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In Ukraine, an informal web of Libertarians becomes a ‘resistance network’

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WARSAW, Poland – Inside a warehouse in an industrial neighborhood, a handful of Americans packed and organized body armor destined for Ukraine. The armor, which was purchased in Europe, needed work. The steel plates were too close to the body, explained one ex-Marine who is now a firefighter in Texas, as he pulled the gleaming plates out and rearranged them so there was more padding between steel and flesh. It was mid-March, and Russian attacks on ambulance drivers and other noncombatants seemed to be increasing.

Another former Marine, now a doctoral student studying 16th -century Spanish literature, was in the process of purchasing a van that day. A Hawaiian-born cannabis advocate, living and working in Eastern Europe, helped pack a car. A grizzled, chain-smoking Pole, who is fighting for the legalization of cannabis in Poland and is the grandson of a Polish resistance fighter, helped translate.

And then there was Tom Palmer. Although he’s wearing a thick, drab green coat and khaki pants, he’s tidy and neat, despite several weeks of nonstop travel, with his hair neatly parted (and dyed to keep the gray at bay, he admits, somewhat ashamed of his vanity). He doesn’t have military experience and he doesn’t speak Polish, and yet when anyone has questions about how to proceed, they turn to Palmer.

Palmer, for his part, was more often than not on the phone talking to contacts in Ukraine, Poland or any other half-a-dozen countries.

“He knows everyone,” said Paul Schwennesen, the doctoral student. “It’s a little uncanny.”

That’s because for decades Palmer has helped build a network in Europe and elsewhere, a network of thinkers, writers, businesspeople and politicians all espousing libertarian ideals. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine and, some fear, a resurgence of totalitarian ideology, that network has been, as Schwennesen said, “repurposed overnight into a global and keenly effective resistance network.”

In the following days, the group that met at that warehouse dispersed into Ukraine, delivering the body armor and other nonlethal aid and ferrying people to safety.

While their efforts were most certainly aimed at reducing human suffering and saving lives, they all had a deeper, ideologically driven purpose.

“Libertarians have often talked about liberty in the abstract, ethereal sense. So it’s interesting to see them step up,” Schwennesen said.

“In some ways, this is the moment we’ve all been waiting for. This is really an opportunity to push back on statism gone bonkers.”

Liberty worldwide

Although Dr. Kyle Varner, of Spokane, wasn’t at the warehouse in mid-March, his trip to Poland and Ukraine to help treat refugees fleeing the war was motivated by his own commitment to libertarian ideals seeded while he was in medical school.

Varner, who was born and raised in Spokane, did one of his clinical rotations in Miami. While there, he lived in an apartment building full of Venezuelans. It was 2012, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was running for re-election. Leading up to the election, Chávez closed the Venezuelan consulate in Miami, essentially throwing a barrier up for would-be expat voters who tended to support Chavez’s challenger, Varner said. Varner was outraged, and helped his friends arrange transportation to New Orleans, where they could vote.

That was his first brush with a more totalitarian government.

In 2017, he was invited to speak at a Liberty International Conference focusing on health care. Varner talked about medical tourism (of which he is a fan, arguing that it gives Americans medical options outside the U.S. and brings money into poorer countries). From there, he became more involved in libertarian work, speaking and writing frequently about it.

Liberty International was founded in 1969 (under a different name) and, as the Soviet Union loosened, was “one of the very first liberty movement organizations to penetrate Eastern Europe, before and after the fall of Berlin Wall,” according to the organization. To do so, Liberty International smuggled books and pamphlets into Eastern Europe and had western economic texts, such as the writings of Adam Smith, John Locke and Friedrich Hayek, translated into Polish, Russian and other languages.

Libertarianism, as defined by Liberty International and Varner, promotes civil liberties and laissez-faire and free-market capitalism, and emphasizes individual freedom, all under the rule of law. In some ways, this definition is more comparable to classical liberalism.

That 2017 conference was Varner’s first introduction to the libertarian movement. He dove in with characteristic zeal, speaking at conferences and heading to the Venezuelan border to help those fleeing what Varner and others characterize as a repressive regime.

The laissez-faire approach to economics has worked well for Varner, a doctor at Providence Holy Family Hospital who has a “mini real estate empire.”

“I make way more money than I really know what to do with,” he said.

He’s poured his money and time into these sorts of causes. Along the way, he met Palmer.

‘Students are interested in ideas’

Palmer has been running in libertarian circles since he was a teenager. In a 1974 article, Palmer, 19 at the time, was quoted alongside 1976 libertarian presidential candidate Roger McBride. Palmer was an organizer for the Young Libertarian Alliance Clubs then.

“Students are interested in ideas,” he said in that interview. “And we are the only political movement of ideas – as distinct from getting elected and looting.”

Since then, Palmer has continued to advance these ideas. He’s written several books and is a frequent guest speaker at libertarian-oriented events around the world. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he traveled frequently to Eastern Europe, smuggling books, pamphlets and printers into the crumbling Soviet Union.

His general modus operandi involved finding people who were “speaking in code,” perhaps “alternative models of communist management,” for instance. He’d then contact those people and help organize seminars where Western ideas could cross-pollinate with the slowly loosening Soviet bloc. He’d get books translated, mostly economic texts, and never traveled anywhere without a copy machine.

Traveling then in Eastern Europe was a difficult undertaking. In Moscow, for instance, he said all the street maps were wrong to confuse CIA operatives. He’d stand on the street corner with a pack of Marlboros and wait for someone to stop and give him a ride in exchange for the smokes.

“A lot of my business is finding people, helping them set up groups,” he said.

In the 1990s, after getting a doctorate from Oxford, he joined a libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, where he is still a senior fellow. In the early 2000s, he joined the Atlas Network, where he continues working today. With the liberalism of eastern Europe, Palmer shifted his focus to the Middle East, traveling regularly to Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries, replicating the work he’d done in the Soviet Union. He’s credited with establishing libertarian programs in 14 languages and helps manage the Atlas Network’s expansive network of nonprofits, nearly 500. He still travels incessantly, admitting that “he doesn’t like being in one place too long,” although, more than that, he’s motivated by those same ideas that he spoke of as a 19-year-old.

But his work in eastern Europe wasn’t over, as it turned out. Following the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in which a Russian-aligned government was overthrown, and subsequently Russia annexed Crimea, Palmer started traveling and working in Ukraine. Now, there are nine Atlas Network-connected think tanks in Ukraine.

In 2015, he spoke at a European Students for Liberty Conference titled “The Crisis in Ukraine.” During that talk, he warned against Russian-promulgated “post-modern relativism” in which the

sins of liberal governments, Ferguson and the killing of Michael Brown, for instance, are used to argue that liberalism is no better than totalitarian regimes.

“It’s a more effective means to undermine liberalism,” he said of that tactic, and urged those in attendance to “hold our own governments accountable.”

Regime libertarians

Palmer’s and Varner’s efforts to spread libertarian ideology haven’t been universally embraced, particularly by some in the U.S., where the Libertarian Party has been sharply divided along a number of issues – notably, the government’s COVID-19 response and to what extent the U.S. should intervene in foreign politics, most recently the war in Ukraine.

Varner has advocated publicly for masking and vaccine regulations, something that’s put him at odds with the anti-mandate ethos of many American libertarians. On Twitter and other media, Varner advocates for reasonable government oversight aimed at protecting the well-being and freedom of others. For that stance, he’s been called “an enemy of liberty” and accused of supporting U.S. imperialistic efforts. In a 2019 article, the Ron Paul Institute lambasted Varner for parroting the U.S. government’s “regime change line” when it came to Venezuela President Nicolás Maduro.

“(Varner) places the blame on the Venezuela government for problems in the country while neglecting to mention U.S. sanctions or any other U.S. government efforts that contribute to suffering in Venezuela, and praises Juan Guaidó who is seeking to overthrow the Venezuela government and whom the U.S. government has been calling the ‘interim president’ of Venezuela,” the article states.

Things got messier when the pandemic started and, recently, Varner formally renounced the American Libertarian Party.

“There are diametrically opposed ideologies claiming the term libertarian,” he said in a text.

Meanwhile, Varner’s and Palmer’s work in Ukraine and elsewhere is subject to a broader critique. They represent what some in the libertarian world call “regime libertarians.” In a March 25 article, Daniel McAdams, the executive director for the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity, wrote that regime libertarians “carry the same water for the warmongers but instead of bludgeoning the Right have chosen to bludgeon actual libertarians who refuse to adopt the CIA talking points about conflicts such as the Russia/Ukraine war.”

These critics also highlight Palmer’s work in Iraq and the Middle East. In 2017, another article criticized Palmer’s work in Iraq as supporting what the author characterized as U.S. regime interests, and noted that Palmer started traveling to Ukraine in 2015 to “support the corrupt kleptocracy of Petro Poroshenko (the country’s former president) and hailing the Ukrainian central government’s war on its own citizens.”

As for Varner's and Palmer's current work in Ukraine, there have been few direct attacks, and several prominent former critics of the two men didn't return requests for comment. One libertarian journalist drew a sharp distinction between "private peaceful activity" and "appointment by the U.S. government to help carry out an interventionist mission."

"I see a bright line there," Sheldon Richman said in an email.

There have been questions about where the Atlas Network gets its funding. In a 2017 article, the Intercept documented how Atlas Network-affiliated think tanks had pushed Latin American politics more toward the right, including accepting funding from Koch foundations.

"The libertarian network, which has reshaped political power in country after country, also has operated as a quiet extension of U.S. foreign policy, with Atlas-associated think tanks receiving quiet funding from the State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy, a critical arm of American soft power," according to the Intercept article.

The network has also been criticized because some of the think tanks it supports have received funding from tobacco companies and advocated for laws beneficial to tobacco companies, particularly in poorer countries.

Varner believes the "regime libertarian" comment shows that for some, "libertarian seems like something that is very USA-centric, and not necessarily a universal value." Schwennesen, the doctoral student, said the work isn't about coercing anyone into believing or behaving a certain way; it's about creating a political and cultural environment that allows choice.

"A true libertarian generally wishes to promote an environment for people to make their own choices," he said.

'You can't defeat a bad idea with bullets'

In a restaurant in western Ukraine, Varner and Palmer met with two young Ukrainians to discuss strategy in mid-March. It was two hours until curfew and, while they're far from the frontlines, the atmosphere was still tense. Restaurants weren't selling alcohol, air raid sirens rang out at night and the streets were full of soldiers. Palmer met the two Ukrainians at a conference in Kyiv several years ago and they've kept in touch, just two nodes in Palmer's worldwide network.

They talked about how to fight Russian disinformation, searching for ways to communicate directly with normal Russians and show them what the invasion is doing to normal Ukrainians.

The two are looking at targeted advertising, focusing on those Russians most likely to listen and learn. At the end of the meal, Varner donated \$1,000 American dollars to their effort via the Atlas Network's Ukraine Freedom Fund, which had raised more than \$1.5 million as of Saturday.

Over the next weeks, Palmer will travel in and out of Ukraine, ferrying supplies and networking. He believes defending Ukraine is about the “fight for liberty” against fascism. While the war of tanks and guns continues to rage, Palmer plans to continue his decadeslong campaign of ideas.

“You can’t defeat a bad idea with bullets,” he said. “You have to have better ideas.”