

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

WINNING WAR, BUILDING PEACE: ACTIVISTS FROM UKRAINE, RUSSIA & THE US DEBATE

LAURA FLANDERS: On the 24th of February, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, a major and brutal escalation of a conflict that's been brewing since particularly 2014. As we record this, Russia's invasion has uprooted millions, killed and injured unknown numbers of people and done probably long term damage to the air, water and soil of a place that, until just now, was the bread basket for much of the world. Here in the US, commercial media have brought us lots of commentary from presidents and politicians, military men, and war victims. But we here know that there are always more people and perspectives than show up in the commercial picture. So today our guests, we hope, will fill in some of the gaps. They have been working for democracy, peace and justice in Ukraine and Russia, and around the world for years. Their job's only gotten harder as you'll hear, but it hasn't stopped. And the need for it is even more urgent now because what happens next will have long lasting impacts on all of our lives. From Russia, we're joined by Dmitri Makarov. He is a human rights defender and the youngest member of the Moscow Helsinki Group, which is the oldest active human rights organization in what's historically called the post-Soviet space. In the Ukraine, Anastasiya Leukhina is a professor at the Kyiv School of Economics. She's advised the Ukrainian and US governments and directs the Horizontal Connections NGO about which we'll hear. From the US, in Washington, DC, where she directs the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, we're joined by Phyllis Bennis. She's also a fellow at the Transnational Institute and recently wrote the piece, "The Best Way to Help Ukraine is with Diplomacy, Not War." I wanna thank you all for joining us and start by going to you, Anastasiya. First off, can you tell us where you are now and how long you've been there? And then give us some sense of what kind of work you were engaged in before the Russian invasion.

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: Yes, I am currently in Berlin and it took us quite a while to get my mother out of the country. She stayed for two weeks in Kyiv and she's on palliative care. So when it was getting really hard and dangerous, we convinced her to leave the country, and it took her, she doesn't drive, but she had my car, and it took her four days to move from Kyiv to Warsaw. And we had to find five different drivers to get her there on the way, and basically, those were people that we didn't know, you know, like I just used Facebook to find drivers. And we also had two minors, two kids whose parents we didn't know, in the car, and we just transported them to Warsaw to save their lives. And it was a very stressful trip for her and I, myself, and my son, we ended up not being able to return to Ukraine from a vacation in Egypt. So we ended up being stuck in Egypt with a pair of fins and summer clothes and no evacuation backpack on us, yeah. So we reunited in Warsaw and came to Berlin yesterday. And yeah, it's a very stressful

time. I can feel that my mind and my cognitive ability have been really down, and my memory, because I think, as all Ukrainians, we are trying to juggle so many things like helping our friends and families in our cities, because the city I am from, Chernihiv, is under siege for many weeks now, and it's a terrible humanitarian situation. Kharkiv is under siege and really heavily bombed. And I mean, everybody knows what's happening in Mariupol, it's a humanitarian catastrophe. And there are so many children and women and just normal civilians that are being hurt. And when you ask me about what I did in the peaceful times, I almost forgot by now because war has just erased everything that was happening before. Yeah, it's a very small non-governmental organization and we basically had two major lines of work. One is activism in alternative education, and we have been helping kids and parents to find different ways to escape oppression in the state system, and also help teachers change the way they teach kids. And the second direction of work, it was in healthcare.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about you, Dmitri? Who's on your mind?

DMITRI MAKAROV: Rightfully, the attention has been on the main victims of this war, which is the Ukrainian people. And the solidarity that they are experiencing, I mean, it's amazing and gives me hopes. For Russians, it has not been that easy because they are blamed, and in part, rightfully so for their aggression. And among my friends, which oppose the war, about a third had to leave the country also, scrambling for neighboring places like Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and so on, Turkey. About a third has decided to stay, myself included, to continue to coordinate and connect various anti-war initiatives that are springing up locally, nationally and international connections. And about a third are still numb struck, still in denial about what's going on.

LAURA FLANDERS: Can you talk a bit about your work before? Because sometimes in our media, we get given a picture only of the countries at war and not of what was there before.

DMITRI MAKAROV: My work has been focused on giving a voice to the civil society from this so-called post-Soviet space, which is a name that I don't like, but we don't have a better name still. Russia is extremely influential, and you can't really build human rights democracy in one given country without paying attention to transnational problems of corruption, of environmental issues, of human rights. It's not just the point of concern for experts and community leaders and organized NGOs. It's also a point of citizen mobilization, that citizens keep on asking questions, "What is it that's going on behind closed doors? What are the acts committed in our name?" We still need citizen mobilization, we still need transnational connections. We need to be much better at something that we tried to do before, and we have to do it much faster. Because this crisis has underlined that the old world and the old ways of dealing, that the current problems are not enough. In that sense, we have all failed to prevent it,

but there is hope in us realizing that failure, looking at the roots of it, and building on the great things that are happening, despite all the horror that's going on.

LAURA FLANDERS: Phyllis, coming to you, I mean, failed. I hate to lay that at your particular door, but when it comes to new internationalism, I would love your take on what's happened here inside the US. I look at a very divided country, here in the US, and a divided so-called left over this question of who's to blame for what happened with the invasion, Russia or NATO, also over the disparate and distinct treatment of white Ukrainian refugees compared to migrants of color in any number of other situations, and Muslims. And of course, you know, we see a continuing struggle in this country around military and carceral policing, punishing responses to just about everything. And I'm not sure that that's connecting to the ongoing work of demilitarization and peace that you work with.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: Thanks, Laura. You know, it is a huge challenge and I don't think we've met it very well. It's beginning, but we have such a long way to go to not just learn, but to apply the lessons of earlier wars. The goal of creating a global movement against war, against militarism, both in the immediate, a global mobilization now against war in Ukraine, against Russia's invasion, the most urgent call, also needs to look forward to the need to build a new architecture of diplomacy to replace the so-called security architecture based on NATO that has been the basis in Europe. And that means getting rid of this tendency for spending huge amounts of money in every country, starting with our own, on the military budgets. The fact that the US and Russia, together, control more than 90% of the nuclear weapons in the world makes the stakes in this particular war even more dramatically dangerous than in earlier wars.

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: It's kind of ironic because I have a degree in peacebuilding from Notre Dame, and I am this like "Peace", "No Military", and all of that, and peace education sort of advocate and I, a couple of years ago, I wrote an article saying how much we have to create securities through education and not through military budgets. And basically, I made an argument to relocate more money from military to educational systems. And now, I mean, when we're attacked by real missiles and tanks and everything, I completely changed the perspective. And I think that as good as diplomacy is, it failed to prevent this war, so now we need military assistance. And I cannot believe I am saying this, but actually, we need real weapons to fight the weapons that we're attacked with and to protect the people. So it's really important that, on top of all the diplomacy-level efforts, that countries like the US and others will provide us with necessary military assistance, because if the war doesn't stop on the Ukrainian territory, it will move further into Europe and probably even further.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is it an either or? I mean, can't we do both?

PHYLLIS BENNIS: Well, I really understand what Anastasiya is saying, and it's a huge challenge for how to answer this. It's certainly true that so far diplomacy has failed. There is diplomacy underway, there have been some talks that seem to have made a certain level of progress, but not enough. And so far, we're hearing that Putin is still refusing to participate in diplomatic engagement at the highest level, which ultimately will be needed. And it's also true — it's not *but*, but it's *and* — also true, is that if we look back just a little bit further, we see that the security architecture across Europe, the rise of NATO, the payment of billions and billions and billions of dollars and thousands of weapons and new weapons systems over and over again, across the continent, mainly funded through the US and the wealthiest countries in Europe, that has failed. It failed to prevent the invasion. It didn't work. So there's an urgency right now, and we know that greater militarization creates more problems after.

LAURA FLANDERS: So Dmitri, do you wanna jump in on this? And Anastasiya, we'll definitely come back to you.

DMITRI MAKAROV: I mean, there is the urgency of the now, and I understand the dilemma and some of my fellow friends and colleagues from the anti-war movement or from human rights movement are taking up arms now. And who am I to judge them? I'm not in a place to judge them or to condemn them, and it's a tragedy that they are faced with this situation. And there are concrete people who ordered this war who are to blame, but there is also a shared responsibility, a shared responsibility that we have somehow limited our notion of security to hard-line military security. Although, I mean, as a part of the Helsinki Movement that was in a way a civil society attempt to shape the way security is treated, you know, in the Helsinki Accords, Moscow Helsinki Group, arguing that it's not the third basket of security, the human dimension of it, that includes human rights, rule of war, it's just as important as economic stability and as hard-line security. And that has been entirely forgotten.

LAURA FLANDERS: The world missed an opportunity to stand up for those principles after the invasion of Crimea. I mean, talk about the violation of Helsinki.

DMITRI MAKAROV: I just remembered, I was sitting in 2014 when the annexation happened, I was in Crimea. I was there on the place. I watched it with my own eyes, and I was dumbstruck by the reaction of a society that didn't understand it as a crisis of the legal norms, that the Budapest Memorandum went to hell, that the entire post-war agreement's architecture went to hell. It wasn't taken seriously enough.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: Just quickly, I was going to say that one of the aspects of that, which civil society is equally responsible as governments for allowing to happen, has been the sidelining, the complete sidelining of organizations like the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which redefined, or at least began the process of redefining security, as

Dmitri has referenced, away from a solely military reality to a much broader understanding of what continental security across Europe means. The notion of allowing organizations like the OSCE greater empowerment, rather than being sidelined, even stripping away their human rights monitors from Ukraine, which happened early on in this crisis. And this has happened before. This happened in the '90s, in the Balkan crises as well. So I think there are models we can look at to see how, even on the immediate level, this process of diplomacy can be moved forward. I think we're looking at a situation where there's going to be a diplomatic solution. The question is how many more people must die before it gets put in place?

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: We are just losing people every day. Eight people died in the shopping center in the middle of Kyiv. I mean, we lost 115 children due to bombings and shootings. I mean, families were shot on their way out of hot zones. And like what kind of diplomatic solutions can be there under these circumstances? It can happen afterwards, but now we need a, like, purely military assistance and not just weapons, but also help with managing and leading and making strategic decisions on warfare.

LAURA FLANDERS: But you don't share our concern that we feel here that the implementation of a no-fly zone could very quickly bring the US into direct military conflict with Russia?

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: The US is kind of already involved in a direct conflict with Russia. So we just have to admit it. And again, we, in Ukraine, we have this, it's a joke about being deeply concerned, and you are using this word again. I mean, being concerned is not enough in these circumstances. You really need to fight with us against this because this evil force, and it's the force of authoritarianism, is gonna come into your door.

LAURA FLANDERS: We're looking at a Europe united, as it hasn't been in decades, the exact opposite of what Putin presumably wanted, more NATO expansion, more militarization, more weapons, maybe not enough, but more weapons being transferred to the region. What happens to progressive movements, broadly defined? And I am reminded, you know, after the financial crash, the crisis of 2008 and before, we did see an Arab spring, a push for democracy, differently, successful in different places, but is there any chance of progressive forces emerging stronger from this, or only weaker?

PHYLLIS BENNIS: Our focus, I think, needs to be on building a movement demanding diplomacy and looking forward at the same time as we deal with the urgency of now, people that are dying today.

LAURA FLANDERS: But very quickly, diplomacy by whom and for what? I'm still looking for what Dmitri mentioned, which was any taste of civil society at those tables.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: There has not, well, there won't be civil society presence at the table until we have a civil society that is more of a presence in demanding that the negotiations happen, that diplomacy be real, not just a slogan. We can't simply assert the slogan. We need real mobilization. And here, at least, that's been very hard to come by.

LAURA FLANDERS: Anastasiya, diplomacy.

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: Well, I want to say a bit more about civil society on the ground in Ukraine, because I think it has been, there is a major breakthrough. There was one in 2014, and whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The civil society is strong as ever in Ukraine. And it basically, people from civil society learn how to organize themselves. And we are doing everything from procurement of military equipment to protective gear, to medical supplies, to evacuation, to, I mean, it's unbelievable. Even with donor blood supplies, it was fascinating that before people fled Kyiv, they left so much donor blood in the bank that has never happened before in our entire history. So in that sense, I think, I mean, it's the whole country is fighting and it's not just the military forces, but also the civic resistance that allows us to at least stop the military intervention. And I think we should also give credit to these organizations, and on top of militaries' assistance, it would be great to provide support to non-governmental organizations and extras that are active on the ground. I know there is a big push to give money to international organizations, because they're like the usual suspects, but what we see is that all local organizations have become very strong and very effective in providing assistance on the ground. So I would suggest that if people choose who to support, there are a number of credible local organizations that do all sorts of assistance, and it will be great to provide help and support to local organizations.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you, Anastasiya. We'll put some information at our website. Dmitri, for you, many people have their hopes pinned on some kind of internal opposition inside Russia, including inside the military. Are those hopes realistic?

DMITRI MAKAROV: Well, I mean, let me just say that let's not hope, let's not put our hopes in that. Because also, the military was involved in war crimes already. It's already smeared in blood. How can it be accepted as a party in any type of negotiation? One of the most interesting processes in Russia at the moment is how people challenge the authority, in their family, where they argue about the war to their parents who are much more receptive to government propaganda, how they argue, for example, in the universities where the rectors of universities speak in favor of the war, representing the entire student body and the students rebel against that, how there are feminist organizations speaking out about how the whole patriarchal thinking is very much implicated in this war. I mean, there are all sorts of dialogues that are going on that

may not be as relevant as military or humanitarian assistance, but are important in to keep people's lives.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: My government, the government I pay taxes to, the government that claims to operate in my name has been responsible for so much suffering around the world, from its origins right through to today. And for us to figure out how to take that into account while building the kind of global movement, a people's movement around the world, to learn the lessons that we're seeing here. Once again, we're seeing that the issues of racism and hypocrisy and xenophobia are not only challenges for us in the United States, they are global challenges that we have to face globally. The challenge of authoritarianism, we saw it with Trump, we are seeing it around the world in so many countries, leads to the horrors of these kinds of wars. And if we don't build a global movement, we will see it again in other places. So we need to simultaneously deal with the urgency of now, which I think means focusing everything on how do we get diplomacy to work, not just as a slogan, but as a reality that can actually stop the killing, and at the same time, look at the lessons that we're seeing from this particular war, and make sure that we use them in building the kind of movement around the world that can prevent it from ever happening again.

LAURA FLANDERS: We're out of time. This has been an extraordinary conversation, the like of which I'm not seeing anywhere. And I appreciate you all for being part of it. Anastasiya, closing thoughts that are, I'm sure, best to all of the people close to your heart and to your people right now.

ANASTASIYA LEUKHINA: I just want to say what you can do to help us. And one is to share more news and truthful information about what is happening in Ukraine, and to provide support to people on the ground, both military and civilians. Second, please create public pressure on your government officials and your politicians, and also your companies to leave Russia and to have strict sanctions and increase them, and increase the pressure at all levels and find diplomatic and military solutions, but also just leave Russia. And I know it's a painful decision, but you still have companies that continue to work in Russia, despite the fact that most of the reputable businesses have left. Because this pressure will help stop the war. And yes, and I also want to thank everybody and thank different countries and people who have been so responsive and so helpful and so supportive for our effort. Thank you with all my heart.

LAURA FLANDERS: Scholars of authoritarianism say that it begins with the limiting of options, a lopping off of a whole set of realities and choices, and the vilifying of those who speak out. Dissenters say that what makes a difference is practice. And today's conversation felt to me like practice, practice in believing that there are more than just one or two options, practice in holding two things together at the same time, that we need to stop a war and work across national boundaries to prevent the next one. I believe we can both work for peace in Ukraine and be

concerned about what's happening in the horn of Africa and Afghanistan and right here in the US. We can live in a world of both and many choices and realities, but we need practice, places of connection, places of breath. You can find my full uncut conversation with today's guests in our podcast feed, all the information about which is at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us. I'm Laura.

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