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Ukrainians in Syracuse pray Trump won't abandon their homeland in the middle of a war

Updated: Feb. 26, 2025, 6:03 a.m. | Published: Feb. 26, 2025, 6:00 a.m.

Nataliya Kolesova, a Syracuse University graduate student, said people need to turn to history to understand the relationship between Ukraine and Russia. "We need to have clear distinction – who is aggressive and who is suffering from that aggression," she said. Ryann Phillips | rphillips@syracuse.com

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By Ryann Phillips | Contributing Writer and Rick Moriarty | rmoriarty@syracuse.com

Every morning Nataliya Kolesova calls her mother, who is still in Ukraine, to ask how her night was.

"They send all these missiles every, every single day. And no one is protected," Kolesova said, a doctoral student at Syracuse University who's lived in the United States for eight years.

Kolesova's fears and anxieties about the three-year-old war took a new turn last week.

A month into Trump's return to the White House, Syracuse's Ukrainian community is shocked at the president's statements falsely blaming Ukraine for starting the war. And they worry his statements mean the U.S. government will abandon Ukraine in its war for survival against a much larger Russia.

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Across the world, Trump's message shook alliances as a new round of peace talks got underway with Russia and without Ukraine.

In Syracuse, home to one of the country's largest Ukrainian communities, Trump's stance felt deeply personal for people who still call loved ones in Ukraine every day, for those trying to get family members out of the war zones.

"My hope is that President Trump has a plan because I don't want to believe that he's ruining our country," Kolesova added. "The United States has always been a beacon of democracy. That's why I'm here."

Several Ukrainians and Ukrainian Americans who live here spoke with syracuse.com | The Post-Standard about their worries and hopes over continued U.S. support for Ukraine.

A surprise to the world

Syracuse surgeon Gennady Bratslavsky, co-founder of the Ukraine 1991 Foundation, stands in front of ambulances donated to Ukraine. Provided photo 2022

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Every year since Russia invaded his former homeland, Syracuse surgeon Gennady Bratslavsky has returned to Ukraine to operate on badly wounded Ukrainian soldiers.

During his last trip a few months ago, air raid sirens sounded in Kyiv every night to warn of incoming Russian missiles, just as they did during his previous trips. This time, one of them landed just a mile from the hotel where he was staying.

Like other members of Syracuse's Ukrainian community interviewed for this story, Bratslavsky was reluctant to say how he voted in the election because of the nation's polarized political atmosphere.

But he said frustration with former President Joe Biden prompted many of his fellow Ukrainian Americans to vote for Trump. They hoped, he said, that Trump had some secret plan to end the war quickly.

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"While the prior administration was supportive of Ukraine, the military aid provided to Ukraine was just enough to slow down the Russian invasion," said Bratslavsky, chair of urology at Upstate Medical University.

Now, said Bratslavsky, co-founder of the Ukraine 1991 Foundation, they worry Trump will abandon the fight while continuing to spread misinformation.

"I do not believe that he did not know that Russia started the war," which has delivered ambulances, trucks and medicines to Ukraine. "There is no question that Russia started the war."

Still, Bratslavsky is holding out hope that Trump's statements do not mean the U.S. is changing sides in the middle of a war.

"My only hope is that his rhetoric is an unusual and non-traditional attempt to act as a mediator," he said, "although this statement has certainly been a surprise to everyone in the world, other than those in Russia who have been brainwashed by the Russian propaganda."

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Trying not to panic

Lida Buniak, president of the Syracuse branch of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, joined others at rallies in Washington, D.C., on Saturday. They gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial before walking 40 minutes to the Russian Embassy.

A Ukrainian soldier, in the U.S. for medical treatment, spoke. He lost both arms and his sight during the war, according to Buniak.

Like Kolesova, Buniak said she's concerned but trying not to panic over the new administration's position on Ukraine.

"I believe President Trump is just trying to feel things out," she said. "He's a dealmaker."

Buniak added, though, that any peace talks must include Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whom Trump falsely called a dictator.

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Sisters' reunion on pause

In Syracuse, a recent high school graduate who's been here seven years said she's still trying to get her sister from Ukraine to the U.S.

"She's living there," said the young woman, who asked not to be identified for fear of being found online speaking out about the geopolitical tensions. "I'm calling her, and I'm hearing those sirens every day."

Getting her sister to the U.S. has become harder since Trump took office, she said. Last month, the Department of Homeland Security paused the Uniting for Ukraine program, which allowed Ukrainian refugees to temporarily enter the U.S. if they had a financial sponsor.

Meanwhile, she said, her family and friends continue to support Zelenskyy. She, too, is trying to remain optimistic about U.S. support.

"I really hope that American people are going to help us in this situation, that they're not going to listen to Trump," she said, "because Trump is not saying the truth."

Holding out hope

Mark Temnycky, a Ukrainian American who holds degrees from Le Moyne College and Syracuse University's Maxwell School, said Trump's statement came as no surprise to him, given Trump's previous attacks on Zelenskyy and complaints about how much the U.S. is spending on aid to Ukraine.

"Unfortunately, there are people who believe these statements, and it's unfortunate that the U.S. president is repeating various Russian talking points about the war," said Temnycky, a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center.

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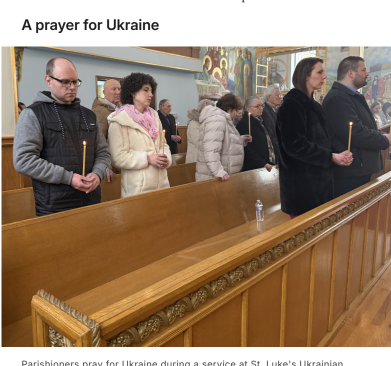
Greg Lisnyczyj, whose parents came to Syracuse from Ukraine after World War II, echoed that point. He said Trump was clearly repeating Putin's "spin" on the war.

"I think it's unfortunate that those words were said," said Lisnyczyj, who operates a mobile marketing business in Syracuse. "This is a true example of good vs. evil. We cannot be sugarcoating any ideas or anything coming from Russia and Putin. They blatantly invaded Ukraine three years ago."

Nevertheless, Temnycky said many of his family and friends in the Ukrainian American community are not giving up hope that the United States will continue to support Ukraine.

"They're concerned about the recent statements, and one thing that a lot of members of the community have been doing now is writing emails or calling their congressional representatives as well as their two senators, explaining why this is important," said Temnycky, whose grandparents emigrated from Ukraine in the 1950s. "And a lot of them have received positive feedback."

A prayer for Ukraine



Parishioners pray for Ukraine during a service at St. Luke's Ukrainian Orthodox Church near Syracuse on Sunday. They sang, prayed and lit candles to honor people in Ukraine. Ryann Phillips | rphillips@syracuse.com

Outside St. Luke's Ukrainian Orthodox Church near Syracuse, the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine stood at half-staff Sunday morning.

About 60 people gathered for a special prayer service to mark the third anniversary of the war, which has killed tens of thousands on both sides.

The Rev. Mykola Andryshkiv held a cross in his left hand, bells in his right. He prayed for all the people suffering in Ukraine. Some people in the church have family and friends still there.

"Amen," he said during the service, which he delivered in Ukrainian and English.

Church members blew out their candles. Andryshkiv asked them to take the candles home.

Say a prayer for Ukraine, he said in Ukrainian. Say a prayer for those still there.

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Got a tip, comment or story idea? Contact Rick Moriarty anytime: Email | X | Facebook | 315-470-3148.

Ryann Phillips is a graduate student at Syracuse University and a 2025 Newhouse Fellow.

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