

Reflections on World Politics #3

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Partners on the Front Lines

The Backstory: Let me explain how I got so involved in the crisis in Ukraine. When Putin's cronies in the Kremlin decided to close down the Russian-American Christian University (RACU) after fifteen years of operation as a Christian liberal arts university in Moscow, we were able to sell our brand-new campus facility in 2014 and transfer the net assets to the States. RACU's Trustees decided to use the assets to support Christian educational ministries in Russia and Ukraine beginning in 2015. Then, when the law was passed in Russia labeling foreign organizations that were supporting institutions in the country as "foreign agencies" and their leaders "foreign agents," request for grants to Russia from our new private investment fund quickly dried.

The Board of Trustees then decided to focus more of our resources in Ukraine, which was always viewed as the "Bible Belt" in the Soviet Union. Our investments expanded significantly, and we established many partnerships in Ukraine with Christian leaders in educational institutions and in church leadership. I visited numerous campuses, met the top leadership of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches, and fell in love with this amazing country and its vibrant young people. I am getting multiple direct reports from Ukraine every day, and they give me much to celebrate and much to weep about. Joy and pain in equal doses.

The Heroes: In the earliest stages of this conflict, two Christian educational institutions were quickly vacated as Russian forces entered the country from its eastern region, which is controlled by pro-Russian supporters. Back in 2014, one of the premier Christian educational institutions in Ukraine was taken over by pro-Russian troops and made into their military base. Significant investments in Ukraine were quickly lost at the point of Russian bayonets, and now it was happening again.

When the attack on Ukraine was launched at 5:00 a.m. on Thursday, February 24, many Ukrainians were unprepared because they had not believed it would happen. Their hope was based on high-level discussions between Putin and Western leaders, and so it was a shock when the invasion occurred. Ukrainian men between the ages of 18 and 60 were required to register for military service. The younger men, ages 18 to 40, were enlisted in active military service, while the rest were assigned to either active or reserved forces. As the men headed off to combat areas, their wives took their families to the western borders where NATO neighbors allowed them to move in. The pictures of these young mothers, with their kids clinging to them as they kiss their husbands goodbye, are painful to take in.

In a report that I received from a friend in Poland, he wrote that the line of cars to get through the border was more than six miles long, and that people had to wait in their cars for a day or two with no access to stores, restaurants, sanitary facilities, or places to sleep. You can imagine what this must have been like for a young mother with several little children, navigating mobs of people. This was true at other border entries points as well.

The heroes are the young soldiers who were quickly trained to fight an overwhelming attack by Russians. But the other heroes are the young female students at the various Christian educational institutions who stayed to help the elderly, the homeless, the hungry, and the confused who had no idea where to go. I will not name these schools for their own safety, but their stories are incredible. At one school, the students, faculty, and staff moved into the basement of their building. After a day or two, the women and children were packed into vans and driven to western Ukraine, leaving only ten people on campus. The school was turned into a humanitarian aid center where people could hide during air raids and get food from the kitchen staff, who refused to be evacuated and continued to provide food for anyone in need.

At another school, more than 1,000 people were supported as the educational facility was converted to a refugee center. The young female students reported that one morning 92 people arrived on campus, most of whom were children from foster families. They were fed, provided housing, given spiritual support, and then helped to get across the border. They told a story of a 95-year-old woman and her 73-year-old daughter who suffers from seizures. The older woman had survived the famine created by Soviet leaders during World War II and now had to flee her country again; these young students took care of them and got them to safety. The students had not been trained for this, but they had been taught to serve those in need and did so without hesitation. Other reports from Ukraine tell of students helping African university students who were having a difficult time getting through border checks, even in friendly NATO countries. The students stepped in, translated for the Africans, and became their advocates, which is what they needed.

Anne Applebaum, an astute observer of this region of the world, reported that “Ukraine itself will never be the same again. . . thousands of people are making choices that they too could not have imagined two weeks ago. Ukrainian sociologists, baristas, rappers, and bakers are joining the territorial army. Villagers are standing in front of Russian tanks, shouting ‘occupiers’ and ‘murderers’ at Russian soldiers firing into the air. Construction workers on lucrative contracts in Poland are dropping their tools and taking the train back home to join the resistance. A decade’s worth of experience fighting Russian propaganda is finally paying off, as Ukrainians created their own counternarrative on social media. They post videos telling Russians soldiers to go home to their mothers. They interview captured teenage Russian conscripts and put video clips online. . . every Ukrainian who lived through this moment will always remember what it felt like to resist – and that too will matter, for decades to come.”

Young people, faculty, and staff at our partner ministries are courageously serving in the resistance. Their reports express a deep commitment to their country and their hope for its future, a future free of Russian dominance.