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American Philanthropists Join the Ukraine War Effort

The private sector delivers flak jackets, tourniquets, weapons and ‘heaters, heaters, heaters!’

By Judith Miller

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Uzhhorod, Ukraine

When Ukraine’s First Lady Olena Zelenska visited New York in September, former Gov. George Pataki asked what her country needed most. “Heaters, heaters, heaters!” she exclaimed.

Mr. Pataki relayed her request to his friend Earle Mack, a real-estate developer and former U.S. ambassador to Finland. Outraged by Russia’s invasion, both men had traveled often to Ukraine to express support and deliver whatever food, clothes and supplies they could muster. Now they had a new mission: Find industrial-strength heaters to prevent Vladimir Putin’s missile assault on the country’s power grid, water plants and other critical infrastructure from freezing Ukrainians to death in winter and paralyzing their fierce resistance.

Mr. Mack called U.S. manufacturers, but few had heaters to spare. Most of what they had wouldn’t help, since Ukrainian products work on 240-volt electricity, not America’s 120 volts. Eventually, Mr. Mack found Minnesota-based Pinnacle, which had 385 surplus heaters made for the European market in a warehouse in Amsterdam. Each heater can run for 31 hours and heat a 20,000-cubic-foot area—about the size of a hotel ballroom—on a single load of diesel fuel. Mr. Mack bought them all—at a steep discount, because Pinnacle wanted to help. On Jan. 12, he personally delivered the first of them to Viktor Mykyta, governor of the western Ukrainian region of Zakarpattia, much of which is without power and lights for eight to 12 hours a day.



Earle Mack with Viktor Mykyta.

PHOTO: JUDITH MILLER

While many analysts have focused on the effect of the West’s indispensable military aid to Kyiv, such creative, targeted philanthropy is also essential if Ukraine is to win this war. I accompanied Mr. Mack on his recent visit and saw that surprising private acts of support, in coordination with Ukrainians on the ground, are being replicated in a thousand ways throughout the country. Whether it’s flak jackets, tourniquets or weapons, Ukrainians are adapting foreign goods to their needs. Without such assistance, they probably would be unable to survive Mr. Putin’s war.

“Only the resistance of Ukrainians will drive Russia from our country,” Gov. Mykyta, 44, told me. Such resilience depends not only on guns but on butter—ensuring enough heat, light and running water so Ukrainians can get through the winter and prepare for Russia’s spring offensive.

We visited two of Ukraine’s 4,000 “points of invincibility”—public shelters in moveable tents and fortified government buildings where Ukrainians can find light, warmth and comfort. A single electric heater warmed one such tent in Uzhhorod, a city in Zakarpattia whose population of 120,000 has swelled by about 80,000, mostly women and children displaced by the war. Manned 24/7 largely by volunteers, including a nurse, this makeshift center allows Ukrainians to get medical help, sip hot tea, work on laptops and charge their cellphones during the rolling blackouts caused by the destruction of roughly half the country’s electrical grid. In another of these points of invincibility, a young man named Viktor worked on his laptop, finishing assignments for his high-school diploma. What will he do after graduating? “I’ll go to the front,” he said.

While the U.S. government alone has committed more than \$2 billion in humanitarian aid for Ukraine, much of that has gone to float the government’s budget. To supplement this essential official support, Ukrainians have opened their hearts, doors and ever-shrinking wallets to fellow countrymen. I saw fewer people sleeping on the streets of Uzhhorod than New York City.



One of Ukraine's 4,000 shelters or 'points of invincibility.'

PHOTO: JUDITH MILLER

The 1.5 million Ukrainian-Americans have been especially engaged, said Andrij Dobriansky, a U.N. representative for Ukraine's global diaspora who interpreted during our trip. He estimates that Ukrainian-Americans, joined by some 200,000 refugees in America, have raised more than \$100 million in emergency aid. But as impressive as that total is the ingenuity with which those funds have been used. By and large, Ukrainians have targeted the aid toward real-world benefits for those most desperately in need.

Ukraine's stoic struggle and creative resistance are astounding, even to a reporter who has been visiting the country for nine years. It was refreshing to hear repeated thanks to the U.S. and appreciation for the fact that American support has meant the difference between Russian occupation and the continued viability of the Ukrainian state. America's privileged 1% give generously to many causes. Given what is at stake in Ukraine for the U.S. and its democratic allies, the money they and others pledge to humanitarian assistance could make the difference.

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Ukrainians charging laptops and cellphones at a shelter in Uzhhorod, Zakarpattia, Jan. 11.

PHOTO: JUDITH MILLER

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