

Europeans Are Terrified of Putin's Nuclear Button

Across Western Europe, people are taking the Russian president's threats very seriously.

Russian President Vladimir Putin placed his nuclear forces on high alert on Sunday, citing NATO's "aggressive" response to his invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, Russia's allied Belarusian government warned that Western sanctions on Russia would instigate the third world war. Europe's governments made no official response to these threats.

But many European citizens—including those in Western Europe, far from the Ukrainian front—can no longer hide their anxieties. Putin is stoking their deepest fear: a continental war that could include nuclear weapons.

Nuno Gomes was busy shuffling espresso cups under a coffee machine and serving customers at a café in Brussels when explosions bellowing out of a TV broadcast of Ukraine's invasion clashed with the cacophonous chatter of coffee drinkers. "It is unbelievable," said the 21-year-old Portuguese barista, one of the millions of Europeans who believed war happened elsewhere, far from their backyard. "I am very scared of Putin," he added. "If Europe sends soldiers to Ukraine to help the Ukrainians, then Putin will attack us. Belgium will be the first because it's the center of Europe."

Meanwhile, Kristof Cresens sipped a local beer at a pub in the beer town of Hoegaarden, Belgium. "I'm sorry my words are harsh, but he is an asshole," Cresens said of the Russian president. He is furious at Russia's attack on Kyiv but is uncertain of what Europe can do to stop it. He voiced a deep-seated fear of the Russian president, a fear that is holding back Europe from taking more assertive action. As a social worker and nurse at an institution for people with disabilities, Cresens oozed concern for Ukrainians, but like Gomes, he too is terrified of the man with a "big army" and among the largest stock of nuclear weapons. "I would maybe, ideally, want Europe to send troops to Ukraine to fight Russia, but if we do, then Putin might attack us," Cresens said.

At a trattoria in Cologne, western Germany, Christina Wienand, Katja Lössl, and

Philip Gutowski, friends, were about to order lunch. “He is a dangerous man. He has dangerous weapons,” Wienand said. “If Germany joins the war, it will become bigger and bigger, maybe a world war.” Gutowski flipped through a menu in a centrally heated restaurant as hail lashed the cobbled streets outside on a cold winter day. An uninterrupted power supply and centrally heated indoors are among Europe’s many comforts. “Ukrainian politicians are right to describe Germany’s support thus far as a joke, but it’s hard because we heavily rely on Russia for gas,” Gutowski said. “It is a difficult situation.”

Dozens of Europeans in several European nations reiterated the same sentiment when Foreign Policy asked them if Europe was doing enough to deter the Russian president and prevent Ukraine’s fall. Even though there was general acknowledgement of Ukraine’s relatively smaller army being unable to push back Russia’s massive military enterprise, no one advocated deploying their own troops against Russia. They backed sanctions, but not everyone is ready to pay more for an alternative source of gas at higher rates. Anger against Putin in Europe is palpable—but so is fear.

Most insist that Europe must not provoke a nuclear-armed Putin. “Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history,” Putin said in a televised address a day before Russian military columns rolled down the streets of Ukraine and airstrikes struck Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital. “Even after the dissolution of the USSR and losing a considerable part of its capabilities, today’s Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states,” he added.

Nearly everyone Foreign Policy spoke with described Putin as a dangerous man with nukes aimed at Europe. They see him as someone insane enough to destroy their cities and way of life at a moment’s notice. They would like to help Ukraine, but their top priority is ensuring war does not come home.

According to a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, 78 percent of Europeans had no confidence in Putin’s leadership. But it wasn’t until last week’s invasion that Western Europeans thought of him as a direct security threat. Russia seems to have now replaced the Islamic State as the greatest threat in the hearts and minds of Europeans.

As Putin unflinchingly wields Russia’s nuclear threat, the Europeans that Foreign

Policy spoke with were not in favor of their military alliance doing the same. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian very cautiously reminded Russia that, “the Atlantic alliance [NATO] is also a nuclear alliance,” as it includes the nuclear-armed states of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Estimates suggest that Russia has about 6,000 nuclear weapons while the United States has about 5,500.

Experts believe Russia is aware of Europe’s aversion to armed conflict in general and disdain toward the use of nuclear weapons in particular. They say Russia’s threat accomplished its goal of scaring Europeans. Russia’s nuclear might is the biggest reason the United States and its European allies have ruled out deploying boots on the ground. Desperate to save his people, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has appealed, in vain, for immediate entry to NATO, which would oblige the alliance to come to Ukraine’s defense. “I’ve asked 27 leaders of Europe if Ukraine will be in NATO. I’ve asked them directly. All are afraid and did not respond,” he said in a video released over the weekend. “We were left by ourselves. Who is ready to go to war for us?”

The United States and its European allies insist they are determined to do everything short of sending troops. Not only has the West come together to impose a ban on Russia using the SWIFT payment system but also a ban on Russian aircraft using European airspace. Moreover, the European Union said it would finance the provision of weapons needed to stop Russia to Ukraine.

After Britain’s shoulder-fired missiles and U.S.-made Javelin anti-tank, guided missiles were spotted on the battlefield and reported to have aided Ukraine, Germany’s chancellor reversed the country’s position of not sending weapons to a conflict zone and decided to supply 1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 Stinger missiles to Ukraine. The Dutch have announced it will supply 50 Panzerfaust 3 anti-tank weapons and hundreds of rockets, and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington will provide \$350 million in additional military equipment to bolster Ukraine’s defense.

Over the weekend, reports emerged that Ukrainian soldiers and fighters in Kyiv have had success in holding onto the capital despite massive Russian bombardments and ground infiltration. Ukrainians have displayed a will to fight and, so long as they continue to receive arms from the West, they might have a chance to at least bleed Russia enough to encourage Putin to rethink his invasion.

“Before the full-scale Russian attack began, I would have said (and did) that no amount of Western weapon assistance could be enough to enable Ukraine to defeat the better-equipped Russian force,” said Olga Oliker, the International Crisis Group’s program director for Europe and Central Asia. “I am no longer certain that is true, but I’m not convinced yet that it is not. Russia has not put all of its capabilities forward as yet. But the Ukrainians have fought bravely and impressively while Russian forces have not fought as well as I expected. Western states can and should continue to supply Ukraine with both lethal and nonlethal capabilities.”

U.S. and European sanctions are no match for Russia’s military might and are unlikely to dissuade Putin and his cohorts from withdrawing from eastern Ukraine. Aiding Ukrainian fighters with weapons’, by contrast, may halt Putin’s march into Kyiv—but it will certainly heighten fears among Europeans of a nuclear response.

Anchal Vohra is a columnist for Foreign Policy and a freelance TV correspondent and commentator on the Middle East based in Beirut. Twitter: @anchalvohra

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