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MSNBC: The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell

LWLOD

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[22:00:00]

ALI VELSHI, MSNBC HOST: Well, thanks to St. Jude for that, but thanks to you and the people around you who are helping these children who are in desperate need of health care and cancer treatment. Yuliya Nogovitsyna is a program director at Tabletochki Charity Foundation in Lviv, Ukraine. Thank you for the very, very important work that you are doing and please stay safe.

That does it for us tonight. I'll see you again tomorrow morning for a special edition of "Velshi." I will once again be reporting live from Hungary at the Ukrainian border. It's time now for THE LAST WORD with Alicia Menendez who is in for Lawrence O'Donnell this evening. Good evening my friend.

ALICIA MENENDEZ, MSNBC HOST: Hey, Ali Velshi. Thank you so much, as always, for keeping us focused on the most vulnerable. That last block, wow.

Now to the latest in Ukraine. For the first time since Putin's invasion began two weeks ago, airstrikes are being reported in western Ukraine, close to Poland. Four people were killed when two cities in the area came under heavy fire. NBS's Cal Perry is in the area and he's going to give us the latest in just a moment.

The Russian assault on Mariupol shows no signs of abating. Civilians who remain trapped inside the besieged city are being forced to scrounge for food and fuel to survive the frigid temperatures. The deputy prime minister of Ukraine estimates more than 1,300 people have died there.

And a raid sirens have been heard throughout Kyiv and there has been fighting on the outskirts of town as Russian ground forces move to encircle the city. But tonight, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, remaining fiercely defiant in a video posted today from the streets of Kyiv.

He urged his people to be strong, to hold on, to fight and to give all their strength. The international community took new steps to financially punish Putin and his enablers for his invasion. The Treasury Department announced a new round of sanctions targeting Putin's inner circle and other Russian elites.

President Biden also calling for an end to permanent normal trade relations with Russia today. The move will remove Russia's status as a most favored nation and hit Russian exports with new tariffs, further isolating the country economically. Today, President Biden said this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: Revoking PNTR for Russia is going to make it harder for Russia to do business with the United States and doing it in unison with other nations that make up half of the global economy will be another crushing blow to the Russian economy. It's already suffering very badly from our sanctions.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: And Russia's attempts to gaslight not just their own people, but the world over its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine was on full display at the United Nations today, including the Russian ambassador claiming that the hospital in Mariupol that Russia shelled, this maternity hospital that you are looking at right

now with your own eyes, had not been destroyed at all. I want you to listen as U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield shoots down those claims from the floor of the U.N. Security Council.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

LINDA THOMAS-GREENFIELD, U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS: We're not going to let Russia get away with lying to the world. Russia is failing in its quest to create an alternative reality. In fact, not even Russian diplomats can keep their propaganda straight. Just yesterday, the Kremlin spokesman said he didn't have clear information about the Russian forces who fired on a maternity hospital.

Then the foreign minister himself denied Russia attacked Ukraine at all, right before admitting that Russia deliberately targeted this maternity hospital in Mariupol. Their fabrications didn't matter because the world had already seen the searing images.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: They did not matter. Appearing alongside the president of Romania on her tour of the region today, Vice President Kamala Harris making it very clear that Putin will be held accountable for the atrocities we are now witnessing in Ukraine.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KAMALA HARRIS, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: I'll say it again. We are clear that any intentional attack or targeting of civilians is a war crime. Period. We're witnessing a playbook, the Russian playbook. And it includes lies, misinformation and the acts of aggression that we are now witnessing. We maintain that diplomacy is the way to resolve these issues that coexist with our commitment to ensure that our allies are strong and that there must be serious consequence and accountability for what Russia is doing.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Let's get right to NBC's Cal Perry who is live for us in Lviv. Also with us, MSNBC military analyst and retired four-star general Barry McCaffrey.

[22:05:00]

Cal you were in Lviv in western Ukraine, not far from Lutsk where Russian airstrikes have recently hit. I want you to give us the latest on that and how did residents in Lviv react to those strikes?

CAL PERRY, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Well, look, I think it changed things here pretty dramatically. This was the first strike in the western part of the country since the first day of the war. So, folks here were feeling relatively safe. This felt like a city that was removed, certainly, from the violence. I'm 350 miles from the city of Kyiv.

Though, it is worth noting that the only sort of open part of that capital right now, Kyiv, is to the west. So, the supply chain runs right through the city of Lviv. Not just the refugee crisis but the supplies that are moving to the east. They are all moving through the city.

So, Russia is clearly now starting to target some of those supply chain places like this airfield that was targeted early yesterday morning. What we're seeing here now in Lviv is a hardening of positions. So, where you had checkpoints on the outer edge of the city, those checkpoints are now dug in.

You have defenses closer into the center of the city, all an indication I think that people here are expecting a widening of the conflict. Beyond that, you have a run on guns. I was at a gun store part of the today, and you have civilian now arming themselves in preparation. And look, this is a gun store that sold two thirds of its guns in the last two weeks. And really only has hunting rifles left.

So, you have civilians now arming themselves with hunting rifles, not necessarily assault rifles or weapons of war. Here is a little bit of someone that I spoke to about why he is buying a gun at this moment. Take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MAX TURYSKY, LVIV RESIDENT: My family is here. I have things to lose here and escaping to somewhere else, it might be an option for young kids, for women, right? But in the end of a day, if everyone will leave, who is going to be here? So why those guys are dying there on the east? On the whole country? Why they are dying? For what? For us to escape? I don't see the point of doing this. Myself, I'm not a soldier, right? I don't know how to shoot people, I don't know how to act in this kind of situation, but if it will come here then I have no option.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PERRY: The other thing, Alicia, worth noting about these strikes, not just that they're in the western part now of Ukraine, but less than 60 miles from the border with Poland, of course, less than 60 miles from that NATO border as well, Alicia.

MENENDEZ: General McCaffrey, I want you to weigh in on what Coal is talking about there, right? The fact that clearly Russians are turning their attention to west. The fact that there is now shelling 60 miles from the border, but also I want to bring you in on this, which is that U.S. defense officials are telling NBC that the Russian convoy that has been lurking outside of Kyiv has dispersed, moved into a wooded area. What does that say to you, general?

BARRY MCCAFFREY, MSNBC MILITARY ANALYST: They are finally waking up. They're getting hammered from the air by these Turkish armed drones and by flanking movements of (inaudible) Ukrainian infantry, is the stupidest thing I've seen ever. Huge formations, stock bumper to bumper like an NFL parking lot.

So, I think they are starting to wise up, trying to minimize the casualties. They're all trying to encircle Kyiv clearly and cut off the city, choke it to death, starvation, lack of water. There will clearly a billion or two civilians in Kyiv. This is going to be their strategy. It's a terror campaign. No longer expressly targeting just Ukrainian military, but instead the civil population, hopeful they'll force President Zelenskyy into capitulation.

MENENDEZ: Cal, what is the latest to get humanitarian aid to the people who need it most? I'm thinking of the people in Mariupol who are facing bitter cold as well.

PERRY: Yes. It's not making it there. There has been no resupply to that city in seven days. The Red Cross has not been able to get in there in any meaningful fashion. Doctors Without Borders is basically begging to get in there to open up some humanitarian corridor.

The situation there is awful. There is at least 1,500 civilians that have been killed. We expect that number to be far higher. The city is now sort of becoming notorious as this first city that we've seen a mass grave, an indication that people there are just desperate. They can't carry out funerals.

And in the city of Kharkiv, we're seeing even worse. We heard the mayor there say they had 90 airstrikes in just 24 hours and there are bodies on the streets. Not just the bodies Ukrainian civilians, but the bodies of Russian soldiers and I have to say, I have never seen this before. I have never seen this before.

I've covered a number of conflicts. And I'll let General McCaffrey speak to this, but I think it's a clear indication that Russia does not control some of these places where there is fierce fighting. They don't control the battle space. They do not have control, certainly, of Kharkiv, even though there has been heavy fighting.

But those pictures that we saw from this BBC news crew of bodies lying in the streets, I think is just an indication of how maybe the mission did not go as planned especially when you talk about the fighting that's taking place in these urban areas, Alicia.

[22:10:00]

MENENDEZ: You know, General McCaffrey, you were talking about Russians encircling Kyiv. What is the timeline for that?

MCCAFFREY: Well, who knows? Again, I hope President Zelenskyy (inaudible). I've seen your people trying to do is get the civilians out of the battle none. The Russians are trying to stop that. So that Kyiv, if it was just primarily, young people of fighting age with adequate stock piles and you've got the elderly and the children and the vulnerable out of the city. It could go on forever.

You know, my dad was involved in the fighting in Italy in World War II and Monte Casino held out for months. So, I think the Russians will have a disaster on their hands if they try and seize that city street by street. Question is what are they going to do? And I think this is primarily now a terror campaign.

MENENDEZ: General Barry McCaffrey, always appreciate your expertise. Cal Perry in Lviv, thank you so much and stay safe.

Joining us now is Jon Meacham, presidential historian and Rogers Chair in the American Presidency at Vanderbilt University. He occasionally advises President Biden on historical matters and major speeches. John Meacham, I think a lot of people are wondering tonight, what is it that we're watching? Is it a war between two countries with one clear, bad perpetrator or is this a prelude to a worldwide conflict? You, of course, cannot predict the future, but how are you as a historian viewing this tonight?

JON MEACHAM, PRESIDENTIAL HISTORIAN: Well, one of the tragedies of history and the inevitable back of history is that this is the way large conflicts begin. Large conflicts don't tend to begin as large conflicts.

They do in fact grow. We saw that unfolded much more rapidly in August 1914. We saw it from September of 1939 (inaudible) Europe.

I think the way I have been watching this is we're in this fascinating seems to me a kind of combination of this being a classic great power war where the rule of the strong, Vladimir Putin, is stronger than Ukraine or at least he thought he was, and he was on paper. And he wants that land. He wants that country.

And the rule of law, whether explicit or implicit, the notion that sovereignty is more important than subjugation, that in fact there is an order to the way the world should work, given the horrible lessons and the horrible experience that we've had throughout our history. Remember, if dictators aren't stopped, these wars grow and you end up rewarding (inaudible).

And so I think -- so you have that unfolding. You have sort of a classic, almost (inaudible) struggle of the strong trying to take over the weak. In a nuclear 21st century world where we do have the scientific capacity to end the world many times over. And so it's this odd and scary situation. It's why I think that President Biden's got a terrific job of balancing, of being forward leaning, standing up as far as wisdom allows.

And, you know, presidencies and eras are almost always defined by things we might not have expected to happen. And this is one of them. And I think what we're going to be watching in these images of Ukrainian bravery, the American diplomatic efforts, this remarkable economic cordon that the president and leading our allies in doing, is we won't know for a long time how this will be viewed historically.

But the thing, to go to your very good question, the thing to remember is that large conflicts begin with smaller conflicts. And so that's the first thing. It's almost a hippocratic oath of diplomacy, is not letting that happen.

MENENDEZ: Speaking about President Biden, we've seen the administration explicitly call upon Americans to keep in mind that the fight for democracy as they pay more for gas. How does President Biden contextualize America's role here given that we're not a combatant? How does he talk about this to the American people?

MEACHAM: Being totally straightforward. There is no spin here. There is no reason to sugarcoat it.

[22:15:01]

One of the covenant of modern democracies when you think about it is if you give it to us straight, Americans tend to do what it takes. Presidents who get in trouble are the presidents who think that they are smarter than the American people and that they can sort of shape reality.

If you think about the presidents in Vietnam, if you think about Watergate, if you think about presidents who underestimate and don't prepare us for hard things are the ones who tend to do poorly. And it's a genuine price.

You know, FDR said in the spring of 1942 that the news is going to get worse and worse before it gets better and better. And the American people deserve to have it straight from the shoulder. And, you know, Winston Churchill had a great two-pronged test on that in the same era. He said that the British people can face any misfortune with fortitude and buoyancy, a classic Churchill phrase, with fortitude and buoyancy.

As long as they are convinced that their leaders are not lying to them or not themselves dwelling in a fool's paradise. So, if you think about that is a two-pronged test. We want to be sure you're not misleading us and we want to have our best judgment that you're not misleading yourself. And I think that if we can check those two boxes, we can move forward here.

MENENDEZ: Here's the thing, Jon Meacham. I understand that in a normal environment, but as I don't need to tell you and as I don't need to tell our viewers, this comes as America is grappling with our own anti-Democratic forces that are being led by a former president. This particular type of domestic division feels like uncharted territory for an American president. Am I wrong?

MEACHAM: Well, wrong-ish, to coin a phrase. You know, Arthur Schlesinger used to say that the divisions over interventions versus isolation (inaudible) late 1930's were even more ferocious than the battles of Vietnam in the 1960's.

You know, remember, World War II started in Europe in 1939. The United States didn't get into World War II despite the mythology, until first, December 7, 1941, more than two years later. And we didn't declare war on Germany until Germany declared war on us, right. FDR did not read -- get the news of Pearl Harbor and then say, we're going to war with Germany. It took several days.

And, you know, there's an old saying that's attributed to Churchill that you can always count the Americans do the right thing once they've exhausted every other possibility. Where I think we are, I think a challenge to the president is of course there is this reflexive partisanship, of course there are these separate realities.

But all you can do is tell the truth. All you can do is do your best. Because fundamentally, if democracy is going to survive, then we are going to get -- get heavy here briefly. If democracy is going to survive and we're going to get very heavy here briefly. If democracy is going to survive, if it's going to long endure, we have to prove ourselves capable of handling the truth about a crisis like this, of doing what we can and of not simply falling into this machinery of perpetual conflict.

It's often as you say fueled by lies and self-serving narratives. And maybe we are not up to it. I think we are. I pray we are. But the question you asked is really fundamental. And we're, you know, these things don't happen quickly.

The crisis of 2016 through January 6th 2021 was the fullest manifestation of many of the worst forces in American life. They are forces that ebb and they flow. And they float for a long time. I think the president is doing all he can to make them ebb, but he has to have all of us doing it. You know, requires us to stop and think for a moment do it. It requires us to stop and think before we offer an opinion, before we declare, you know, one side or the other wrong. This is a real, genuine stress test for democratic lower case D citizenship.

MENENDEZ: Perhaps I am showing my relentless millennial optimism by saying this, but I, too, believe that we are up to this task. Presidential Historian Jon Meacham, as always, thanks for being with us.

Coming up, a Russian superstar breaks with Putin's war. And he says tens of millions of Russians feel the same way. That is next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[22:20:00]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNKNOWN: People who understand what's really going on are really upset and I already heard about several of my friends and colleagues who are either - - or they left or they are trying, desperately trying to leave.

UNKNOWN: I just wanted to say that please do not associate us, Russians with this war. We never wanted it and we never voted for this government I feel ashamed.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: So, what you just watched, those are Russians fleeing what is becoming an increasingly oppressive, authoritarian regime, as Vladimir Putin cracks down on anti-war sentiment. Inside Putin's Russia, it is now illegal to use the words war or invasion, punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

He has blocked independent news sites, banned social media sites, Twitter, Facebook and now Instagram. And Putin's propaganda is lying to the Russian people about what is actually happening in Ukraine. As this Ukrainian refugee details, her mother in Russia did not believe her when she told her they were under attack.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNKNOWN: She is my mother. I'm telling her what is happening in like, that we are going to shelters, you know, to -- when we hear bombs. There is like attacks and she said she is not believing me.

[22:25:00]

So, I stopped talking to her because like, I can't. If she don't believe her own daughter, she is all, like, totally brainwashed from TV, you know, because they are TV of like all about this propaganda.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: And yet Russians are still speaking out against Putin's war. Now, 14,000 people have been arrested in more than 140 Russian cities since the invasion began. Today, jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny posted a message calling on Russians to protest on Sunday saying "Mad maniac Putin will most quickly be stopped by the people of Russia now if they oppose the war. You need to go to anti-war rallies every weekend, even if it seems that everyone has either left or got scared. You are the backbone of the movement against war and death."

And a Russian rap superstar canceled several shows in Russia after the war started, announced today that he will hold a series of anti-war fundraising concerts outside of Russia with 100 percent of the proceeds going to help the millions of Ukrainian refugees.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(Speaking Foreign Language)

TEXT: I'm angry because s___ stuff f___ up, because the war in Ukraine has been going on for more than two weeks. And yet there are tens of millions of Russians who categorically disagree with this war. And I think this should be said as loudly as possible.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Joining us now is Ruth Ben-Ghiat, history professor at New York University and author of "Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present," which delves of course, into Putin. And Molly McKew, former adviser to the president of Georgia 2009 to 2013. She's also an expert on information warfare. Molly, I got to ask you, do you think there are tens of millions of Russians who oppose Putin's war?

MOLLY MCKEW, FORMER ADVISER TO PRESIDENT SAKASHVILI OF GEORGIA: I think it's always hard to know what is happening in the Russian public given the poor visibility we often have. I think what we've seen already though is there have been significant protests. It takes a fairly high activation energy to go to those protests because of the risk to individual Russians of arrest and jail time for doing that.

I think that is significant. I think there are a number of efforts underway to try to break through the information barriers that the Russian public is sort of kept inside, to give them more information about the war, about what is going on. And I think that will -- that pressure will increase.

MENENDEZ: Ruth, Masha Gessen told Ezra Klein that the war feels like an alternate reality inside of Russia. Take a listen.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

MASHA GESSEN, RUSSIAN-AMERICAN JOURNALIST: People have gotten accustomed to a series of financial crashes and periods of hyperinflation and even periods of scarcity. And I think people have no idea about the scale of the catastrophe that they're facing. But of course, what makes that possible is the lack of any kind of circulation of information in society. Right? You can't get a bigger picture than your own slice of experience unless you're reading the independent media or Western media. You don't know just how overwhelming these sanctions are.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Ruth, to Masha's point, what is Putin's relative strength inside his own country?

RUTH BEN-GHIAT, HISTORY PROFESSOR, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY: Well, it's really interesting because just a few months ago before the war started, he had 71 percent popularity rate. However, that's obviously going to -- that's going to be very harmed. And what's very important and speaks to the rapper's gesture and a lot of the people you see being arrested are young.

A poll last year, ages 18 to 24 age group of Russia, 48 percent of them felt that Russia was going in the wrong direction. And a poll right now says that 39 percent of that same age group opposes the war. And this is only going to spread because authoritarian states invest hugely in making sure there is this -- trying to make sure there is this seamless consent for the leader. They use repression. They use disinformation. But something like this catastrophe, it's very difficult to hide for too long.

MENENDEZ: Molly, CIA director William Burns said yesterday he thinks the Putin propaganda bubble will eventually burst. Take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

WILLIAM BURNS, CIA DIRECTOR: I don't believe he can wall off indefinitely Russians from the truth especially as reality has begun to puncture that bubble, the realities of killed and wounded, coming home in increasing number. The realities of the economic consequences for ordinary Russians. The realities of, you know, the horrific scenes of hospitals and schools being bombed next door in Ukraine and of civilian casualties there as well. I don't think he can bottle up the truth indefinitely.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Molly, do you agree, and what will it take to burst that bubble?

[22:30:00]

MCKEW: I do think it gets harder to hide the truth, especially when the body count is increasing as it is. I think we've seen this in the past with, some sort of more recent Russian military actions when they were trying to hide casualties in Syria, in eastern Ukraine in earlier fighting.

When there's a point at which you can't do that anymore, because a bunch of mothers start looking for their sons. And these forces of sort of the angry mothers in Putin's Russia have been significant in a number of periods in his presidency.

And I think that there are these inevitable moments of truth, even in very closed societies. The economic pain that is coming will be one. And the sort of missing and the dying will be another. But I think there's -- it's sort of on Russians themselves to open their eyes, to read other sources of news, to hear what is coming from outside, to listen to the phone calls they're getting in Russian, from people outside of Russia trying to tell them what's going on.

And not just be anti-war, but to understand with the war is about, and to be anti what that is about as well.

MENENDEZ: Ruth, to that point about understanding what the war is about. I want you to take a listen to what President Biden said today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: We already know, Putin's war against Ukraine will never be a victory. He hoped to dominate Ukraine without a fight, he failed. He hoped to fracture European resolve, he failed. He hoped to weaken the Trans-Atlantic alliance, he failed.

He hoped to split apart American democracy in terms of our positions, he failed. The American people are united, the world's united, and we stand with the people of Ukraine. We will not let autocrats and would-be emperors dictate the direction of the world.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Ruth, you heard the rhetorical too there, right. "He failed. He failed. He failed. And yet, is there any way to stop the bloodshed, without Putin getting to claim, choosing to claim that he's a winner?"

RUTH BEN-GHIAT, HISTORY PROFESSOR, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY: Well, you know, that will depend what kind of assistance the world gives in material and military terms. But, certainly, as you said before, it's becoming much harder, and it will become much harder to negate reality.

It's really interesting. You know, Putin has invested hugely in his personality cults, as the strong defender of Russia. And there's a survey every few years of Russian elites. And one of the things that most bonds them to Putin, is this image he has as defending the prestige of the west abroad.

And so look at all the hits that prestige has taken, the military, which has been kind of ravaged by corruption, there's no troop morale. Russia has become a pariah, including in the sports world, the cultural world, the economy is collapsing. This is not winning.

MENENDEZ: Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Molly McKew, thank you both so much for joining us tonight.

Coming up, more than 2.5 million people have left Ukraine since the invasion. We are going to be joined by a Ukrainian mother who is going to talk to us about the devastating decision to leave the country with her young son, that is next.

[22:33:11]

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MENENDEZ: Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine has left the country's second largest city, Kharkiv, in ruins. Kharkiv's metro stations, restaurants, and bars, now function as bomb shelters including school pubs seen here for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It's also the bar where our next guest, Christian Miller and Olya Tymoshenkova met two years ago. 12 days before Russia launched its attack on Ukraine, Christian an American living in Ukraine received a call strongly recommending that he leave the country.

They raced to plan their escape to safety, after negative COVID test, Olya, Christian and Olya's 9-year-old Sacha got in a taxi and headed straight to the Kharkiv airport. All the flights out of Kharkiv were booked.

So they went home, and booked a 1 a.m. train to Kyiv. Christian, Olya and Sacha landed in Tbilisi, Georgia, at 7 a.m. on Valentine's day, that was nine days before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Joining me now from Georgia, are Christian Miller and Olya Tymoshenko. Thank you both so much for being here. Olya, when you look at those pictures of Kharkiv from what is now your relative safety in Georgia, what goes through your mind?

OLYA TYMOSHENKOVA, UKRAINIAN REFUGEE IN GEORGIA: It is terrible. I've seen those places, it's not just buildings, not just pictures of ruined places. They have their history, I know those places, it's my gym room, my swimming pool. -- Sacha's kindergarten. Those places that they visit that they lost, it's horrible.

MENENDEZ: All of those places in which we build our lives. Olya, have you heard from your friends and family in Ukraine?

TYMOSHENKOVA: Yes. I tried to get in touch with them, and to check them out everyday. Recently I'm asking them stupid questions like how are you? And almost all of them are asking, answering just this one word "alive", and that's good enough.

[22:39:54]

MENENDEZ: Yes. All questions feel somehow insufficient in this moment.

Christian, I want to know what was going through your mind when you received that call telling you to flee the country.

CHRISTIAN MILLER, AMERICAN LIVING IN UKRAINE: I was pretty nervous, because I tested positive for COVID the week before. So, you know, I was like I'm going to have to rent a car to get out of here. It was Friday night when we got that call.

Saturday, we both got tested in the morning. It came back negative, then we looked into getting out of the country which included going to the airport and trying to buy a ticket out of Kharkiv. But everything was booked up that day because there was a rumor they were going to shut down the airspace because of insurance underwriting and (INAUDIBLE).

So we went to Kyiv and we, you know, took a midnight train out of Kharkiv to Kyiv, and then we flew out of Kyiv the next evening.

MENENDEZ: I just want our viewers to understand sort of the contours of the decision you are making. Because, Christian, you write on Facebook that, quote, "The principal of Olya's sons' school laughed, and said to enjoy our vacation when Olya requested his withdrawal from school for two months. Leaving was seen as an overcautious if not paranoid move."

Christian, I wonder if at any point you questioned your own decision?

MILLER: No. It's better to err on the side of caution. There is a poll done for five days before the invasion had happened. And only 20 percent of Ukrainians thought this invasion could happen. So, it was a real surprise.

Ukrainians as Olya will tell you have been living under this threat of a full scale invasion for eight years and you just kind of grow used to it, and you can't plan your life around whether they will be invaded, or not.

MENENDEZ: Olya, you are one of the first to escape to safety. Can you talk us through your experience, what it has been like in Georgia?

TYMOSHENKOVA: Georgian people are very supportive. Taxi drivers are not charging the same rate we are with Ukrainians. Our landlord family supports this very much with everything she can, this moral support. She provided some food, asking how are you, what could she do. Everyone goes to the demonstrations every day (INAUDIBLE).

MENENDEZ: Olya, I'm a mom, you are a mom, and one of the things that I have wondered as I watched other moms go through this is how do you explain this to your kid. How do you tell them what is happening, and what their future is going to look like?

TYMOSHENKOVA: No, for now, he is not realizing the damage of what's going on, really. My hope is that he doesn't, for now.

(CROSSTALK)

MENENDEZ: No, finish your thought.

TYMOSHENKOVA: Because I'm talking to my friends that left in Kharkiv and Ukraine or trying to get out from that situation who have kids. And kids are damaged, some of them are not talking, some of them are talking in sleep saying like horrified. And I'm happy that Sacha haven't seen this.

MENENDEZ: Olya, is your expectation to go back to Ukraine?

TYMOSHENKOVA: I hope it's going to get better soon, and I would have an opportunity to help build it all back. I love my Ukraine. I love my city. I love the people over there. I'm proud of them proud to be Ukrainian.

MENENDEZ: It's the refrain that I have heard from every Ukrainian I have spoken to.

Olya Tymoshenkova, Christian Miller, thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Coming up, David Miliband, president of the International Rescue Committee, is going to join us to talk about the humanitarian crisis created by Putin's war. That's next.

[22:44:05]

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: The situation is very bad. There are no lights, no water and there are some problems with gas. And the city's under attack all day long. It is daytime and the nighttime. It is very dangerous to civilian people.

So, it is awful, actually. It is impossible to live there right now.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: Paulina Raton (ph) is a Ukrainian refugee from Kharkiv. She is one of more than 2.5 million people that have fled Ukraine in the first 16 days of the Russian invasion.

According to the U.N. High Commission on Refugees, 176,000 refugees have fled to Slovakia, 225,000 are in Hungary, and 1.5 million are in Poland. And still more are expected to leave Ukraine as the war continues and the violence escalates.

Joining us to discuss the growing humanitarian crisis is David Miliband, president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee. He was formerly Britain's foreign secretary.

Mr. Miliband, thank you for being with us.

Clearly, this crisis is devastating for those who are fleeing the war and overwhelming for the countries that are trying quickly to help with food and shelter. What are the challenges of a refugee crisis that happens on this scale?

DAVID MILIBAND, PRESIDENT/CEO, INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE: Thanks, Alicia. Well, you've got to remember that the European continent is the world's largest, richest, single market. It's 500 million people if you include the U.K. as a European country alongside Norway which is not yet -- not in the European Union.

[22:49:49]

So at the moment, 2.5 million refugees, predictions of 5 million -- that is a lot of people. But there is an infrastructure there that can support them. And what I would call attention to is that yes there is a refugee crisis across the border in Europe. But the situation of those trapped who are inside Ukraine is genuinely a matter of life and death.

Fortunately, once people make it to Europe, there are systems in place to make sure that they are able to get fed, that they get shelter, they get medical care. And we will be supporting that as the International Rescue Committee.

But we will also be concentrating on the situation inside Ukraine, because that's a major front of humanitarian concern. People under bombardment, people with water and electricity cut off, people who are unable to leave. And we've got to make sure that we deal with them as well.

MENENDEZ: Right, and that's part of what we were reporting on earlier in the show.

I also want to ask you, the "New York Times" reporting about the refugee impact on the city of Lublin, Poland. That's about a 135 miles from Lviv Ukraine, where a hotel has taken in refugees. The manager is telling "The
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Times", "We have a whole army here. A network of hotel connections that works as a crisis team 24 hours a day, communicating fast with each other to check the availability of rooms and sending Ukrainians to one another. Such help requires a lot of money, but these are special situations."

They are even turned one of their conference rooms into a playroom for children from Ukrainian orphanages. Grassroots movements, incredible. It's also only a temporary solution, a hotel can't survive as a refugee center without assistance. What kind of assistance do they need?

MILIBAND: Yes. We are using -- we, the International Rescue Committee are using Lublin as our Polish hub. And there's an extraordinary effort not just by the government, not just by commercial (INAUDIBLE) like the hotel you mentioned but also by ordinary families.

The most important lesson of experience from refugee crises around the world is that the sooner refugees can move into ordinary communities, living (INAUDIBLE) with his families, otherwise renting housing, and being able to support themselves the better.

And the good news from the European side of the refugee crisis -- is that not only have three years of residency being guaranteed to any Ukrainian who arrives in Europe but so has three years right to work, three years right to services, three years right to get your kids into school.

And all of our experience shows that the sooner those measures for integration of refugees into the host communities' life, the better. We don't want to see large refugee camps created. That's not going to be a way in which we will be able to meet the trauma that these refugees have faced and give them a sense of rebuilding a life before they can come to a view in the end about whether they can go back to Ukraine, if and when peace is restored.

MENENDEZ: It's just so critical what you are saying. And I want to make sure that we underline it for our viewers which is that there are plenty of people who are leaving and their intent, their greatest wish may be to go back as quickly as possible. But there is simply the reality that people may be displaced for weeks, months, years. And their ability to live and work in these societies is absolutely critical. It is not lost on me, Mr. Miliband, that you said something very important there which is the European side of this crisis, meaning that the U.S. I believe also has a role to play.

Of course, already temporary protected status, TPS, has been extended to Ukrainians who are already inside the United States. A large amount of aid. What more, though, does the United States need to be doing?

MILIBAND: Well, Alicia, you are making a great point but obviously the U.S. is fully engaged diplomatically. It is engaged militarily. But it can be engaged on the humanitarian side. Not just the distribution of aid money, which is taking place from USAID, led by Samantha Power.

But also recognizing that this is a moment to reset global expectations of how to treat refugees. And there are those with Ukrainian links in the U.S. who should be given the right to stay here, not just temporary protected status but refugee status.

I would also like to see this as an opportunity to extend the refugee resettlement program to Ukrainians, so that they are given a chance to rebuild their lives here.

The Biden administration has pledged to rebuild the refugee resettlement program, which historically had bipartisan support in the U.S.. President Reagan admitted more refugees than any other American president. And that bipartisanship has been important. But it was absolutely trashed in the Trump years.

President Biden and his team are trying to rebuild it. And this Ukraine crisis shows why it is so important. Because there aren't just 2.5 million Ukrainian refugees there today. There are over 30 million refugees and asylum seekers from other countries. And the U.S. can continue to be open, reestablish itself as a leader in refugee resettlement which is important alongside the aid work that we've talked about.

MENENDEZ: It is the number one thing I hear from advocates which is that the refugee cap here in the United States needs to be lifted and increased. I want to ask you -- before you go -- very often when we talk about displacement across the globe specifically when we talk about crisis in Syria, we talk about this idea of a lost generation, right.

This idea that there will be a generation of people who do not have more than a fourth grade education. That there will not be the community necessary to go back and rebuild their home country.

We all, of course, see this as a humanitarian issue. This is also a geopolitical crisis. If this is not handled properly in real time, what are the future repercussions?

[22:54:56]

MILIBAND: Well, I think you are making a really important point. The unintended humanitarian crises around the world are a source of political instability.

But I would also make another point. The western world has said that liberal democracy is on the line. And one of the aspects of liberal democracy is to treat those in need properly. That is why this is a moral crisis as well as a military crisis. It needs to be established properly.

MENENDEZ: David Miliband, very grateful for your time. Thanks so much for joining us.

Tonight's LAST WORD is next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MENENDEZ: We have an update on the horrific attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol.

[22:59:35]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SERGIY KYSLYTSYA, UKRAINIAN AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS: Let me share with you very good news.

Ms. Mariana, the pregnant woman, gave birth to a healthy daughter last night. Her name is Veronica. Here she is with her father.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MENENDEZ: A family member says she was named Veronica after the Greek goddess Nike, the goddess of victory. Welcome to the world, Baby Veronica. You've already survived so much.

That is tonight's LAST WORD.

"THE 11TH HOUR WITH STEPHANIE RUHLE" starts right now.

END

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