

EAU CLAIRE — For Andrii “Andrew” Sabazov, life changed forever on Feb. 22, 2022. On that day, Russian troops started their invasion of the eastern part of his home country, Ukraine.

Tensions had been high between Russia and Ukraine for years, especially since 2014 when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula, recognized internationally as part of Ukraine. Sabazov said that intelligence from the United States had warned Ukraine of the possibility of further military action, but many people in Ukraine did not take the possibility seriously.

“Just days before the war began, President Zelenskyy assured the public that there would be no invasion and that the country was safe. However, he later admitted that he knew the invasion was inevitable but didn’t want people to leave the country, as empty cities would be easier to capture. I can’t even imagine how many lives his words cost,” said Sabazov.

Sabazov’s home city of Kharkiv, in the years since the start of what Russia refers to as its “special military operation,” has been especially hard-hit by the Russian military.

“It breaks my heart to see Kharkiv suffering so much. It’s the city where I grew up, full of memories and familiar places,” said Sabazov. “To see it destroyed like this is painful. I constantly worry about the people who are still there. Many of my friends and acquaintances are still forced to live there for various reasons, but it becomes harder and harder each month.”

“It was unsafe to stay in Ukraine with my family,” he said. “We started to look for a new place [to live]. ... [My wife] wrote letters, she sent it through a lot of charity organizations and one organization responded to us and invited us to the U.S.

“It was a good decision to move here. The U.S. is a great country and Chippewa Valley is a great region for living.”

Sabazov was amused that a lot of people in his new country did not know much about Ukraine, including where the country even was.

“Some of them thought it’s in Africa or something like that,” he said with a laugh. “In Ukraine, people live pretty much the same way as here because it was a shock for me that people here ask, ‘Do you have supermarkets? Do you have a grocery store in Ukraine? Do you have TV?’ I explained to everyone that we live the same life as here.”

Sabazov was pleasantly surprised by the people he has met in his time in the Chippewa Valley. He has worked as a truck driver here in the States, and said that the people he has met in Wisconsin have been nothing but courteous.

“I was surprised in a good way,” he said. “It seems like they really want to help you if you’re in trouble. In Ukraine, it doesn’t work out that way.”

He said that, despite what Ukraine is currently dealing with, he can understand some of the sentiment people may have against supporting the war efforts there.

“There are a lot of problems in the U.S. [which need] to be solved, but there is not enough money for that, and I understand people who disagree with the policy.”

Sabazov himself has had concerns that funds meant to help his native country fight may be getting misappropriated, and he appreciates being in a country where he has the ability to state that concern openly.

“We are here in the U.S., in a free country, and everyone can say whatever they want,” he said. “In Ukraine, I cannot say that type of thing.”

Sabazov’s family came to the U.S. under the Uniting for Ukraine program in 2022. The government program provides a pathway for Ukrainian citizens and their immediate family to stay temporarily in the country, with the option to renew their status.

“I’m really happy where I am now. I have a job, and my wife has a job. We pay taxes. We enjoy our life. We want to raise our child here. If the U.S. gives us the opportunity to stay here, we will gladly stay here,” he said. “In August of this year, our stay was extended for another two years, until 2026. We’ve also applied for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), but we’re still waiting for a decision.

“We understand that the political situation in the country is complicated right now, but if it turns out that America is no longer interested in us, we will not stay here illegally and will try to find a country that welcomes people like us.”

But that said, he hopes he can stay, and he knows that he, and other people making the United States their home, have plenty to offer to make the country a better place.

“The U.S. is a country of opportunities, and you can get everything — really everything — that you want, but you have to work so hard on it,” he said. “And with immigrants who are coming to this country, you are making the country stronger, and you’re working so much, and you’re very appreciative of what the country is giving you.”