

EPISODE 10

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[00:00:19] RT: Hey, everybody, Rick Torseth, and welcome back to 10,000 Swamp leaders. As a general rule, my episodes are conversations with people who are leading in the swamp, and today is no exception to that. What is different about today is that we're actually going to be discussing a very live current event, which is the ongoing conflict that just started in the last 24 hours in Ukraine. And in order to do that well, I brought back Mike Staresinic, who some of you as listeners will remember from our very first episode. I brought back Mike, because he knows quite a bit about Ukraine.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:56] RT: So, Mike, let's just get going here, because people have some idea of who you are. But I want you to put yourself in context for them about what your position is, and relationship is to Ukraine, and therefore that helps them understand why we're going to have a conversation about it today.

[00:01:12] MS: Sure, great. Thanks, Rick. Thanks for having me back, too. It is kind of soon. Over the past 23 years, I've been involved in seven projects in Ukraine, almost all of them on the ground, working with people in different cities and locations about critical matters that matter to them in elections, democracy, governance, and Euro-Atlantic integration. And that starts in 1999. We hosted an event at Freedom House, a think tank that I worked for out of Washington, it was in Hungary, and it brought together all the countries of the former Soviet space and said how are things going now 10 years on from 1989? And there was a host of luminaries, prime ministers, presidents, former prime ministers and president, amazing folks coming together. And including from the Ukrainian delegation, we had the Foreign Minister and the defense minister to

talk about Euro-Atlantic integration. Euro being the foreign minister speaking about EU integration, and Atlantic being the American participation was about NATO.

They made us understand, “Hey, guys, we're on the same track as everybody here. But because we're Ukraine, we have some complications, because of the Russia factor.: So, we were made very clear why Ukraine might be on a slightly different trajectory or timeframe. That was very helpful in setting the stage for me almost a quarter century ago now. And after that, Ukraine attempted to have free and fair elections in 2004. They call it the Orange Revolution. I helped organize veterans of others sort of freedom fair election struggles to go to Ukraine, and share what had worked in Georgia the year before in Serbia, three years prior to that and other countries across eastern and central Europe at a time when nobody believed that Ukraine could have a free and fair election, free of Russian interference, and successfully institute a reformed government.

Well, they did. And then later, 10 years after that, a more retrograde government had come back in. Viktor Yanukovich shot the Ukrainian people to protect his petard in front of Russia. He had to leave because he assassinated 100 people in the square and can never return without legal consequences. And another, the Euro revolution and people in Ukraine, were looking for help, what do we do afterwards? How do we do this? A moment of great patriotism and young people being involved in politics for the first time all across the country.

So, from that time, that's the past eight years, I've tried to help communities in whatever way I can, in various projects that look at European integration, improve democratic practice, better governance, better service delivery, better connection between elected officials and citizens, and people who are surviving in the East after conflict, millions of people who were vulnerable, because they've been displaced from their homes. So, a realm of things where I feel like I get to go and meet people in person and say, “What's happening? And how can various international programs help you out?” And then I sometimes design and lead those programs. Sometimes I come in as a consultant or trainer to help out specific aspects.

[00:04:22] RT: Okay. And I think I'm correct in saying this, that currently, you are attached to a team of people on the ground working in Ukraine. And you've been doing that work from distance from Pittsburgh, where you are now. For a while, if act longer than before the Russians

mask their troops on the border. So, for people listening a little bit if you can, and we should say right away that there's some things you may not be able to discuss or names you may not be able to use because of the consequences that could fall their way. But is there anything you can say about the current work you've been doing prior to the Russian invasion?

[00:04:57] MS: Sure, thanks for that. In the east where the country was disrupted and then there's a so-called contact line, a dotted line across the map where Russia essentially has asserted control since 2014 conflict. There are a number of cities just west of that line, that have been cut off from markets, customers, supplies of water, drinking water, coal, anything they need for manufacturing. And so, via various US government programs, mostly USAID, their efforts to try to help those communities reimagine their future.

Well, I brought in City 50 concept. I helped cities envision out to 2050 what transformation looks like from where they are now to sort of postindustrial more balanced economy. That's my project since 2013. I've worked with 22 cities around the world on that concept. So, it kind of fit for the industrial cities right next to this contact line. To have somebody come and say, "How would you re-envision your future, to talk with leaders on a serious level?" That's governors, mayors, civil society, local government councils, everybody to say, "How do you actually reimagine the future and now that you've been disrupted?"

So fortunately, for me, since 2017, since I brought this project, it has been picked up by US government donors and said, "We'll go for it and see what happens." It's been quite confidence building and building a sort of diverse, economically diverse and sustainable and resilient economy in those cities. Anticipating a sort of peaceful situation that have not worked directly in the conflict zone is saying, now we've got to convince the Russians that you agree with us. I haven't gone across the contact line.

[00:06:40] RT: Okay. I can't help think, Mike, that in the last 24 hours, those people's vision for what their cities and towns could look like in 2050 is suddenly on the backburner that the Russians are advancing, so to speak, in some cases. So, as you sit here today, you said something to me yesterday, and you said, this is day one of a thousand days. Can you talk a little bit about why you say that? Because I know it's not a flippant comment, there's something to it that is based on your experience in these kinds of situations. So, help people understand

because I think a lot of listeners are just trying to make sense of what's going on there and what's ahead, and may have some aspirations and hopes for an outcome that sooner than what it may be. So, would you mind adding your perspective to the conversation based on your experience?

[00:07:30] MS: Yes, thank you. It's not an easy question. But I'm glad you honed in and remember this phrase day, one of a thousand days. I'm using day one of a thousand days quite consciously to kind of remind people who are in – I'm in Pittsburgh, right now, they're in the middle of the struggle. But I've had various people, by the way, you know, at 5 AM, Igor rolled out of bed, because he heard explosions on the edge of town and texted me, they're bombing us now.

[00:07:55] RT: Who's Igor?

[00:07:55] MS: He's a teammate I have in the Ukraine who is a very good local guy who kind of facilitates community processes. And a lot of the people I work with there, a team of 30, the people who've been on the ground in the community forever. But also, a lot of them have been displaced by the first conflict. So, they have a lot of personal drive to contribute to their country's future.

He rolled out of bed at 5 and said, "They're bombing us", and I happen to be on line at 10, 10 PM here the same time and I'm glad I saw that and was able to offer a few words. But I found other people writing to me right after, "They're bombing our town. They're bombing our town." Three cities and we were exchanging messages. They saw or heard the explosion. So, first name testimony. And the New York Times was about five minutes behind, I guess, verifying, getting a second source having the editor check it. I felt kind of lucky to be involved with folks there.

And so, what is happening, Rick, is that if you're in that situation, some people are saying, I guess it's all over now. Everything we tried to prevent, and this is the end. And I feel I have to say this is not the end, this is the beginning. There's a lot of work to do over the next thousand days, three years. Folks who have helped externally with great bravery, being with people in Ukraine over and over. Some wrote to me and said, I just don't see any hope, this is going to

turn into North and South Korea. And I just wish that – I use this phrasing of 1000 days and say, “Look, whatever happens, there's a role for us to help. We have to be ready to help because we are the people who know what's going on a little bit. Where are people going to run to? What are the blockages to them getting there? Can we help refugees if they need to escape? Can we help people inside if they need help?” And in every conflict, I've been involved with, one of these adaptive leadership principles and it is true even at the crisis moment, before it is settled into a truly complex situation that the crisis moment is an extreme hyper version of complexity. We go there and we are with people.

I have a few stories of that. I mean, I've like seven stories of people going there, and being with people even in great danger, if that makes some sense. So, I just want to remind our friends who are panicking thinking everything's over, it's just kind of started. And that includes Washington think tanks, that includes Americans welcoming refugees, that includes Poland, which has people fleeing over the border, that includes the people who are fleeing. I know you think your life is over today, and this is it. This is actually the first day of your next life, which is something the refugees and internally displaced people from the first conflict in 2014 have been clear about and have told me over and over.

[00:10:37] RT: You're pretty certain right now that refugees are on the move. I mean, I know I read some stuff this morning about sending people out of the country. So, that process in some ways is already day one beginning?

[00:10:51] MS: Thank you for that, because yeah, I would first of all, say yes, with the limited information we have, that is true, and people were already on the move. They're getting into Poland, they're getting out of Kyiv. They're moving from various places. Now, why do I qualify that, is because in some cities, if you haven't been attacked personally, people want to hang in there and stick in there. Ukrainians, I think the President said you'll see our faces not our backs. People don't want to leave until they have to. And in some cases, don't have anywhere to go. That kind of break it down into subgroups of who's going where are not going where, but you have the phenomenon of people not wanting – for example, before the military attack started, there was nobody in Ukraine who wanted to leave because it said I'm not going to give him the victory without having fired a shot.

So, there's science mode, but also, it's an unbelievable moment. Sorry, if I'm changing the subject, or people can't believe that their brothers and sisters and cousins and the country. Ukraine is intimately linked with Russia and Russia with Ukraine. People went to school and they have friends, they have relatives, they go back and forth for vacation. This is not what anybody in Ukraine wanted, and it's certainly not what any citizen of Russia wanted.

[00:12:05] RT: Help us understand who these Ukrainian people are. What are they made of? What's their culture like? What's their humanity like? Because most of us have never been there. We don't know.

[00:12:15] MS: Thank you. These are very plucky people who are going to be tough in this very difficult violence situation. I mean, plucky is the only word. It's kind of one of these informal words that spans comic strips and never appears in policy. But plucky, the people are kind of tough and determined and they go about their lives. They're known to be kind of quiet and just get it done kind of people. And some people say that's because the Russians executed anybody ambitious in the 1930s. So, there's a sort of a historical cultural aspect to this. But people get it done and work hard and are a little bit serious. I find until I get to know people, they don't let down their guard. They're kind of serious and don't smile and laugh. The anti-Americans, in that sense, like, where we try to go out of our way to put people at ease and tell jokes and stuff. They'd rather get to know you first and I kind of appreciate that.

[00:13:12] MS: Tell us a little bit about their art, their culture, their music, their songs. Add some texture to the humanity of these people who are right now in a very hard situation.

[00:13:23] RT: That's great. And I will describe to you what I think of as Ukrainian culture. As I talk, I don't want it all to exclude Russian culture, because they're, first of all, intertwined, equally rich in Ukraine, and also in Russia. So, let's not paint Russians as some different culture, then it's actually very much connected. This is why people do not want to go to war. I'm hearing more and more evidence, even though the government is trying to shut down people and demonize them and fire them or whatever, in Russia, the people in Russia don't even want this war. Why? Because everybody's related.

So, you've got these broad, deep families. What we would call a cousin, they will call brother and sister, because families are so close. Holidays mean a lot. Their holidays are people dressed up in their national costume, in my opinion, more than anywhere else in Europe. And that's hand embroidered flowers and women with floral bouquets in their hair and traditional foods. So, traditional food is so important in Russia and in Ukraine both. You've got borscht and all the beets and the cabbages and all the stuff that keeps you strong. Everybody's growing food at home in their hand making desserts for family festivals. I attended birthday parties with our team in Ukraine where there's tons of cakes, but there's also fresh plums right off the tree and grapes broad from the market.

So, there's a kind of healthy attitude towards life. If Americans might go to McDonald's for lunch, I often found people even in Kyiv, which has McDonald's. But in Kyiv, you go for a fresh made soup, and vegetables at this sort of Ukrainian McDonald's, but everything's fresh fruit. So, people make soup every day. There's a lot of beautiful elements of culture. Music too, music is dear to everybody's hearts. You find people writing poems and writing songs and performing songs. And those would be sentimental, maybe melancholy, but there would not be a drop of animosity to anybody else. So, the songs coming out today, I haven't seen any, but I'm going to guess there will be songs saying, what happened to our brotherhood? Why are we not as close as we used to be? I'm going to write up postcard to my long-lost cousin.

[00:15:40] RT: So, what I hear you say is we're at the beginning of something that could be with us for a while. And you're going to be involved in some way, shape, or form with the people as these days unfold. So, when you think about how you help, or how your team helps, and somewhere out there, people listening are wondering how can I help? We'll get to that a little bit later on. But share with people some of the specific ideas, methodologies, frameworks, that you think are going to be important in order to resolve this conflict, or to help these people get through this conflict. What comes to mind for you? What influences you that has you say, "This is a way that I can be helpful." Let's be specific. Let's be specific with some of the tools or processes that you think you might see value in helping people embrace so they can handle this tough situation.

[00:16:34] MS: I hope I'm up to the test, frankly, because when you ask the question, and others asking the question, and honestly, my answer is sometimes I don't know. Try this out. I

hope this works. What do you think of this? And that's okay. But you don't want to screw it up. So, what happens, Rick, in crisis is that lots of things are unclear. The facts are unclear, what's actually happening is unclear. We can reach people. I tried to call yesterday and I couldn't get through. This is very common. So, there's a great sense of confusion in crisis. And I think we all have to redouble our efforts to communicate. I know an organization that says at times like this, communicate, communicate, communicate.

And so, on every level, you'll hear Zelinsky speaking to Ukrainians, and yesterday, even to Russians in their own language, Russian, which he speaks better than he speaks Ukrainian to say what's really going on. We all need at every level, from the presidential level down to, I have a project down to – I'm an American, who cares, too. I don't know what's going on. But I want to put something on my Facebook to be helpful. We have to be very good at what we communicate. If any of your listeners and nothing involved that want to say something positive, always communicate in a positive way. Set a way forward, ask a question because you know that you're ignorant, but say, "I'm here and ready to help. In what way?" I'll stay on the communications before I get to action for a minute. And communications, there's always some sort of malevolent factor out there and confusing factor on purpose. And I would say, "Don't take the bait."

[00:18:04] RT: Give us an example of something that might be malevolent, that people might get seduced by, so they understand that.

[00:18:11] MS: As Americans, and by the way, you control what you can control. I'm not in the frontlines in Ukraine, neither are you, so we can control a little bit what we receive from media and what we process. And so today, we saw a malevolent US TV channel that is not really a respectable channel, quoting an attorney for a convicted person from the US government convicted of having the level of influence with Ukraine Government in the past six years. Why should we listen to that person?

So, even one of my respected contacts online show me that I said, "Why did you show me the person that I can never agree with? Cut out the bad influences on your social media." It's hard to do. My social media is curated as a 300-year-old bonsai, and I think so let's listen to people we trust. It's Gary Kasparov, the Russian dissident. It isn't Navalny who's in jail, but is still

getting messages out. It is some people in Moscow who are protesting. It is the Ukrainian foreign minister who is the voice of Ukraine for this conflict. Listen to those sources you trust and clip and curate and cut out those who only add confusion on purpose in order to mislead people. Don't take the bait.

There was an old recording in the '80s on your voice machine that was wait for the bait. So, I use that too. Don't take the bait, catch your name and number. I don't want to hear from you anymore. And by the way, this is a joke, but it's not really a joke, because we have to have short, fast ways to cut garbage out of our lives at a critical moment of crisis. Another thing we use the 80/20 rule, if you're 80% sure, go ahead. You're probably right. Don't wait for 100% proof, ironclad proof.

[00:20:07] RT: Okay, so let's imagine right now that people in Ukraine, somewhere in Ukraine are hearing your voice from Pittsburgh. And you have an opportunity right now to give them coaching and counsel about how to navigate beyond day, one of the first thousand days. So, what do you say to them directly? They're saying, "Mike, what do you got? We need help." How do you help them? What do you bring to them?

[00:20:30] MS: Hello, people. Hello, dear friends and colleagues, we love you, we support you, and we're with you, and we know that you know what to do more than I know what to do. So, I'm not going to tell you what to do, right? But believe in yourself. Get informed. Real clear information prevents fear and panic that leads to bad decisions, so that you don't lead yourself into something dangerous. Learn as much as you can that's out there. Resist disinformation. Disinformation is sent to you in order to make you fear and panic and make all the wrong decisions. So, as straight as you can.

Communicate, and love your friends and neighbors, as you always do. Talk them through their panic. Panic is natural at this moment, but it's usually not helpful. So, help them see it through. Now, the other thing I have to say is, I'm telling you this only because this is what you've already told me that you are doing. So, what I'm trying to do is reinforce that you were doing the right thing. And by the way, in any situation of crisis, chaos, or anything that any of us have faced, all we do is sort of listen closely, and give it back to you in a way you can handle. I hope that helps.

[00:21:38] RT: I think it does. You posted something in a group that I'm a participant in before yesterday, maybe Monday. Nothing had happened yet, but it was coming and you could see it. And you said day one of a war is a time of atonement. And I know in our group, that really jarred people, but not in a way where they fought back on it. They just had never considered that descriptor. So, can you talk about that?

[00:22:10] MS: Yeah. That's a good topic. If I get choked up, let's just keep talking. Don't take that as a sign of not being willing to speak about it. I think it was a critical moment for me, and I think people perceive that. We might make mistakes along the way, in our work and change, we don't have a chance to say I'm sorry, very much. If anything, we screwed up, it might be paid out in human lives. A person cannot make up for those kinds of mistakes. So, I find it very important to apologize and to make amends. And to pre-apologize for all the limits we have.

The reason I told that to our group is that that's a moment where we can admit, we're not up to the task. If you're a consultant or an agent of change in the work we do, if you admit that you're not up to task, you get fired. So, we don't admit our mistakes. When can you admit it? Unless you're headed into to the worst situation possible. I use it in a couple ways intentionally in my work. I faced some deadly situations in my work. I fear that my sons would not know what I thought about them. So, I always say, if I'm going into a life-threatening situation, they know that I love them. And if my last thoughts will be, "I love you both." It's important for me and my sons know that they will not miss me in a way. But I also think it's for all of us in this difficult work of change. Our communities of people going to strange places that they don't know and unfamiliar situations. Your plane might crash or get shot down. You do not want to leave life with any regrets.

So, it's a sort of a no regret type thing. And I apologize to friends for any wrong I have done. But some of our faith traditions have that possibility, right? You do it every Sunday in some churches. You do it every year in the Jewish faith. Every faith has a way to live a clean life. But liberty is my way of reducing tension.

[00:24:14] RT: So, we'd like to end this on a high note. I'm not really sure that's an aspiration we should drive for. I think, though, that people out there, I live out here in Seattle, you live in Pittsburgh, we have friends and colleagues all around the world. This is troubling everybody.

And everybody has some form of a question that says how could I help this situation? You're somebody who is able to do your work because you get a lot of help from governments and NGOs and stuff to give you resources to go do the work you do. So, you know something about how to help. As we all sit here, fragmented around the world, looking at this situation and trying to figure out what can we do about it, do you have any suggestions or recommendations about how I might do something either for those people there or something local or somewhere in between that does have directly or indirectly some positive benefit for the people of Ukraine right now? And to people, as you say, in Russia, who are also struggling with this.

[00:25:10] MS: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. So, pick up because it's so hard to answer. I often say things like, meet people where they are. I have lots of friends who are going to Poland right now to meet Ukrainians. Right before the shooting started, I know for people, well, five if I include myself, who are ready to go to Ukraine to stay on here with you, just to experience this with you. So, if you're in Seattle, or San Francisco, or New York, and you can't go to Ukraine or Poland, how often you meet people where you are? And that can just be being attentive to the dynamics and that people are coming and inviting them into your conversations or discussions.

A lot of people came from Ukraine from the pogroms from World War Two from World War One and World War Two, and after, they became intellectual leaders in this country who helped show us the freedom. I think Max Boot is one of them. And there are a lot of people on our scene, who came from this. So, what was happening in the US in the middle of the 20th century was welcome people actually, as new intellectuals or participants. So, let's just be open minded in that sense to meet people where they are, wherever they may be. Sometimes that's in organizations, and Pittsburgh there's the Hello Neighbor program that most welcomes newcomers.

So, you know, I'm encouraging people, when they get a newcomer, invite them to lunch, at the Rotary Club, at the Chamber of Commerce, at the religious community, whatever it involves. So, everybody can participate. I think our ideas, our brains, and our hearts are more valuable than our money. Although, I wouldn't discourage people from donating to sort of humanitarian relief. But I think that's not the art of things. I can meet people where they are. I will in the tradition, as soon as I can go back. And what is going back mean to you as a person or as an organization? Maybe I just leave it at that.

[00:27:02] RT: When I listen to you make that suggestion, I think that in some ways, we're not just talking about Ukrainian stuff if we're talking local help. There's always some group, some peoples that could benefit from being helped and there's no Ukrainians or there's somebody else out there and helping somebody as an indirect way to help people in Ukraine, if you're not able to be directly connected to them, I would think.

[00:27:25] MS: I agree 100%, Rick. We could leave it at that. But I could give like one more tip of us, you could cut it there or you can –

[00:27:32] RT: Let's take another tip. We could use one right now.

[00:27:35] MS: Well, as I'm listening to you say that, I not only agree 100%. But I wanted to offer extra encouragement to Americans are others who may be hearing this and say, "Look, I'm supposed to be some expert. I'm supposed to know what I'm talking about it." When I meet people from a new area, I don't even know what to say to them. I said, "Well, what brought you here? How's it going for you?" If you think you're supposed to know something, it's hard to ask an open question where you may be revealing, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about. I think we should all do now. We should all reveal. We should learn the habit of feeling as if I don't know what's going on and I'm okay with that.

So, what brought you here? How did that go? How to ask open ended questions and to listen? At the Rotary Club today, there was another person from another country who asked five questions, but at the end, I still don't know anything about the situation. So, let's get comfortable with that situation of discomfort and just ask and ask and ask and learn and learn, show an open heart because the person I was asking, probably had a hard time answering. So, should I make him more comfortable or more uncomfortable? I hope the way I asked made the person more comfortable open up and we all learn. So, it all comes down to in the end that these one-on-one contacts are the meet people where they are, whatever that means. Meet people where they are. I think that's the theme of our conversation today.

[00:29:00] RT: Okay, great. So, we're probably going to be wrestling with the conflict in Ukraine for a while and situations will change and evolve. So, I hope that you're willing to come back as

situation changes, as you get more information to stuff that you can pass on to listeners as a way to help them navigate this journey that we're all going to be in for a little while. Let's consider this verse one of a swamp and prose that we're writing together and is to be continued. Are you up for that?

[00:29:32] MS: I am up for that. And I think our friends and members and everybody in Poland and other countries boarding will feel it first and we should be attentive to them and their needs and it's going to keep going. The similar dynamics will keep expanding from there and we should all be ready to be involved.

[00:29:50] RT: Okay. Mike Staresinic, thank you very much. Thanks for coming back. If you keep coming back, you may end up having to be a cohost here, we'll see.

[00:30:00] MS: My goodness, send the headset. Thank you for including me, my brother. Thank you all. Love you all. They want us to give us your support, so thank you all.

[00:30:11] RT: Thank you Mike.

[OUTRO]

[00:30:15] 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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