

News; Domestic

THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW for March 25, 2022, MSNBC

Ali Velshi

7,456 words

25 March 2022

MSNBC: The Rachel Maddow Show

TRMADS

English

Content and programming copyright 2022 MSNBC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Copyright 2022 ASC Services II Media, LLC. All materials herein are protected by United States copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast without the prior written permission of ASC Services II Media, LLC. You may not alter or remove any trademark, copyright or other notice from copies of the content.

ALI VELSHI, MSNBC HOST: Good evening again from Warsaw, Poland. Thank you for joining us from the next hour.

Let me sketch out a situation for you and ask you if it sounds familiar. Russia begins amassing troops on another country's borders. The United States calls out Russia's belligerent moves and warns it not to invade. Everyone is on edge, wondering if Russia is about to invade, and if so, how the United States will respond.

I could, of course, be describing the situation leading up to the invasion of Ukraine last month. But actually, I'm describing what was happening right here in this country, in Poland, in 1980.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

TV ANCHOR: Good evening. Poland and the possibility of Soviet military intervention was the subject of an unusual White House statement this afternoon.

In that statement, President Carter said, the United States is watching with growing concern the unprecedented buildup of Soviet forces along the Polish border and the closing of certain frontier regions. The statement also said that military intervention in Poland would have the most negative consequences.

[21:00:01]

REPORTER: Senior officials are operating on the assumption that the last thing the Russians want to do is invade Poland, recognizing an invasion will make everything much worse.

But at the same time, the Russians continue to increase their military pressure on Poland. For example, on both sides of the East German-Polish border, a 40 mile wide strip has been closed to foreign observers. There are ten Soviet divisions about 100,000 troops in this area. On Poland's eastern front, from the Baltic military district in the north to the Carpathian in the south, Soviet forces are in what officials here call an enhanced state of readiness.

EDMUND MUSKIE, SECRETARY OF STATE: The consequences from the part of Europe, of the West I think have been made clear to the Soviet leadership, in a number of -- through a number of channels.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: Now, this standoff with the Soviet Union was sparked by the success of a nascent pro-democracy here in Poland, a pro-democracy movement here in Poland. You will remember, it the solidarity movement, which began as labor strikes in a Polish shipyard and quickly grew into a national phenomenon under its charismatic leader, Lech Walesa.

The communist government in Poland being forced into compromises with these democratic labor activists. And the Soviet Union didn't like that one bit.

In the end, though, the Soviet Union didn't need to invade Poland. The communist Polish government declared martial law and staged its own military invention. Protests were brutally put down. Demonstrators were killed. Thousands of opposition activists were in prison.

But that was not the end of the story. Actually, it was just the beginning of the story, because the solitary movement wasn't destroyed. It operated underground through years of repression, until it burst back into the open in the late 1980s and forced the government into something that had never happened in the history of communist eastern Europe -- free and fair elections.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REPORTER: The unthinkable was happening before their eyes. Poles relished every result that's taken together added to a crushing defeat of the previously unquestioned masters of Poland, the communist party.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It is one step in our escape from serfdom, from communism.

REPORTER: Solidarity computed that its candidates would completely control the new Polish Senate, and win every contested seat and the more powerful Sejm, the other house in Poland's parliament. (INAUDIBLE) electoral wins, though, was not closing. We all must prevail Poland, he said, no matter who won.

With their first step towards democracy's defense successfully take, and Poles descended on the Chinese embassy to protest the repression in that country. They had confronted their communist party at the ballot box and not a single drop of blood had been shed.

(EBND VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: The first domino to fall in the collapse of the Soviet Union fell right here in Poland. The leader of Solidarity, like Walesa, became Poland's first democratically elected president. Anti-communist revolutions swept across Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall came down. In less than three years, the Soviet Union was no more.

Some 30 years later, Poland now once again finds itself on the front lines of a confrontation with Russia. This one unfortunately fall from bloodless. As the war in Ukraine rages next door, and millions of refugees flee over the border, President Biden arrived in Poland today for a firsthand look at the humanitarian response.

He was greeted by Poland's president, in a town just 60 miles from the Ukrainian border. Biden hailed Poland for taking in so many refugees. And Poland has not just been leading on the humanitarian front, Poland's government has been rallying European governments and aid for Ukraine, and has prided itself in recent weeks on being a lynchpin of Western Solidarity against Russia. Now, here's the thing, it wasn't a foregone conclusion that Poland would be such an eager partner with the United States and Europe against Russia.

In recent years, Poland was more likely to be fighting with Europe as its right wing government has been rolling back Poland's very hard won democratic reforms. Less than one month before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland's prime minister attended a conference of far-right, largely pro-Putin European leaders.

And yet, since the invasion, Poland's government has turned out to be perhaps the loudest voice of European solidarity against Vladimir Putin. Maybe they remembers Soviet troops massing on their own borders 40 years ago, and their own solidarity movement, ultimately facing them -- or maybe it was the horror and brutality of Russia's invasion of Poland, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine playing out so close to Poland.

Today, from the devastated Ukrainian city of Mariupol, we saw the first images from inside that theater that Russia bombed nine days ago. Ukrainians who had been sheltering inside, stunned, covered in dust. As the narrator says, a missile hits the center of the theater. Officials in Mariupol today sit around 300 people who are taking shelter in the building were killed. That's a claim that is not possible for us to verify at this point.

But if true, it would be the single worst atrocity since the war began. A bomb dropped on a shelter marked with signs saying children, large enough to be read from the sky. Meanwhile, 80 miles northeast of Ukraine's capital, the city of Chernihiv is surrounded by Russian troops. The city's mayor took this footage of the destruction of his city. We're up to 150,000 people remain trapped. He says they can't cope with all the dead.

Chernihiv is thought to be strategically important for Russians because it stands on the root towards Kyiv, from the north. But now that there is some indication that the Russians are narrowing their military objective. The perspective is changing. Russian military officials today held a briefing in front of a very big map, saying that the operation in Ukraine is entering a new phase, focused on the complete liberation of the Donbass. That, you will recall, is the eastern region that Russia and Ukraine have been fighting over for years.

The Russian officials claim today that Russia's assault on cities like Kyiv, that was just a distraction, to lure Ukrainian forces away from the east, which seems like a pretty ridiculous assertion. But it is sparking some hope that the Russians are rethinking, the breath of their military operation.

Joining us now from Kyiv is Igor Novikov, he's a former adviser to the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy.

Mr. Novikov, thank you for being here. We appreciate your time. We realize it's the middle of the night.

I do want to ask you about this speculation. These reports that Russia is saying, basically all we were looking for was Donbas and everything else was a distraction. What do you make of that?

IGOR NOVIKOV, FORMER ADVISER TO PRES. ZELENSKYY: Well, I think the military operation is not going to plan and -- the wording here, I wouldn't trust anything the Russia says. So, I only look at their actions. We run into information trouble around Kyiv, they've run into -- to the northwest of Kyiv, it's not gone to plan for them around Mykolaiv and southern Ukraine. So, I think the only area where their operation is semi successful that would be eastern Ukraine.

And, my cousin is actually a soldier on the front lines in the eastern Ukraine, so I get the daily reports from him. They're throwing a lot at the Ukrainian army there. They are not being entirely successful, but it's definitely going better for them there than elsewhere in Ukraine.

VELSHI: So, let's play that out, whether it's because -- whether they were trying to distract Ukrainian forces, or because, as you say it's not going to plan. In the end, how does it affect the outcome? What is President Zelenskyy, what is his response? If he says, we just want Donbas?

NOVIKOV: Well, I think our government has been explicitly clear there is no compromise on our territorial integrity and sovereignty. So even if they are successful in Donbas, that will not end the war. So, you know, that will be a temporary situation of the global community and Ukraine will have to deal with.

But let's not jump ahead of ourselves. Because, I mean, there's so much at stake at the moment. We've seen Russian reposition troops to Belarus and southern Russia. So I think we are -- likely to see a second wave of attacks.

And Kyiv has become ravaged. I mean, we've heard a number of explosions in the late afternoon of, you know, the magnitude we haven't heard for a while. So, with Putin you never know. So the situation is at the peak of its uncertainty. That would be my description.

VELSHI: Okay, as you say. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. The current issue right now that you have President Biden in Poland. He was 60 miles from the border. He has been attempting to rally NATO and European allies against Russia, with more support for Ukraine.

Obviously, President Zelenskyy's not getting everything he's been asking for from NATO or the West. What is going to allow you to fight longer? What is the bare minimum that you can come away with from President Biden's trip?

NOVIKOV: Well, look, there's a simple way to describe it. I mean, we are getting enough to hold Russia back, and to be successful. So if I had to quantify it, I would say it's in the 70 percent -- 70 percent Ukrainian defiance, and 30 percent, you know, the hardware that our soldiers are actually using.

We could use a lot more hardware. And we need our skies close ASAP if we want to (INAUDIBLE) civilian casualties that amount. That's the bare minimum. But you know, one thing we have to be clear about, this is not a Russian-Ukrainian war. This is a global conflict that is going to spread to Eastern Europe. It's going to affect the number of different, you know, places in the world.

So I think what we need the most is for the west to overcome that inertia of denial, to understand that, you know, it doesn't end in Ukraine. It only ends with regime change.

On our part, we're doing a lot. I mean, let me give you an example, apart from the military -- there's also economic and informational war. So, you know, Ukraine is actually being relatively successful, trying to erode that foundation of Putin's autocracy.

One example would be how the image of one of his henchmen, Kadyrov, from Chechnya is changing. So, Ukraine has been really successful in trying -- disputing that myth that he is an almighty figure in Russia and we've turned him somewhat (INAUDIBLE) the actor who pretended to be a scary tyrant. So, that's what we did to Kadyrov. We turned him into a meme.

And if we erode that fear, you, know that could be a possibility of certain regime changes in Russia, sooner or later. And, you know, that kind of changes the situation dramatically. So, I think we -- what we need to do, we need to work together and make sure we get the best outcome of the situation. Get peace as quickly as possible, and prevent civilian deaths, because children should not be dying in the 21st century, you know, in the theater of war.

VELSHI: Igor, thank you for your time this morning, this early morning for you. Igor Novikov is a former adviser to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. We appreciate you being with us tonight.

Well, today, President Joe Biden joined the Polish President Andrzej Duda in Poland for a briefing on the humanitarian assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees who are entering Poland. The two men will have a formal meeting in Warsaw tomorrow.

Biden's high profile visit points to the vital role being played by Poland amid this ongoing conflict in Ukraine. For more on this, I want to turn to Stephen Mull, who previously served as ambassador for Poland and Lithuania. He's now the vice provost for global affairs at the University of Virginia.

Ambassador Mull, thank you for making time to be here tonight.

I just want to draw attention to something I said a few minutes ago. It was not obvious to the world that Poland would be at the vanguard of this fight that Volodymyr Zelenskyy says is a fight for democracy, and a fight for democracy in the east bloc and eastern European countries. It just was not obvious the way Poland has been going. It's like Hungary had been backsliding on the Democratic scale in the last few years.

STEPHEN MULL, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO POLAND: Good evening, Ali. It's good to be with you.

I think, in fact, Poland has been since it joined NATO in 1999, the most important strategic repositioned ally of the United States in the region. And that become critically more so since this invasion started just over one month ago. Poland shares about 330-mile border with Ukraine, which puts it right on the first -- of this tragedy unfolding right next door.

But that border is also a conduit for an increasing numbers of military weapons that we are sending to the Ukrainians, through our Polish friends. But it's also the conduit through which the major refugee are coming out of the crisis are flowing into the rest of Europe. So, as a conflict, it seems like there's a good chance it will in the coming weeks. That border is going to be a really serious flash point that we need to be worried about as a NATO ally of Poland.

VELSHI: Let's think about that. It's a big border. But, as you said, all of the stuff that's going -- a large majority of the support and material are going across the Polish border. We know that more than two thirds of the refugees coming out are going through that Polish border.

Poland is taking a big risk right now. It's hoping to lean on its NATO allies to say, don't have us take this one alone. This could be very bad.

Is it Poland's experience, either through the wars or in the solidarity movement that ended communism here, that Zelenskyy could be right? This thing could be spreading last?

MULL: Well, absolutely. I was serving in Poland when Russia first began invading Ukraine eight years ago. I could tell you that conflict was much less serious than we are seeing here out in Ukraine. And back then, the entire Polish government -- Polish society were really frightened that the Russians weren't going to stop at that border and would reclaim and dominated during -- occupied for 123 years before World War I.

So that may seem like a long time ago for us, but it's really fresh in Poland's memories. So, it is a big risk that they are taking and funneling all of this military assistance. It makes them a target. But they believe they already are a target. And they are going to take that risk.

VELSHI: What do you think success looks like in the meeting between Joe Biden and due to tomorrow? Is there something they can do that sort of steps a little bit further have been where NATO is right now?

MULL: Well, I think the Polish government has been quite clear that they welcome everything the United States has done to support the Ukrainian government in their struggle with the Russians. They'd like a lot more. And so, President Duda certainly is looking for an even bigger commitment from us to make sure that the Ukrainian army has what it needs to repel the Russian invaders. At the same time, I think President Biden is looking to make sure that we are as tightly coordinated as possible --

VELSHI: Stephen Mull, thank you for your time tonight.

(CROSSTALK)

MULL: -- thank you.

VELSHI: I'm sorry. Please finish your sentence. I had an interruption in my ear. I thought you had finished. I apologize. Please continue what you are saying.

MULL: -- you may remember a few weeks ago, there was a miscommunication over transferring the possible transfer of Polish fighter jets to Ukraine. It wasn't communicated particularly well. So I think the President Biden wants to make sure that we are absolutely hand and glove in working together with our Polish allies.

VELSHI: Right. That sort of played out by press release, which I don't think within anybody's best interest.

Ambassador, I'm sorry for the interruption. Thank you for your time tonight. We really appreciate it. Stephen Mull is the former United States ambassador to Poland.

Well, much more ahead tonight. Including, we're going to be talking about some refugees who we saw in Poland and the experiences that they are having while they're here. We're also going to be discussing developments on the nuclear threat that is hanging over Ukraine. We'll talk to a former NATO official about how a desperate Russia could use smaller, so-called tactical nukes, and how the West might respond to that.

Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:21:49]

VELSHI: One of the big questions that hangs over everybody's discussion of Russia's invasion of Ukraine's how everybody thinks about the threat of nuclear war. It's been 76 years since the United States launched nuclear strikes on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than 200,000 people. No country has used nuclear weapons in war since then. But the world's nuclear arsenal have grown exponentially.

Today, Russia and the United States possessed bombs more than 1,000 times as powerful as the ones that were dropped on Japan during World War II.

Now, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Western countries are in a standoff with a global nuclear superpower. But some national security experts say that the real and immediate threat is not the nuclear weapons have gotten bigger since World War II. It's actually that they've gotten smaller.

Today, Russia's thought to have between 1,000 and 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons. Those weapons are much smaller than the ones of the U.S. dropped here on Hiroshima but is still capable of causing unthinkable death and human suffering, and their launch using the same missiles currently deploying against Ukrainian cities.

As one nuclear expert wrote in a recent article for "Scientific American," quote, a tactical nuclear weapon would cause all the horrors of Hiroshima but on a smaller scale. It would produce a fireball, shockwaves, and deadly radiation that would cause long term health damage in survivors. Radioactive fallout would contaminate air, soil, water and the food supply, end quote.

Now, most experts believe that the use of nuclear weapons in this war remain highly unlikely. But there is growing concern as this war drags on that Vladimir Putin might resort to using smaller weapons of mass destruction. As we reported here last night the White House is a team of specialists to develop contingency plans for what to do in place that are Putin decides to employ chemical, biological, or even small nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

So, how worried should we be about that escalation by the Russian military?

Joining us now is Rose Gottemoeller, a former United States under secretary of state for arms control who served as deputy secretary general of NATO. Thank you for being with us this evening.

I guess I need to ask you. In my brain I really don't distinguish between a little and big nuclear attacks, or tactical versus something else. They also seem really bad to me. But tell me about the idea of tactical smaller nuclear attack?

ROSE GOTTEMOELLER, FORMER DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL OF NATO: You are absolutely right to emphasize that any nuclear use, big or small. It's the absolute breaking of a taboo that has existed since World War II. And we really like to change the world as we know it. It would really I think lead to global condemnation of law got a very potent of the entire Russian regime, because as a "Scientific American" author said, these are -- these are weapons of enormous destructive power.

[21:25:02]

They are frightening in their destructive power. And so, they would galvanize I think global attention away even beyond what we've seen today with this egregious and barbaric invasion of Ukraine.

So, I think the Kremlin is no doubt thinking twice about their nuclear saber-rattling at this point.

VELSHI: Yeah, I guess that's the issue. We're all surprised. We all know everybody of a certain age has seen how this unfolds. How there is an understanding that we don't have -- that that's something that Vladimir Putin was talking about from before this invasion was launched. And he continues to do so.

Now it's quite -- but it has caused quite the wettest to convene a team to say what happens if this happens. Tell me what you think about what happens if they use any kind of nuclear weapon in Ukraine?

GOTTEMOELLER: Yeah, I think that's a really important point. I'll come back to the way -- from the Kremlin side. But they have been rattling the saber since 2014. Putin enjoys doing it since the invasion of Crimea in 2014. It would be funny if it were not so tragic.

But the fact that throughout the years the Soviet power and into the Russian federation, their propaganda machine has regularly -- behind the United States for being the kind the bad boy of using weapons of this kind in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I think the Russian leadership is having second thoughts about having that moral burden put on their shoulder. Suddenly they become the bad way of the global regime.

And propaganda directed at that perhaps. So, that's why I'm thinking that is the steam is quieted down a bit. And the focus sadly nonetheless has shifted to perhaps that chemical attack in this invasion.

VELSHI: I want to talk to you about that, because the mind doesn't react the same way to chemicals and biological attacks as it does to nuclear when we talk about it, when we think about it, but they're awful. And they're widely used and they're also disallowing it. It also comes up.

What do you think the likelihood is of chemical or biological weapons being used?

GOTTEMOELLER: Sadly in the last year in particular with the civil war in Syria, where Russia's been very involved in the last decade. Chemicals were used regularly in warfare, although that was prohibited by the chemical weapons convention, whether you are using chlorine and gas which is an industrial chemical, or whether you're using sarin, which is a nerve agent. All of this is prohibited by the chemical weapons convention, which the Russians have signed up to.

But nevertheless they have been shielding and defending the Assad regime in Syria over the last ten years, as they have been using chlorine and also some mustard gas. So, I would say they kind of have a lot of -- practical experience over the last ten years. So, that's what concerns me a bit about the situation in Ukraine.

But nevertheless we need to roundly condemn any use of chemicals whether the ammonia they have stockpiled apparently, or whether it's any kind of chemical agent. We need to be ready to round and condemn that and add it to the pile of evidence that's accumulated of war crimes in this invasion of Crimea.

VELSHI: And Joe Biden made a reference to that today. He will be addressing the world tomorrow and I suspect at this topic that you're discussing will come up.

Rose Gottemoeller, thank you for joining us. She's the former United States undersecretary of state for arms control in the former deputy secretary general of NATO.

Well, in a speech today, Vladimir Putin use some conservative talking points and accuse the West of trying to quote, cancel Russian culture. Meanwhile, his own inner circle continues to get mysteriously smaller, begging the question of whether the Russian leader is starting to lose his grip of control. A journalist who's forced to flee Russia to avoid arrest joins us next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

VELSHI: Last night, we showed you this video that a Russian state sponsored news outlet released of President Putin meeting with his security council. It's 11 second long in the focus here was on the guy in the upper left hand corner, that guy. That's the Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu who after being on Russian TV nearly every day in this war had been conspicuously absent for the public eye for nearly two weeks.

These 11 seconds was widely interpreted as Russia saying hey, he's still here. Definitely nothing we are going on. And this video spotted by "The Moscow Times" is from nearly two weeks earlier from March 11th.

Now check this out. "The Moscow Times" points out that the defense minister is wearing the exact same outfit in both videos. He's in front of the exact same background, and all of his movements seem to exactly mirror one another.

Now, there's been a ton of speculation in the West that Putin may be doing some sort of a purge of his inner circle. There are reports that Putin arrested the deputy head of the Russia National Guard. And a U.S. intelligence official told "The Wall Street Journal" that they believe that incredible report of one of Russia's top

intelligence agency units is under house arrest. He was the chief of the FSB unit, in charge of gathering intel about Ukraine leading up to the war.

Now, NBC's not independently confirmed any of these reports, and part of the reason for that is that the reporting that you need to do to get to the bottom of this simply cannot happen in Russia. Even "The Moscow Times" is no longer in Russia. They relocated to the Netherlands earlier this month after Russia passed that law, making it illegal for journalists to even call the war in Ukraine a war.

The law has forced the last bastions of independent press to either flee the country or shy away from any real war reporting altogether. In this story in particular would be illegal twice over, because back in 2020, the Russian government it illegal to report anything about the Russian security services. So, there hasn't been press on this stuff out of Russia for years now.

Our next guest is a Russian journalist who covered the Russian security service for decades and decided in 2020 that rather than stop reporting are getting thrown in jail, he leave the country and report from London. He's improperly well-sourced and maybe one of the best people on the planet in a position to help us make sense of all this.

Joining us now is Andrei Soldatov, an investigative journalist, expert on Russian state intelligence apparatus, the author of "The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Emigres and Agents Abroad".

Andrei, thank you so much for joining us tonight.

There is something so interesting in your reporting. Your sources do not believe that these disappearances and Vladimir Putin's inner circle are punishment for the war not going the way they planned. But they actually might be a mole hunt. Tell us about?

ANDREI SOLDATOV, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: Yes, we got some report two -- actually two weeks ago that Vladimir Putin decided to attack the FSB, as you rightly mentioned, and the head of the espionage unit of the FBS was placed under house arrest. The source reports indicated that he was placed under house arrest because intelligence provided to Putin before the invasion was not accurate. They did not expect any resistance from the Russian troops. And we know now that what is actually happened is the fierce resistance from the Ukrainians.

But it looks like now, it's coming something else. It's not only about bad intelligence. It's not only about misusing of funds, allocating funds of government to cultivate political group in Ukraine, which would be more supportive of the Russian invasion. It's also about trying to find a source of the U.S. intelligence, and why does the intelligence before the war was so accurate.

And it started with the FSB in this particular unit because this unit was also in charge of the maintaining official (INAUDIBLE) with CIA. So, they started there, because these guys were known to have at least some context with American intelligence.

VELSHI: Now let's talk about the Defense Minister Shoigu being out of the public eye. Obviously this is not a name or person with who our western audiences are familiar. Why -- tell me about why this is such a big deal that he was active at the beginning of the invasion and suddenly seem to have disappeared for two weeks and now there's questions about whether this video that he was on is really current or from two weeks ago?

SOLDATOV: Well, first of all, this war is very different from what we've had before with Putin. We had a war in Chechnya, in Georgia, and in Syria. All these wars, we have a commander who was in charge of the operation on the battlefield. This war is different because we do not have such a person. The public face of the war from the military side is Sergei Shoigu, the minister of the defense -- despite the fact that he has no military training, no military education and he's an engineer by his training.

Nevertheless because he was always extremely close to Putin, they spent their holidays together, and Shoigu was a very popular in the country, he became a popular face of the war. Now he disappeared for almost two weeks. And there's no public explanation.

And some rumors of maybe he had some problems with his heart. Maybe the problem is that the war is not going the way that everybody in Moscow wants it to go.

VELSHI: Andrei Soldatov, thank you for your excellent reporting on this. Andrei Soldatov is an investigated journalist and an expert on the Russia state intelligence apparatus.

We're going to take a quick break but still ahead, we're going to be checking in with a friend of ours named Alexander Prokhorenko. Alexander is still in Kyiv where life persists amid the invasion.

But first, we'll show you the extra mile that people are going to here in Poland to welcome Ukrainian refugees. You won't want to miss that.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:44:28]

VELSHI: Poland is not just taking refugees from Ukraine in. This nation is offering those refugees housing, money, and medical care. And for the people coming here from Ukraine, Poland is offering schooling, and with that, a sense of normalcy.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI: Class is in session. These are Ukrainians students learning Polish. A lesson that you could see belies just how quickly these high school sort of had to grow up since fleeing their home country weeks ago.

[21:45:01]

EVA VISHNIVETSKA, UKRAINIAN REFUGEE: I miss my city so much, if we were friends you would just, you would have to see my hundred messages about how I want my home. I miss my city, because if war stopped, just like that, I need to wait two months before going back home. It destroyed, it destroyed all my city. I was home when the bomb blast in the house nearby. I just saw its noise and, hot, it's so crazy and strange.

VELSHI: By contrast, the routine of school is a welcome relief.

ALEXANDER LOPATYSNKYI, UKRAINIAN STUDENT: I want to say thank you to all the Poland people that help.

VELSHI: From gym class, to the lunchroom, new friendships are formed.

NATALIA MAZUREK, POLISH STUDENT: Sometimes the presidents is the most that we can give, and the most important thing that they get from us, because they need it. They left their families. Ukraine. So, every way of help is needed as much needed.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: They need friends

NADIA KACPEREK, POLISH STUDENT: They want to talk. They want to integrate with us and feel like normal teenagers.

VELSHI: And the city wants them to feel welcome, too. On every Warsaw lamppost are Ukrainian flags welcoming them here.

Warsaw's a city of about 1.7 6 million people. Recent estimates are that about 300,000 refugees have come to the city. That's a 17 percent increase in the population. But half of those refugees are children.

So, despite all the social services that are being offered to these refugees, local officials say it's not enough.

You told me that the Polish students are doing a great job, the parents of the students are doing a great job, and the people in the community are helping you a lot. Still you say you need more?

ANDRZEJ WYROZEMBSKI, HEADMASTER (through translator): We have to provide for these kids, because some of them are sleeping in our room with ten or 20 people on a mattress. We need more financing, to give them breakfast, and to give them dinners. If the number of kids in Poland grow, the schools grow by one fold, it's a huge burden.

Poland is not such a wealthy country to take care of it by ourselves.

VELSHI: Andrzej Wyrozembski is the schools headmaster. He tells me that he thinks that the other EU countries need to step up to help Poland financially. And in Poland, there's a lot to finance.

Here huge lines are seen each day as refugees lined up for a government ID number, like a Social Security number in the United States, it guarantees them the right to work, free health care, and education. And for the students receiving that education will starting in Polish school may feel like starting over they don't intend to -- let the challenge held them back.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: If you want to learn, you would learn. And if you don't want to learn, you don't learn. I will not -- yeah, I want to learn Polish, but I know that it's important for me and I need to learn.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI: Well, tomorrow, President Biden will be coming here from Warsaw, Poland, to meet refugees from Ukraine and talk to officials here about the extraordinary mandatory efforts that they're undertaking as Poland absorbs more than 2 million refugees and counting.

We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:53:13]

VELSHI: One month ago today, it was the second day of the war in Ukraine. And on that day, Rachael talked to a restaurant owner in the capital city of Kyiv named Alexander Prokhorenko. Like most of his compatriots, he was new to war. He told Rachel that he and some of his neighbors were just learning how to survive.

They found some pool chairs and pillows and transformed an underground parking garage into a bunker, while taking turns guarding the doors with these weapons.

Now, much has changed since then. Alexander is no longer sleeping in the underground garage. Most of his neighbors are gone. He doesn't have the guns anymore. He donated them to the men on the front lines.

Alexander didn't leave Kyiv because he couldn't believe his parents behind, but that has changed, too. They left the city a week ago. He stayed. He told us today I'm not allowed to leave the country. And I don't want to be anywhere else.

At peace with his decision to stay in Kyiv until the end, Alexander decided to be of service. He started by driving people to train stations so they could escape. He then worked with other restaurant owners to prepare meals for Ukrainian soldiers. And then one day, suddenly, he received a text message from a friend that put him on a new path. His friend told Alexander's relatives needed food and medicine. So, Alexander found the supplies, and delivered them. And this initiated a chain of help.

Supported by his friends in restaurant industry and ten volunteers, Alexander now spends most of his days delivering food to those in need, about 50 to 75 bags daily containing eggs, butter, bread, chicken, milk whatever they can find.

He's also picking up medicine for elderly people. During one of his deliberately better Ukrainian grandmother who had been unable to leave Kyiv. She was so overwhelmed by Alexander's visit that she broke down in tears.

[21:55:03]

She said she never expected to live her last days like this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I live to see this bastard come and disturb my peace before my death. My birthday was on the 25th of February, 83 years old and this bastard congratulated me this way.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: As Alexander drives from district to district delivering food, he's become a witness to war. He took this video that you're watching on his phone earlier this week. That pile of debris is the Retroville shopping center in Kyiv. It used to be a vibrant place that was filled with restaurants and shops. They have a fancy McDonald's. It's all gone. All of.

It was hit by a Russian missile on Monday. According to "Kyiv Independent", at least eight people died in that strike.

The mall is only five miles from Alexander's apartment, so he's very aware that the war is moving close to his own home. He said that the anticipation feels like a game of roulette, Russian roulette, and that any day could be his day. But he is ready to fight.

Joining us again is Kyiv resident and restaurant owner Alexander Prokhorenko.

Alexander, we're really grateful for you joining us tonight. So much has changed in this month, so much. Tell us about what your life is like now compared to a month ago?

ALEXANDER PROKHORENKO, KYIV RESIDENT: Good evening.

Well, it's -- the light has changed to anticipation of the war getting closer and closer to where you are. It was already in our lives. But now we can hear the bombing more often. We hear this siren I would say every, not every day but at every moment but every hour.

So, life has changed totally. And as you heard before, now are helping out not just people who need food, but people who need medicine and there are a lot of people with medicine for thyroid that are in need and medicine for diabetics. You cannot find it anywhere in Kyiv, anywhere in Ukraine. So my friends from abroad buy all this medicine and sent it to me, and volunteers also buying this medicine, all around Kyiv region, and a few of my friends even from different parts of Ukraine are also buying out this medicine, and sending it to me.

And we're giving it away for free because people are really in need of it. So, basically life has changed totally, from normal to nightmare. Seeing these people, seeing their eyes -- seeing what they're really going through. It's a terrible shock for us, and for -- I would say for any citizen of the world.

VELSHI: Tell me about when you say seeing them and seeing their eyes. I'm seeing them on the other side, when they leave the country, when they get off these trains in -- whether it's Hungary, or here in Poland. It's women, children, generally without men, in a fighting age because people like you can't leave. What do the guys look like on your side?

PROKHORENKO: Well, I would say pretty much the same. They are scared, two groups of people when you deliver to them food and medicine. One group is when you - saying, okay, I'll go downstairs. Or I'll meet you in front of my building. And then the rest say, please come to this floor that floor. And you're going up and you see they can move, while the bombing, while the siren goes, they can't even move to the basement and the time they cannot move.

I saw this grandma, grand woman was -- she barely could move and though more than 60 percent of people just cannot go anywhere. So, they're scared. They don't have much time to go downstairs. So, that's shocking because this is something a normal that you could see during this stage, and those grand people needs to have respect from -- I don't know, from the rest of - - from all the world, from -- they need to believe in calm and happy life but not like now.

This is -- this is happening right now. This is -- this shouldn't happen to these people. And it makes me and the rest of the people who don't want to take the leave it makes me stay, because if not us who would help them if we will leave somewhere and hide, who will be in charge of this.

This is that everybody should know, that the war -- it's been a whole month since the Russia attacked Ukraine. And Russians bombs are hitting residential building in Kyiv, and the live shopping mall was -- surrounding the building that was destroyed completely to the ground. And, you know, the Russian famous opposition journalist Oksana Baulina, she was killed by Russian military drone, and -- while giving the report to the media.

So, basically, you know -- and the overall feeling is quite tense. But we work every day. We continue helping our people and people in need. And we continue to distribute food, and medicine and we barely could get any sleep.

VELSHI: Yeah. Alexander, thank you for this. I hope things have changed differently the next time we speak. Alexander Prokhorenko, we appreciate what you're doing, the world does see you and you do have our respect.

That does it for us tonight. Time for "THE LAST WORD." Alex Wagner is in for Lawrence tonight.

Good evening, my friend.

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT. THIS COPY MAY NOT BE IN ITS FINAL FORM AND MAY BE UPDATED.
END

Content and programming copyright 2022 MSNBC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Copyright 2022 VIQ Media Transcription, Inc. All materials herein are protected by United States copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast without the prior written permission of VIQ Media Transcription, Inc. You may not alter or remove any trademark, copyright or other notice from copies of the content.

Document TRMADS0020220326ei3p00001