Ukraine offers a visible alternative to a system that, "while not classical communism," nonetheless "rejects basic Christian anthropology" and "the teaching of who is a human being."

"Our faith, our Church teaching, the holy Scriptures, which are the basis of Western democracy, have inculcated in us a deep awareness of the fact that we are children of God," he said.

That dignity "cannot become a function of some goal," he continued. "You can't kill millions of people leading humanity to some kind of utopian future, as the communist system has promised."

Paradoxically, said Archbishop Gudziak, the "colonialist, imperialist plan" of Putin is being endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church, with which Mikhail Gorbachev restored relations in 1988 while he was general secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party.

Putin himself professes to be devoutly Orthodox, but Archbishop Gudziak said the alliance between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state is essentially "a fight for grandeur and a fight for territory" based on a nostalgic desire for "past imperial glory," both "political and ecclesiastical."

Archbishop Gudziak also said the Russian people themselves are "being fed a fable" that Western nations seek to humiliate Russia, which in turn must "flex (its) muscle" and "recover what it has lost," with Ukraine being "goal No. 1."

The propaganda is also designed to "sow doubt in the minds and

hearts” of Westerners, causing them to dismiss the Ukrainian crisis as too complicated to understand, said the archbishop, urging Christians in particular to “look at reality in light of the Gospel and know the facts.”

Donating to the U.S. bishops’ annual collection for the Church in Central and Eastern Europe helps “the people suffering from the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine,” he said.

Above all, Archbishop Gudziak stressed prayer is crucial in resolving the Ukraine crisis.

“We Christians recognize that God is the Lord of history and his grace has effected miracles in human affairs,” he said. “The crumbling of the Soviet Union 30 years ago is one example. That happened not through war, not through armed conflict. It happened peacefully and, I would say, miraculously.”

Basilian Sister Ann Laszok, director of religious education in the Ukrainian Catholic Church’s Eparchy of St. Josaphat, based in Parma, Ohio, said she prays “constantly for all our brothers and sisters in Ukraine who are facing the threat of aggression against their sovereignty and independence.”

Her prayers transcend all borders.

“I also pray for the aggressors, that they may see the light of Christ and de-escalate in order to reinstate peace to all in eastern Ukraine,” Sister Laszok said.

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