Virtual Event | Reporting from the Frontline of the War in Ukraine

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………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• James Barnett, Research Fellow, Hudson Institute
• Kenneth R. Weinstein, Walter P. Stern Distinguished Fellow, Hudson Institute

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2100-virtual-event-reporting-from-the-frontline-of-the-war-in-ukraine-42022

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.
Kenneth Weinstein:

Welcome to Hudson Institute, I'm Walter P. Stern distinguished fellow Kenneth Weinstein, and I'd like to welcome you to this event on reporting from the front line of war in Ukraine. And I'm delighted to welcome my Hudson Institute colleague, research fellow, James Barnett who's currently in Bucharest, Romania, but spent two weeks in Ukraine at war.

James' specialty, for those of you who follow Hudson Institute closely, is the geopolitics of Africa. And so this saga has a deeper story to it. And he is also right now a visiting fellow at the University of Lagos in Nigeria, where he currently lives. James, let me begin with the question, why did you decide to go to Ukraine?

James Barnett:

Yeah. Thanks Ken, thanks for having me. Thanks to everyone who's tuning in to listen to whatever observations I might have that I hope are useful or helpful to those interested in the conflict in Ukraine.

Yes, so it's a very valid question. It came together last moment. When the war in Ukraine started, it had not been my plan to go up there. I've done a bit of freelance journalism before, I do a various different projects ranging for more academic research side to more writing for magazines and such. And I was very concerned by what I was seeing on social media, following the war from the far, as I think many of us were, but it hadn't actually been plan to reposition there and go into the conflict to cover it.

What actually originally brought me up to Europe, I was planning to write a story that's was going to be more about Germany than about Ukraine. So through various connections, in fact, through connections from Nigeria, I knew in particular, one former Bundeswehr German soldier who called me up one day, it happened to be the day that I just submitted a bunch of big projects, met some deadlines, and he called me up and he said, "Hey man, been a while since we talked, a bunch of my buddies are joining the Foreign Legion in Ukraine, we're going to head out in a week or so. And we're really excited about this. This is really interesting. We're going to be fighting this great imperialist aggression in Europe."

And he sounded very excited about this. And he was saying, "Oh, and you're a journalist, right? Maybe you should come along, you should join us."

And when I heard more about him, his plans, his buddies, the friends he was going to travel with, and this was still a couple weeks into the war in Ukraine. And so it was relatively early on, I'd been consuming a ton of news about it, just out of my own personal concern, I guess, or interest.

And I thought it was interesting because while there was a lot of news coverage of Ukraine, there hadn't been at this point many serious profiles of these international Legion volunteers, these foreigners who were going to fight in Ukraine on behalf of the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian government. And I thought it was particularly interesting that it would be a focus on Germany and the German military, because that's been an area of mine that I wouldn't say it's a professional area of competence, but German foreign policy and society had always been a subject of interest to me.

And I thought it would be, just from the writer's perspective, I thought, "Okay, this will be really interesting. Germany has officially a relatively non-militaristic foreign policy. How did the average German soldiers see that, especially now that there's war in Europe?"
It's a long way of saying I came up to Berlin. I was staying with friends and then over the course of 24 hours, all of the German guys I was going to travel with got cold feet. And it was largely as a result of, by this point it was about three weeks into the war, if I'm recalling correctly. The Ukrainians had had some experience with the foreign fighters by now.

And a lot of the people who had been showing up in Ukraine were people that didn't have combat experience. They were well-meaning, or maybe they were looking for adventure, or whatever their motivations and how much they wanted to fight. Some of them were proving to be a liability from the Ukrainian side. And actually there had been a big Russian strike where they hit a base very close to the Polish border where a lot of these foreign fighters were based. And so very shortly after that, the Ukrainians essentially put out a notice saying, "We're only going to take actual combat veterans, people with real combat skills."

The main guy I was talking with, for example, he'd served, it was two-and-a-half years in the German army, but he'd never deployed into a combat zone. And so because of that, he thought he wouldn't be qualified.

So the Germans that I was supposed to be traveling with and writing about, that story fell apart. But I was already in Europe and I'd already made contact with a number of Ukrainian journalists and colleagues on the Ukrainian side of the border. So I thought, "Okay, let me go over, see what it's... I'm here, I can see what it's like for a bit." There's a lot of media, but they tend to be pursuing the same subset of stories. And I guess one advantage I have is writing for magazines, I have a bit more space to try to tease out longer themes and stuff. I'm not trying to fit a deadline every night. And so I thought this is the seminal critical moment in European history, and yeah, I'm here in the continent, I think I should go.

Kenneth Weinstein:

That's absolutely extraordinary. So you're in Berlin and you decide you're going to go to Ukraine without your German buddies who were going to join the Foreign Legion. So you decide to go, and so how did you get in? Where'd you go at first, and what was your reaction? I mean, simply getting from Lagos to Berlin is, I assume, a challenge, let alone getting from Berlin into Ukraine.

James Barnett:

Yeah thanks, super question. So surprisingly getting from Lagos to Berlin is actually easier than getting from say Lagos to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. This is actually a big issue that West Africa has, which is a bit of a tangent, but they have a serious issue with lack of flight connectivity. So, because where a lot of the travel, a lot of the people who can afford airlines, they're flying more from Europe to Africa, or Africa to the Middle East.

So I booked my ticket two days before I left on Turkish Airlines at a pretty reasonable price, and got to Berlin that way. So that actually wasn't so much of an issue.

In terms of getting into Ukraine, the Ukrainian government has made it quite easy for journalists to go in and to enter the country and report. You essentially have to go through a process of getting accredited, which you do through the Ministry of Defense, and in my experience a lot of times other countries and stuff, getting an accreditation process can take a very long time.
I got mine, I think within 48 hours, because so many journalists are heading to Ukraine these days. And the Ukrainian government, I think very consciously, is trying to welcome foreign journalists and to say, "Look, look at what Russia is doing." So I was sponsored by a magazine, New Lines Magazine, which I've written for, including my dispatches from Europe so far.

And so it was relatively easy to send in the basic information. I assume that they ran me against some SBU database to confirm that I wasn't someone who showed up in areas where Russian dissidents get assassinated around that same time. They have to check your background, but the actual process was pretty easy.

I took a train from Berlin to Warsaw, there were lots of those, and then carpooled with some people from Warsaw to the border, to a small village called Medyka, which is one of the border crossings between Poland and Ukraine. And then from there, onto Lviv, which is the large Western Ukrainian city that has really become a hub for international journalists, humanitarian workers, diplomats.

So the city, which traditionally has quite a tourism appeal, in some ways, as I mentioned almost jokingly in my first dispatch from Ukraine, this city still feels like a very touristy destination. It's just now it's the CNN camera crews and stuff who are taking over the hotels. So it's actually, in some ways it was a very... Lviv almost had the feel of like a convention, lots of foreign journalists, lots of foreigners were in the city at the time I was there.

**Kenneth Weinstein:**

And when you finally got into the war zone, what was... Let's just talk about Lviv first of all, okay so it does feel like a tourist destination on the one hand, on their hand, obviously Ukraine is at war, has been invaded, we've seen the humanitarian crisis ongoing. How much of it did you feel in Lviv, and then let's talk about the actual moment when you first came, when you were actually on, if you'll call it, the battlefield.

**James Barnett:**

Yeah. Thanks. I mean, I definitely don't want to be too kind of glib or whatever about the situation in Lviv. The entire Ukrainian society has really mobilized. And so even though Lviv is a couple hundred miles from the front lines, it's definitely... the war has changed kind of every aspect of life there. Right? So for starters, there's a tremendous influx of refugees come from the south and the east, many of them crossing into Poland or Hungary after entering Lviv, some of them staying in the city.

And then the military also, there's a massive recruiting drive. There's something called, the Territorial Defense Forces, which is part of the... kind of alongside the National Guard, which are mobilizing in every part of Ukraine. And so, there's lots of kind of mobilization of local military and National Guard units. And I guess, a real concern for, or alertness about the possibility of Russian saboteurs in the area.

So even though it's quite far from the front lines, there are a lot of soldiers out and about, a lot of checkpoints, and it's also a major area for military aid, the whole oblast, not the city itself really. But you see a lot of military vehicles moving around. I spent a good bit of time traveling around the oblast visiting some of the villages and smaller towns in Lviv to get a sense of how kind of the war is changing things in these smaller communities, further from the front lines.
And yeah, it's very visible there, both in terms of just demographically. You have a large percentage, large portion of the population is now joining the armed forces or the National Guard in one way or another. People are kind of shifting economically the kind of everything, all the businesses, everything from farming production to the clientele of the coffee shops is kind of shifting. And so, there's a lot of stuff, a lot of kind of diverting efforts to the war effort.

And then also a tremendous kind of push from volunteers, ordinary civilians who are pitching into the effort one way or another. So in my article, I mentioned seeing local grandmothers knitting camouflage nets that they're going to then send to the front to put them on Ukrainian tanks to shield them from Russian aircraft. A lot of people making monetary donations, donating clothes. And certainly, I think what I also saw was kind of the, and this is maybe something that gained much more of an appreciation for when I was there in the country, is seeing how kind of... When the entire nation is mobilizing for war and particularly it's a war being fought against a military that doesn't distinguish between civilians and military targets, which was kind of a theme in my second dispatch from southern Ukraine, closer to the front, is that everyone is kind of pitching in and working to support both the refugees, but also the military.

You'll have families that open up their houses to refugees and donate clothing to the local centers. But they're donating anything that could be used as a balaclava for example, to give to the troops in the front lines. So, there's this very kind of mass mobilization throughout society that I think is really kind of impressive to watch, and is just not something that I think I fully appreciated before I got there.

Kenneth Weinstein:

It has to be the first time in your life you... I mean, I suspect most of us don't get to see, and unfortunately, don't get to see this. So, it had to be the first time in your life you've seen this kind of mass civilian mobilization. So let me ask you, in terms of you getting around your crane, how did you get around? Were you by yourself? Were you with journalist colleagues? Were you taken around by Ukrainian officials?

James Barnett:

Yeah. No, great question. By the time I got there again, a couple weeks or a few weeks into the war, in some ways there was kind of already an infrastructure in place for journalists, humanitarians coming in. So, I mean, the simple answer is, I think all of the journalists, pretty much all the foreign journalists in Ukraine, not all of them, but most of them, and certainly myself included, are deeply indebted to Ukrainian colleagues. We'd call them fixers or drivers or translators.

But I mean, there's a whole kind of number of Ukrainians from various professions. A lot of the colleagues that I worked with hadn't necessarily been journalists, but had worked in media or something like that. And because they already had contacts with international journalists or had worked with international film crews, for example, they kind of made the transition almost overnight, to working with news crews and journalists coming in.

And so they're, I mean, truly invaluable, especially if you're kind of a doofus like me who doesn't even speak the local language, or more than a few phrases. I was able to go it by sometimes. Most days I was there, I didn't have a local translator. I was just kind of getting by on my own. But certainly for some of
the more sensitive travel or meetings, for example, with government officials who don't speak English, then you work with a local translator. And I have nothing but praise for all the Ukrainian colleagues I worked with. They were really, really professional, really impressive, very smart. I think it's kind of, and this is a broader, I guess, reflection on Ukrainian society, but the vast majority of people I talked to did not expect, on February 23rd, that there would be a war. I think people really were in disbelief those first few days, that this had actually happened. This isn't supposed to happen, right? This is the stuff we read about in school, in textbooks, or heard our grandparents talk about.

So most people, certainly not all, but most people I talked to were not expecting a war. And then kind of very quickly, they'd adjusted to this kind of war time reality and were... I mean, you would think that they had been working in a war zone for years or whatever, just with kind of how confident they were, how professional, the way that they measured risk and reward. So, I was certainly... I think and pretty much any other foreign journalist who's gone in there has really benefited from those relationships and that assistance.

Kenneth Weinstein:

Let me ask you, was there ever any moment you felt at danger?

James Barnett:

Yeah. I mean, it's a relative concept, sure. I think for a number of reasons, my goal was not to kind of be there in the trenches for long term. And I do want to say kind of as a general matter, I think there are a lot of journalists and there are certainly Ukrainian journalists, but also some foreign journalists in Ukraine who have taken a lot more risk and spent more time than I was there. I'd hoped to spend closer to a month, but because of various factors and obligations in Nigeria, personal and professional, I couldn't spend more than a month in Europe.

So I think that when you're in the area and you're talking to other journalists, you can kind of get a sense of what are the risks worth taking? And what are risks that I don't have the preparation for.? Right? Whether it's the gear, whether it's just the experience. And you kind of weigh that with also, "Okay, is this an area where there is already a ton of news coverage? Or is this an area where I would actually be able to go and have something new to report?"

And again, one of the benefits of going in for the past... when the war had already started several weeks ago, was that I was able to see kind of a lot of the reporting that had already been done. Some of it really fantastic by journalists who knew the country much better, had spent a lot of time in war zones and similar situations. And so I could kind of see, "Okay, they've covered that area and that sounds like an area that maybe I wouldn't benefit much from going to and could potentially be very risky."

But in terms of risk, I mean, yeah. Certainly. I spent one day in a kind of a frontline city, Nikolaev which is the city north of Odesa that's kind of really been holding out since the beginning of the war, initially under a very intense Russian ground assault. But in the past few weeks, it's been essentially incessant Russian bombardment. And even further from the front in cities like Odesa and even Lviv, there were successful missile strikes in both of those cities while I was there. In both instances, relatively close to where I was. And in each instance, the Russians weren't aiming for kind of the historic, downtown or the populated city center, they're going for infrastructure. And one theory there is that they're actually very
much kind of part of the Russian way of war there. They're trying to destroy the civilian infrastructure to make these cities increasingly difficult for the inhabitants. Just increasingly difficult to live in, by hitting power lines, hitting fuel supplies. I mean, it's a very odd sensation or odd situation to be in, just to see... you're in this very, what looks if you're in the city center of Odesa or Lviv, it looks like a normal European old, historic downtown area, though a lot of the windows are boarded up.

But then you've got this black smoke billowing out and you realize, oh, that's a fuel depot a couple kilometers away. So there was often this weird disconnect between parts of... you could be in one part of the city and things seem very ordinary. But you check your phone and it's, oh, yeah. That explosion was actually very close, I'm now seeing.

Kenneth Weinstein:

And in terms of let's say Mykolaiv in particular, but also Odesa or Kyiv, what's your sense in terms of the civilians who are there? How are they coping? What's their reaction? How do they feel about what the United States is doing for them? What's your sense on the ground about what the United States is doing? What we should we be doing more of and what are ordinary civilians saying? Because obviously we hear president Zelensky regularly, on a daily basis, but what's your sense of where ordinary civilians are in terms of their attitude towards the United States, towards the west, and towards Russia?

James Barnett:

Yeah. Great questions. I think to the first part, how are people coping? I think in a place like Lviv or Odesa, which is a bit further from the front lines, doesn't experience or hasn't experienced the same degree of destruction yet, people are kind of reclaiming bits of their pre-war kind of normalcy, right? So in Odesa the week that I was there, businesses were starting to open up a bit. There's still a curfew, there are lots of air raid sirens, but honestly, by this point, lots of people kind of ignore the air raid sirens, because most of the time there aren't actually strikes within the city. The siren goes off anytime there's aircraft detected in the area. So it kind of becomes a part of daily life.

I spoke with a lot of people who were volunteering in one capacity or another, and I think it was really impressive to see how they managed. On the one hand, they kind of reoriented most aspects of their life towards helping the war effort in one way or another or helping refugees. And that was their job now, they were involved in all this volunteer activity.

But on the other hand, they were kind of able to, and very intent on maintaining some element of their kind of ordinary lives. They don't want the Russians... They're not going to let the war take that from them, not going to let the Russians take that from them, whether it's being able to go grab a coffee with a friend or they've done like movie screenings and stuff and they've moved them to safer locations. But like people are learning how to adapt. Though, of course, I don't want to, again, understate how difficult it is. And people, I think, are very anxious of course about how long the war will persist.

In terms of popular attitudes towards the U.S., I think that people by and large were very happy to see Americans or foreigners there. They felt that certainly we were partners. I think that very often I would hear that we're not doing enough. There's been a lot of focus in Western media, Western commentary about the debates over imposing a no fly zone over Ukraine. And while I certainly heard some people repeat Zelensky's request for no fly zones, I've certainly heard officials say that. I think what I heard
more often was not people wishing for a no fly zone, wishing for direct American or NATO intervention, but rather just increasing the quantity and quality of military hardware that NATO powers are sending to Ukraine.

I think that there's a real sense among the public that Ukraine has a really good army, that Ukrainians are fighting well, they're fighting hard. This is something that a number of people admitted. We wouldn't have guessed that before the war because there's been this war grinding on for eight years in the Donbas. We'd heard there's been all this propaganda from the Russians about how powerful their military is. They produce these slick ads and recruitment videos and such. Corruption has historically been a problem that's undermined Ukrainian armed forces, certainly prior to 2014. But in the past month or by now six weeks, the Ukrainians have really demonstrated that they are one of the most effective fighting forces out there today.

And so I think that there was a sense of pride in that and for a lot of people I talked to, that kind of translated into a sense that, what we really need from you guys is not your direct intervention, but you have the best military hardware in the world, whereas, our military is a smaller military, poor military. So you give us that hardware, we'll know what to do with it. We can handle these Russians. We're showing that already. But especially I think the concern is really with the air force and the airstrikes. I'd have ordinary cab drivers or older ladies in bomb shelters would be talking about Patriot missile system, Bayraktar. Everyone knows these phrases and these terms now, saying give us more, give us more. One refrain I heard a lot is that Putin is mad, but he's also a bit of a paper tiger, if you will, that, oh, you guys are too afraid of escalation. We've seen the Russian military is very weak. If you guys give us more or take a more forceful role in the conflict, he'll have no choice but to cave.

I would say I'm not an expert on these issues. I don't want to claim to be kind of a seasoned Eastern European or whatever. That's not necessarily my personal view. I think it's very reasonable. We need to be having debates about what is too much escalation versus sufficient degree of support. But I certainly think that the sentiment among the population there, which is already fighting the Russians is that, look, these guys are already throwing everything they can at us. We're holding the line. So give us more support and we'll push them back. I think that's the attitude I encounter the most.

Kenneth Weinstein:

So a country more where I guess develops, as you're saying a popular strategic consciousness in a way that people have a sense of how the war's going, about what's needed, how to respond to it. Did you sense a differentiated view say of Germany? The Ukraine had long been critical Nord Stream 2, long been critical of Angela Merkel and her foreign and her economic policy and security policy. Did you sense a difference with regard to the Germans in particular, but other Europeans from the United States?

James Barnett:

Yeah, that's a great question. It's not something that I asked every official or every Ukrainian I spoke to, but I'd say that, President Zelensky himself stated this pretty clearly, right? That one speech where he was saying, the countries that support us versus those that aren't with us. And he was a bit critical of Germany. I did hear similar remarks, particularly about the Russian oil and gas. Like the sentiment that we've been warning the Europeans for a very long time about Putin, about how they're so dependent.
And now they're afraid because they don't want to lose their heating in winter and so they're not going to be as tough against Putin as we hope. There was kind of an appreciation of how hospitable other European countries, including Germany, had been to Ukrainian refugees.

I think that sentiment definitely came through. And I will say, having traveled now, I've been in five European countries, four countries beside Ukraine. And certainly this is a cause that is on everyone's mind. Germany, for example, is not a country known for waving flags, but you see a lot of Ukrainian flags in Berlin. And there are a lot of volunteers going out every day to the Hauptbahnhof to help the refugees who are coming in from Ukraine, who are getting off the train to provide them some sort of assistance. So I definitely think that, now I'm in Romania, similarly seeing Ukrainian flags. So I think this war is very much in the public consciousness in other European countries as well, in a way that other conflicts haven't been.

**Kenneth Weinstein:**

Yeah, the Germans certainly have stepped up in the post-war period in terms of welcoming refugees, taking them into their houses. It's been extraordinary to watch. I've seen with my own German friends, certainly, pictures of them going to Hauptbahnhof in Berlin to meet people and to take them in.

Let me ask you about your travels in Romania in particular, and in the rest of... As you said before we were on, you said you're back under Article 5 territory; you feel a little safer. The Romanians have been extraordinary in stepping up in this war effort, as have the other Black Sea NATO allies, including the Turks. What's the sentiment on the ground in Bucharest, and also in Moldova, where you were as well?

**James Barnett:**

Yeah. I've only been in Bucharest a couple days, but from what I've gleaned, I think that people are very... This war is definitely hitting closer to home than I think a lot of people are comfortable with, but I think that the fact that this is a NATO country really does give people a lot of confidence. Romania, it's very integrated into the European Union and to NATO, and so I think there's very much a sense that whatever, at least the few conversations I've had on this, that whatever crisis there is in Ukraine, Romania is very well-positioned, and that compared to the possible trajectories the country might have gone in the 1990s... I was in Ceausescu's mansion this morning, saw the golden bathroom, and so I've been thinking about that history. I think there's definitely a sense of, "Oh yeah, we made the right decision in the '90s to orient ourselves towards the West."

Moldova, I think, is really interesting because their position is much more precarious, outside of NATO, outside of the EU. The contrast between Moldova and Romania is really quite visible. Again, I say this not as someone who purports to be an expert in this area, but you can just visibly see it when you look at all the basic economic indicators, the development indicators. There are a number of reasons for that, but one of the major reasons is that Russia has, in some ways, a de facto veto over Moldovan policy, because there's this Transnistria conflict, this little stretch of land that you could barely consider a state, but it's occupied. There are Russian troops there. The estimates vary.

Because Moldova is a small country, military of only 6,000 to 7,000 forces, it's a landlocked country, they feel very vulnerable. I had some very interesting conversations in Moldova with both ordinary residents as well as some former officials, and the Moldovan government's official policy is one of neutrality
because they're trying very hard... They don't want to offer any pretext that could give any potential pretext for Russia to activate and unfreeze that conflict in Transnistria, if you will.

I think, in Moldova, the border is just an hour away from Odesa, so the war is very real for them. There's a very real fear that if... It's literally a quote, I already know. If Ukraine falls, we will be next. I think that doesn't give the country... That concern hasn't given the country as much flexibility in its foreign policy. There are definitely criticisms of the Moldovan government, that it hasn't done enough, that Putin is not someone who even needs a pretext, as we saw in Ukraine, so that the Moldovans should, in fact, be taking a more vocal position.

I think that the one area where Moldova has done incredibly well, everyone is in agreement here, is on the humanitarian front. Ukraine and Moldova have always had close relations. There was visa-free travel even before the war. Now the country has taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees since the war started. Most of them don't stay in Moldova, most of them pass through into other countries, but every day there's constant movement of people into Moldova. Now the war is going well enough for the Ukrainians that some people are crossing back into Ukraine. At the border crossings, I did see people going the other way, which is interesting, and interviewed a few of them, heard their stories and perspectives.

But certainly, on the humanitarian front, that's something where... And it's not even the Moldovan government so much; it's ordinary Moldovan people. The statistic I was told was that roughly 90% of refugees in Moldova are being housed privately by individual families, rather than in camps or anything established by the government or the INGOs.

Kenneth Weinstein:
Incredible. Your sense is most of the refugees want to return to Ukraine? That's a question.

James Barnett:
Yeah, definitely. I think that there's... Being a refugee is tough, regardless of the situation and regardless of which country they're coming from. But I think that certainly there's been a greater sense of optimism growing in the past few weeks, certainly compared to the first days of the war, and so there is a belief that it will be feasible and the right thing to do to go back.

Yeah, I heard some pretty powerful testimonies. The one that immediately sticks out, at the Palanca border crossing in Moldova to Ukraine, interviewed some women driving. They're Odesa natives, and they'd driven to western Ukraine through Moldova. They did that to drop their kids off in western Ukraine with a family there. It's a rural area in the Carpathian Mountains. They think it's relatively safe. It's not near a big city.

They're moving their kids out of Odesa because they really are concerned about the situation there, as I think they're very correct to be. But they didn't want their kids to be refugees in another country. They wanted them to stay in Ukraine, where they could get Ukrainian education, be there with a Ukrainian family. But they were concerned about driving the roads from Odesa into the western part of the country, again, for valid reasons, and so they drove through Moldova, and then they were going back to Odesa. It was two women. Both of them, their husbands had joined the military, and they wanted to be back there with their husbands in the city.
Just hearing a story like that, it's a humbling moment where I remember I've just... I can get stressed about my own personal life decisions, or work, "Where should I move? Should I be an idiot and go to Ukraine?" or whatever, but the stakes aren't the same. These are people who, overnight, they've had their lives upturned, and they're now having to make these decisions about, "Okay, how far away do I need to move my family to make them safe? Do I stay and support the war effort here, or do I move out of the country to someplace safer?" Just hearing the different perspectives on how people are approaching that question has been really fascinating and, in most instances, quite inspiring.

Kenneth Weinstein:

Well, on that very inspiring note and incredible story of these women driving through Moldova to get their kids into safety inside Ukraine, in rural Ukraine, it's just been an absolute pleasure. Learned a great deal, and just want to congratulate you.

I've been chatting with James Barnett, Hudson Institute Research Fellow, and just want to remind everybody that his reports from Ukraine can be found at New Lines Magazine and I urge all of you to read his reports.

James, look forward to continuing the conversation before too long. Safe travels back to Lagos, and thank you very much for being here today.

James Barnett:

Thanks so much, Ken. Appreciate it.