

EPISODE 008

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:05] ANNOUNCER: You're listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody, and welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, a podcast about leading in difficult times and difficult situations. Today, I am welcoming back a familiar voice to many of you, Mike Staresinic. If you listened to the episode last week, you heard Mike talk in great detail about Ukraine and the situation there. That conversation drew a lot of responses. And Mike and I followed up a little bit about what we are hearing. And Mike had the idea of inviting a colleague and friend that he's known for a long time, who is Ukrainian, into the conversation. And so today, it's a great pleasure to have Polina Makarova. Make sure I have that correct.

[00:01:01] PM: Makarova.

[00:01:02] RT: Makarova. Thank you very much. I knew I'd mess that up.

[00:01:04] MS: Does it rhyme with macaroni and macarena. It' Makarova.

[00:01:09] RT: I practiced that, and I knew I blow it. So I apologize right out of the gate. So our conversation today is going to be a firsthand account by Polina about the last seven days that she's been experienced in her homeland. And to get into that conversation, I'm going to ask Mike to begin by sharing with the listeners how the two of you met. And then, Polina, that will give you an opportunity to share with people who you are and what you do prior to the last seven days, and then we'll go from there. So Mike, over to you to share a little bit about the connection with the two of you, please.

[00:01:40] MS: Thanks, Rick. And I really appreciate you doing this in the introduction. Because last week, when you asked me questions, I say, "Well, how do I know that? Let's ask somebody

who really knows,” which is what I do in my work. Let's find somebody who's in the situation. Let's ask Polina.

So I'm so glad Pauline has joined us. It's been overdue. I think we pledged to meet up every year after we met, and we haven't been able to. Since 2017, Polina and I met at the Plan-B festival in Kharkiv, which is a really remarkable festival of activism and music. The best music and DJs in Europe. Best new music with some sort of social activism connected to it. I hope we'll come back to that because it's something that has really shaped my life and a lot of our lives. And Polina was helping. She volunteered for the festival, which hundreds of people must have been volunteering. But following that, I hope it was an okay role of helping me get around and interpret for me with my awful Ukrainian, and also gave me an amazing tour of this remarkable city that's now under siege.

[00:02:40] RT: So, Polina, so you meet this guy from Pittsburgh. Share with people a little bit about who you are, as I know, you have some artistic aspects in your background. So just give people a context of who you are.

[00:02:54] PM: Hi, everyone. Thank you, Rick and Mike, for giving me voice. It's very important for all over the world right now about, but especially for Ukrainians. I'm 29 years old, and I'm a graphic designer. All my life, I tried to use my professional work as a form of activism. I created design for anti-corruption projects, for ecological projects, for feminists project, for Kharkiv pride movement, and so on. This was my life, and I was building my country. I was in any way I could contributing to reform in Ukraine. So it is a proper European state.

[00:03:45] RT: And then, seven days ago, everything changed. I know that there are hundreds of thousands of people, Ukrainians, on the move. The rest of the world is calling them refugees. I'm not sure what you call it, but I know you're one of them right now. So would you share with people what the last seven days have been like for you since the invasion started?

[00:04:05] PM: Can I share the atmosphere in Ukraine and my feelings before the invasion?

[00:04:10] RT: Absolutely.

[00:04:11] PM: So since 2014, when Donetsk and Luhansk were declared People's Republic, it was done by Russia, firstly. And I hope now the world sees it. And my native city, Kharkiv, it was also proclaimed to be Kharkiv People's Republic. But our Ukrainian special forces, they freed the administrative building that was – It was taken and captured here and the Russian flag was put on it. So this destiny of being part of Russia in 2014, in 2015, it didn't become our reality, and we were very grateful for it. But still, we lived in fear for eight years. We lived in fear, but we continue to build our life.

Around 2015, 2016, I asked my husband, “Are you sure that we want to build our life here? Because we are not safe here. Putin will come for us.” He said, “No, I think it will be alright.” So we bought a flat. And then we bought a bigger flat. And we bought cars. And we were making renovations in the bigger flat to move there and to raise a family. And I was trying to get pregnant while fearing that at any moment it can all be over. And I was asking him, “Are you sure that we need to continue spending our money to furnish new flat? Are you sure that we need to spend our money on travel or –” We bought tickets to Italy for the 24th of August? And I asked him, “Are we sure we're going to go there?” He said, “It will be all right.”

And we lived like this till the last day, even though the information keeps coming about chances of invasion, raising and raising this each day. And we were torn apart. Because on one hand, we had to continue living. On the other hand, we couldn't not think about what can happen at any moment. And we prepared, but it was not enough.

I went to first aid medical courses for the last two or three weeks. And on Friday, we had to go to the shooting training. But on Thursday, the invasion starts already. We've had so many plans, and we made them while thinking it will never happen. I mean, we made plans without being sure that they will come through. So when, finally, on the 24th of February, we woke up from sounds of bombs. It's undescrivable experience, I think more so because we were imagining it for the last few weeks, for sure.

And just before the invasion, I felt so bad physically, and emotionally, and psychologically, that we watched Harry Potter, Sorcerer's Stone, to feel a little bit better. And this movie, and not only these books, the story that they're telling it is exactly what is happening with Ukraine and Putin. Putin is Voldemort, and he's Stalin, and so on. This is one evil that continues living.

So we woke up from bombing. And I took documents. We took things that, for weeks, we were told to take if anything happens. So there were instructions. It was called emergency bag. How to pack an emergency bag. So we did. And the first thing that I did, we went across the city, to my workplace. I was working in Kharkiv, anti-corruption center. We went there and I collected my notebook because all of my life is on it.

Then we went to my parents and we decided to split up. We decided that I will drive my mother, my sister, my aunt, and two cousins, and all of our kids. I am going to drive them on my car to our summer residence, which is a little bit to the southwest from Khrakiv. So it would be a little bit safe. I wanted also to say that last time I had my husband was in a parking lot near my home. And I didn't know whether I will see him in few hours, or a few days, or months, or ever again.

So then whenever at our summer residence the time came to make the most difficult decision that I've ever made in my life, to go further west. And now it's hard for me to tell you how this decision was made. We made the vote. We voted. The result of the vote was that we need to head further to the west.

So by the evening of first day, we were at the city Dnipro. And it was already clear that it was the right decision. I was driving for the whole day. The second day, my husband's colleague gave keys to his flat for us to stay in Dnipro, the first day. He gave us keys, and then he said, "Take them with you. I don't need them." So we went to the next day, early in the morning, we went further west. And again, I drove for the whole day. And we came to Vinnitsa in the evening. It's like another 500 kilometers, I think.

We stayed at a friend's house. She fed us. She gave us a place to sleep. I slept for two hours, again, like the night before. And then in the early morning, we went out again, and drove for the whole day again. We drove. And each day, the situation on roads was worse and worse. If first day it was not a lot of cars. Everyone was obeying rules and everything was calm. Second day, it was more urgent. People were driving faster. A little bit less carefully. And on the third day, it got worse from morning to the evening. People were driving as fast as they could. They didn't panic. But there was a sense of urgency. Everyone was moving fast, but it was controlled.

But unfortunately, we saw some cars that didn't make it. We saw one car that was in flames, like in movies. We saw one car that was hanging in the branches of a tree and other damaged cars. Even though it was scary, the unity of people, it is undescrivable. And I'm sure – And I see in us and in my friends that they become more and more united. So people just give you food. They give you shelter. They don't need money. Everyone gives everything to anyone for free. Money don't matter there now.

So by the end of the third day, we came to the end of the queue to the border. And we stayed at the SKU for another day and a half in. The queue was around five kilometers long. It was moving with a speed of like few meters every 15 hours, approximately like this. But their local people, they help. They bring food. They don't sleep for days. They continue cooking food for people who are stuck in the queue. And people come to eat this food. And they leave what food they have in their cars delivered to locals so that they cook it and give it to other people who come to the queue.

So everyone shares everything. Nobody's hungry. Nobody's cold. So yeah, we crossed the border after four and a half days. I think I may be a little bit confused. And I thought I was exhausted because I slept for like eight hours over this time. But I decided that we will go straight to Warsaw. The crossing of the border was very quick. And I'm very grateful for Polish government and all Polish people. They are helping very hard. They're very concentrated to give help. They're very compassionate, and we appreciate it.

So as I said, after we cross border, I was very tired, but I decided that we have to go straight to Warsaw. So we went to Warsaw. We were met by friends of friends who made a dinner for us and it was so surreal, and in such contrast with our reality back in Ukraine. Just the person who we didn't previously knew invited us to his flat. And there was a table set with dinner for us. And it was such a normal and cozy environment in such contrast to what is happening there. It was hard. They gave us a place to stay. They gave us everything we need. And we are very grateful for it. But we didn't exit the war. I mean, we're in it fully. I'm in constant contact with 10s of people about where they are, what do they need? I tried to coordinate my friends from abroad who want to help. They translate videos. They help with the information spreading and so on.

[00:15:38] RT: I have one question that I think listeners are probably wondering about a little bit. Can you provide them with an update on the state of your husband in Kharkiv, given that you left him in a parking lot a few days ago?

[00:15:51] PM: Yeah. For a few days, he mainly stayed with his parents at their house. They barricaded windows, because of marauders and explosions. Today, he went to the city. While there is no curfew, you can go around the city, but only if it's absolutely necessary. He did a few things around town. He brought some medical supplies to hospital that he had at his home because he was a distributor of medical plates for bones and so on.

[00:16:32] MS: [inaudible 00:16:32].

[00:16:34] PM: Yeah. He had some in reserve. He drove to the hospital to give it away. It's all for free, of course. Then he moved some people around city who needed to get to destinations to other destinations. He went to our flat. My and his flat. He to some things. He gave away for that we had there to our neighbors. We also had like a store room in the basement. He opened it for our neighbors so that they can use it.

He received the call from my friend. She asked him to drive her and her girlfriend to the railway station, because now there is almost no possibility to get to the train station to try to call taxis. But the chance that they will come is very small. And generally, people don't drive. Because, generally, the advice is don't go outside.

My husband came to them. They lost their cat. And they didn't want to go without it. So he smashed some furniture in the kitchen to get to this cat. They took it, and he drove them to railway station. I don't think that they have left railway station because there are I think hundreds of people, maybe thousands, at the railway station in Kharkiv. They're trying to leave. But trains are very rare. I don't know, maybe one or few a day. There's a huge queue. And the trains take mostly only women and children.

Another thing I wanted to tell about my husband. Today he told me that he received some mission that he can't talk to me about. I assume it's some help, some strategic value. I don't

know. So he will be doing it in the evening or at night. And I really hope that he calls me again after.

[00:18:58] RT: Mike, it's been a week since you and I spoke about the situation. And I know that you have your people in country and you're in communication with all sorts of folks. Can you add kind of a refresh from your perspective about what's changed since we last spoke and any other thoughts you have about the situation?

[00:19:19] MS: Yes, thanks. So that's not easy, Rick. I hope I can do justice to the topic. Number one, I have to say, thank you, Polina, for sharing with us. You have to say hello to your husband when you speak to him later after this operation. Tell him I said a big hi and send a hug. He's about six foot six tall. So the also last time I saw him, he hugged me goodbye, and I got one of the best bear hugs in my life. Also, when he took us out, he showed us the best beer making in Kharkiv and suggested what beers we might drink. And of course, I wanted one, but it ended up being free. And the bigger guys can handle it. So you've got to send my love and appreciation to Alex, please, Polina.

And it just takes me back to those days. If we look at the current situation, I do think about Kharkiv and Kyiv. And I think about the east, which I think has been under covered in the media. So I spent yesterday trying to reach CNN and New York Times. All were informed that they should be reporting what's happening in Mariupol, which is further to the east. So the update really is that I think that Vladimir Putin, Voldemort. We shouldn't say his name. Either that guy or that guy. The Botoxed Stalin, I think as he's known, used this Monday Minsk meeting to sort of cynically reload and try out a new strategy.

And we see that from his – I mean, from Francisco Franco to Slobodan Milosevic, this is what they do. He used that opportunity to reload and re-strategize and decided that they had to take the attack full-on to civilians of Ukraine. In these cities, at least. I don't know how those decisions are made. But it's a tragic mistake from him. It's a historical estate that will live in infamy. And he has cemented his place in the gallery of tyrants forever. So that meant more rocket attacks. And they call them grad rockets, which I'm not that familiar with. But these are small rockets that are very easy to launch from trucks, and they've got trucks full of them on the

outskirts, and they're hurling them in certain apartment complexes and government complexes in the middle of Kharkiv.

One we saw landed at the center of Kharkiv and took out the Slovenian ministry and one of the government offices right near the mayor's office in the Freedom Square that Polina took me all around. President Zelensky repeated yesterday, this is the largest square in Europe, or the second largest. And to me, it's one of those moments where everything is the best or the second best anywhere. Anywhere you travel, well, this is the biggest square. I thought it's doesn't have to be the biggest. It has a huge heart. It's a beautiful, big place with this constructivist architecture surrounding the square, which is La Corbusier kind of failing to making the Radiant City in Paris, but succeeding to make it in Russia, and in Ukraine, and in former Soviet republics right there in the 20s. This is a masterpiece of that style, which is very severe, but elegant and clean with no decorations. Kind of sound modernist architecture. For architects, they know the square and they know the building. Any architect in the world have studied this place.

SO I do remember walking around there and hearing all the details from Polina. We looked at these statues of the three Nobel Prize winners from Kharkiv. Really, a city of science. We saw the statue of the students who were killed in World War II, very beautiful thrones ensemble, sculptured as the Youth Center. We went inside the building right behind that and saw two stories of art, a very contemporary art exhibit from folks, mostly sculpture from folks around all around Ukraine. It was very beautifully done. So Kharkiv is under onslaught. Everybody's in the basement when the firing is going on. People are hiding. The sound of shooting is interminable. And you really can't get a rest. It's quite disturbing. So that's Kharkiv.

And it's a bit puzzling. And the first time I went there, I thought we're just 20 miles from Russia, or 10 miles from Russia. Why haven't they come and take it? I felt that sense of fear that Polina referred to, because it's so close. Even though the conflict was, at that time, a little bit far away, you thought, "My goodness! This place is kind of vulnerable."

But at the same time, it's beautiful. It's got this modern subway system. People get to work. They get up above ground and walk. Everybody's walking everywhere. It's a very walkable city. Ukrainian cities, this, the fifth-year downswing that American cities spat, at least in one regard.

I'm trying to think, I should probably move to Mariupol. Mariupol is also under unsought. That's a steal and port city in the east that is encircled by Russian forces and is getting bombed from all sides, mostly outside at the moment and then on the left bank of Mariupol, which is making at least 2000 people run away to central Mariupol. They need help in humanitarian supplies. And in Kiev, I don't have an update today. As Polina said, you're just checking your message every five minutes. I just haven't had the chance to catch up here. 11 o'clock in Pittsburgh.

[00:24:16] RT: Thank you. Polina, when we were talking before we started this episode, you said something to me that you knew this was coming. You being the country. And you didn't do enough to get ready for what was coming. Because you had some thoughts about what I guess I'm going to say is the potency of fear. From your perspective as you sit here right now, what's your reflections on how the country got ready for this? And where are they now? And I know it's a very difficult impossible question to even think about answering right now. But what lies ahead based on how you've entered it as a country from your perspective?

[00:24:58] PM: I can tell you this. Way we were fearing, but we couldn't believe that it is possible to do what Putin does now. And after crossing this portal from thinking it is impossible, to thinking that everything is possible. We are now ready for nuclear war. I'm telling you straight. And we are ready for it. And we will never give up. And this is what every Ukrainian now says. There is no return. We wouldn't give up at any point earlier. But now we have lost so much that we don't care. We will fight until the last breath over the last Ukrainian, and not only Ukrainian. And if Putin starts nuclear war, then so be it. We can't do anything about it. What we can do is continue fighting, and maybe something will survive. And I think the world starts to understand it now. But it's not enough, unfortunately.

[00:26:08] RT: So what can people listening do to be of help?

[00:26:13] PM: Firstly, they can share information, because Russia fights on the informational front also. And I saw instances. And I saw screenshots of messages that said, "This is the job for you, Russians." I mean, this is directed to Russians. You have to download videos of war crimes that are committed right now in Ukraine, and you have to resound them. You have to record sound as if like from the first person who is filming this video. And to record the text, which explains that these are Ukrainian soldiers, Ukrainian military troops, which are destroyed,

or that these victims are victims of Ukrainian army and so on. So to reverse it. They're manufacturing these fakes.

So if the world doubts that Russia is aggressive, and they are destroying Ukraine, then the world doesn't deserve to exist. This is my view. If the world gives up on Ukraine now, then it doesn't deserve to exist, because it will mean that everything, every value of free world, of the West, of Europe, of all these human values, they are declared. If they mean something to the world, then they have to be defended. They do mean something for us Ukrainians, and we are dying for these values now. You know, like, the value of the dollar currency is guaranteed by gold. The value of human values is now guaranteed by Ukrainian lives. But if Ukraine fails, if Ukraine falls, if they kill us all, and the world doesn't do anything, these human values, it will mean that they don't exist. Because the world declares them. If the world declares them, the world has to do something. Not only declare, but fight, and do every person all over the world has to fight this fight right now in every way that they can. They can help in media. They can help financially. They can go to demonstrations. If everyone does everything they can, then we will survive as a human race.

[00:28:58] RT: Thank you for that. It's a clear call for action. Can you help us understand what you will now do from Warsaw?

[00:29:05] PM: I am staying in contact with all of my friends. Making sure that they're okay. And if they need something, I can help them get contacts and so on. I will continue to spread truth. To spread my experience and information about what is happening with my people. And I will move further west because people are coming here to Warsaw, here to Poland. And I'm very grateful to Polish people. And I really don't want them to get tired of helping Ukrainians. That's why we will make space for them. And we will move further west.

I want to say, again, that it is like in movies about World War II. There are bombs. There are dead people. There is panic. There is fear. There's hunger. And each minute is a failure. And another thing that I want to say that we, as Ukrainians, we do need help. We do need help to save the world. But we will continue fighting even if we don't get any help. You should see videos of people who are coming out to the streets carrying Ukrainian flags, and they stand

before Russian tanks. They lay near tanks. They hold it with their hands. You can't defeat such people. And you will never defeat them. But you can run out of them.

And I really liked what Mike said, that Ukraine is the center of the universe right now. If the universe is a place for people, for a human race, then Ukraine is the center of the universe right now. Maybe he can talk a little bit more about it.

[00:31:07] RT: Mike, some final thoughts from your side?

[00:31:10] MS: It's hard to know what to say, except to endorse what Polina has said. I think we have to listen and listen closely. I think the words are there. I think **[inaudible 00:31:20]** see this publicly very soon. We'll hear the words. And we'll also see them written down. And I think it will require us to go back and back and think and pick out things that mean something for that day and for that moment.

[00:31:36] RT: Polina, when we were discussing before we started recording, the possibility that things are happening and changing so fast, that it's possible that you want to expand the conversation from where we're going to leave it here. And so we have an agreement that all you need to do is let me know that you want to come back and share more stuff, and it will have a conversation, the three of us together on this. If there's other people that you think should be in that conversation, then we'll make room for them. And we'll do it that way as well. Whatever accommodates what you think is the situation that you want to address at that time. So I'm going to give you the last opportunity to say anything you want to the listeners before we bring this episode to a close.

[00:32:20] PM: Thank you so much. I want to say again that we will never surrender. We will fight until our dying breath. We will dedicate our lives either to rebuilding our beautiful country or fighting Russia, every one of us. I want to ask listeners to think about what it means for them. And that the moment when all this situation will touch them physically, it will be too late. You have to do something before it.

I also want to thank our Ukrainian army. They are heroes of undescrivable measure. And we have so many funny jokes and memes about this war. You can't imagine. We have to translate

them. One of them is that NATO has to join Ukraine in the sense that Ukraine wanted to be a part of NATO. Now NATO has to be a part of Ukraine because we are stronger, and so on.

And I really want to thank my president. I didn't vote for him. I even didn't respect him. But now he's more than a leader. Ukraine is the center of the universe. Zelinsky now is the superhero of our planet. So I truly and insistently advise everyone to listen to his speeches that he gives. He formulates everything very clearly. And thank you for inviting me for another part. It's an honor. And I will come back for sure. And I really hope that we will have some good news to talk about

[00:34:22] RT: Well, Polina, it's my honor to have you here, and your voice, and your message. And I don't want it to be the last one. I think there's a future here that's coming in your capacity to feel it and articulate it in words that people can understand. It's really potent. And it's important for them to hear this conversation, because it's a piece that's missing in the dialogue that's going on, I think. So we'll continue to do that. Mike, thank you again for being part of this. We will be back together again, I'm quite sure. So thank you everybody for listening. And Polina, thank you very much. And do take care, please?

[00:34:58] PM: Thank you. I will.

[OUTRO]

[00:35:02] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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