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Disbelieving But Fretful, Kyiv Hears Nearing Drumbeats of War

By Daphne Rousseau for AFP

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Ukrainians attend an open military training for civilians in Kiev. **SERGEY DOLZHENKO / EPA / TASS**

Every hour, from dawn til dusk, Ukraine's soulful national anthem echoes across Kyiv's expansive Maidan Square, just as it did in 2014.

Back then, it was a rousing call to join the masses braving the bitter cold on the square during Kyiv's historic — and ultimately bloody — pro-EU revolution. Today it is playing again as the former Soviet republic girds for all-out war.

Russia has amassed more than 150,000 Russian soldiers on Ukraine's borders, according to U.S. estimates.

Russia's parliament has approved sending its "peacekeepers" into parts of Ukraine's east that Moscow has recognized as independent statelets and President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric is sounding militant.

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But on the spring-like streets of sunny Kyiv, no one stops to look at the giant screen showing pixelated images of the country's yellow and blue flag, the anthem blasting from speakers.

"Everything will be fine," said Zoya Rozuman, a cleaning lady, her blue outfit partially unzipped on a warm afternoon.

"I don't think the Russian people, those who live around Moscow and Vladimir, want our sons to die. And we don't want their sons to die."

Instead of worrying about the war, the 59-year-old plans to spend the coming weeks tending her garden.

War footing

The anthem started playing on Tuesday, when Russian lawmakers sitting 800 kilometers (500 miles) from Ukraine's eastern front in Moscow unanimously authorized the use of military force abroad.

In the Kremlin, Putin is coy about his plans, telling reporters that the deployment of Russian forces would "depend on the situation on the ground."

But the nearing drumbeats of war have many in Kyiv worried, even it they do not think that the Ukrainian capital itself will come under attack.

"We are afraid of war, but we are ready to fight, because this is a defensive war," said Atantoliy Tarasenko, 74.

Like many others, the pensioner still seethes that his Western-backed government "did not lift a finger" to keep Russia from annexing Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014.

Now, Moscow has recognized the independence of two eastern Ukrainian regions that began waging a deadly insurgency at around the same time.

The government in Kyiv says it is ready to fight, with the defense ministry warning of "hardship" and human "losses."

Students and workers have started receiving emailed instructions from their schools and bosses about how to prepare for the worst, including what to stockpile and where to find the nearest bomb shelter.

Anger at Putin

Oleg Koras, 38, has joined a "territorial defense" unit in Kyiv.

But despite going to training twice a week, he acknowledged feeling slightly helpless.

"If the bombs start falling on our city, what can you do but jump in a shelter," he said, before adding: "But then we will know how to respond."

Besides nerves, a palpable level of anger is rising at Putin, who has tried to keep Ukraine under Russia's influence for the past two decades.

Putin's tactics sparked two pro-Western revolutions — one in 2004 and the other a decade later — and are bringing the two countries dangerously close to war today.

"He is not someone you can reach deals with," said Maksym Dizhechko, a 41-year-old lawyer.

"He is like this huge kid in school who beats everyone up, and who only understands things when he gets punched back."

The sentiment was shared by Ksenya Baliy, a 31-year-old DJ.

"I still feel hatred toward that man. I don't think he deserves to be where he is," she said. "I want him to disappear as soon as possible from our beautiful planet."

Yet the cultural and familial links between the two neighbors linger, rising up above the fury at political figures.

Volodymyr Khroviy, 39, identifies himself as a "Russian from Ukraine," with his family living on the other side of the border.

But his home is Ukraine, Khroviy says, "and if they come with their tanks and weapons, I will certainly not be pleased to see them."

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