

The Western World Is in Denial
Opinion by Veronika Melkozerova - The Atlantic



Sergey Bobok / AFP / Getty

KYIV, Ukraine—It's been 19 days since Russia started the unprovoked war in Ukraine. I have changed my location three times, but I am staying in Kyiv to take care of my elderly parents.

Every day I see Russians getting closer to my city from the northwest. I have been sleeping on the floor since February 24, when Vladimir Putin ordered his troops to invade my country.

I am lucky. Others have lost their homes, or have no water, food, or heating. Russian troops have already killed several thousands of Ukrainians, including more than 80 children.

Every night I close my eyes thinking I might be next on Putin's death-toll list. Nowadays you never know where the Russians will drop their bombs—onto a residential building, a kindergarten classroom, a monastery, or a maternity hospital.

Every day Russians commit more and more atrocities in my country. Only after Putin unleashed hell on our lands did the West finally unite in support of Ukraine, providing more weapons. Finally, the collective democratic world squeezed Russia with unprecedented sanctions.

However, this has not stopped Putin from bombing and destroying Ukraine. If anything, his resolve has only strengthened. The Kremlin knows that Russians will feel the full impact of sanctions in a month or so.

It also knows that Europe is so dependent on Russian fossil fuels that such harsh sanctions likely won't last long. I already see more and more tweets sympathizing with Russians, saying those people do not deserve the limitations imposed against their nation for Putin's war.

This is the same nation where 58 percent of people support Putin's actions in Ukraine, according to the [latest polls](#). Putin doesn't kill anyone in Ukraine with his own hands; other Russians are doing that. The Kremlin has been planning to invade and destroy the identity of my country, and to do it quickly, and the Russian people are backing it.

Russians are making this calculation because they believe they can afford to. The Kremlin knows that the West, despite its public admiration for Ukrainian courage, has left Ukraine alone on the actual battlefield. Westerners would rather help Ukraine with weapons and money but stand aside.

People in these countries are scared of World War III. I understand the fear—but don't you understand that World War III may have already arrived? Ukraine has been begging NATO to establish a no-fly zone, to protect us from Russian bombs, or at least give us fighter jets so we can better protect our skies. So far, the answer on both is "no."

Meanwhile, more than 2,187 people have died because of Russian attacks in Mariupol alone, according to officials there. Russian attacks from the air have almost destroyed Volnovakha, Kharkiv, and many other towns in Ukraine.

Ukraine's authorities, who first pressured world powers to impose preventive sanctions, then pushed them to cut Russia from the SWIFT international-payment system, then pushed them to cut Russia from the rest of the world, have been asking how many more people should die for the skies to be closed over Ukraine.

What I see from NATO is a version of this message: The war in Ukraine is not our war. We will come forward only if Russia attacks an alliance member or bombs our convoy to Ukraine.

People of Europe and the U.S. have been pressing their governments to take a proactive position. They sent donations. They sent thoughts and prayers. The governments, especially in Europe, are still very cautious when it comes to making any move that might provoke Russia.

Leaders such as Emmanuel Macron still seem to believe that dialogue can persuade Putin to stop his atrocities. For many in Europe, Russia's petroleum and gas are more valuable than Ukrainian lives.

I understand the Western governments' position. I also used to say "This is not my war" while watching Russia's atrocities in Aleppo. I also sent my thoughts and prayers to the people of Syria, also destroyed with the help of Putin. And back in 2008, I was so young that I did not even care to think about Georgians, whose land was also devastated and divided by Putin. And before that Moldova, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Libya, and other African countries.

Those were not my wars. But in 2014 the war came to my country. Back then, the world continued to cooperate with the aggressor Russia, deepening its dependence on Russia's fossil fuels. Western leaders were willing to turn their back on the war, certain that Putin would never dare to attack the powerful collective West.

We in Ukraine also did not believe that Putin would dare to launch a full-scale invasion. But he did. Because in Moldova, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, Russia got away with its crimes. It did all this after the infamous “reset” of relations with the United States, and the United States allowed it. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on March 3, the West will “get over” its “hysteria” about Ukraine too.

I am afraid he might be right. And I am afraid of what that will mean for the rest of the world. Russia can't let itself lose in Ukraine and has enough resources to keep its economy alive. Putin has made clear that he doesn't see Ukraine as a sovereign nation and that he would rather destroy it than let it exist as a free European nation.

Many, if not most, Russians [share his view](#). Even many who claim to be liberals have tended to see Ukraine as a “special country,” meaning their country.

So maybe by saying “This is not our war,” the world's leading democratic countries are simply showing that they are in denial about what will happen next. What if World War III has already started? Perhaps it began in Georgia, Moldova, and Syria.

Perhaps in the future, the invasion of February 24 won't be seen as the start, but as a key turning point.

It is obvious that Russia will not stop its crusade against democratic values and common sense in Ukraine. Russian propagandists have been talking about which country will be invaded next. Ukraine's Defense Secretary Olexiy Danilov has said it might be Lithuania, a NATO member. Will NATO act only after Lithuania is invaded?

I don't know. And I don't call upon the peaceful nations of Europe to join our war either. All I can ask is that you think about your beloved cities and the people who might one day become Putin's next targets.

Ukraine used to be known as a country of beautiful Soviet modernist architecture, featured in numerous Western music videos. It used to be a country of beautiful landscapes, cool restaurants, and humming rave culture. It is a country that has hosted two Eurovision Song Contests and one European soccer championship. A country that has become a battleground for U.S. politics and led to an impeachment scandal in America.

Kyiv used to amaze people with the beauty of the Dnipro River and impossibly long summer nights; Lviv dazzled people with its restaurants; Mariupol offered a vibrant mix of heavy industry and a lazy seashore-vacation mood. Kherson had awful roads but offered beautiful nature, pink lakes, the Black Sea, and plenty of homegrown food as compensation. Kharkiv, an education center, has hosted hundreds of international students and kept the special pride only a country's first capital can have. For me, Kharkiv was a city of mathematics and large squares.

The Ukrainian people always welcomed guests from across Europe. We were so proud that the world had finally become interested in what we had to offer after the Maidan Revolution of 2014. Now the whole world is watching Putin destroy our land and murder our people: Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kherson, and now, the analysts say, Kyiv will be next.

Sanctions work, but they have not stopped Putin's rockets falling from the skies. Now, after Georgia and Syria, those deathly rains have come to my land. What if they come to your land next?