

LOCAL

Warren Buffett's son, others explain why helping Ukraine is good for Erie, America



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From Ukraine to Erie: Inna Zapara watched Russian forces bomb city of Energodar

Inna Zapara, her 38-year-old brother, Serhii Hrabovyyk, his wife and son, and their 71-year-old mother Zoia have resettled in Erie. *Matthew Rink, Erie Times-News*

Businessman and philanthropist Howard G. Buffett, the middle child of billionaire investor Warren Buffett, led a series of conversations in Erie Wednesday about the importance of bolstering support for war-torn Ukraine as Russia's assault on the nation nears the two-and-a-half-year mark.

Buffett didn't mince words during an interview with the Erie Times-News editorial board, saying that adversaries like Iran and North Korea are supporting the Russian invasion not simply to take over Ukraine, but to weaken the West.

"They want to weaken the United States," Buffett said. "And China wants to take the number one position in the world in terms of the economy. And so everything is designed to weaken the United States, to reduce our freedom and undermine our democracy.

"If we don't help Ukraine win this war now," he continued, "It becomes our war."



From left, Heather Conley, president of the German Marshall Fund; Howard G. Buffett, son of billionaire investor Warren Buffett and the founder of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation; and Kateryna Simagly, the first secretary of public & cultural diplomacy, Embassy of Ukraine to the U.S., are shown on Wednesday at the Erie Times-News. The group was in Erie as part of its "Whistlestops for Ukraine" tour, which aimed to bolster support for Ukraine in its war with Russia. *PROVIDED BY THE HOWARD G. BUFFETT FOUNDATION*

The Howard G. Buffett Foundation partnered with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a nonpartisan public policy think tank that focuses on U.S. and European Union relations, and the Farm Journal to launch a multi-state "Whistlestops for Ukraine" tour to drum up support for Ukraine in primarily agriculturally rich areas of the country.

Erie was selected in large part because of the connection the groups had made with Erie-based [Logistics Plus founder Jim Berlin](#).

More: [See how Erie has rallied to support those in war-torn Ukraine](#)

Local efforts to support Ukraine

[Logistics Plus](#) and another Erie-based company, Vorex, moved \$100 million of gas pipe from China to Ukraine to help Ukraine and the European Union break its reliance on Russian natural gas supplies. They moved 22,000 tons of drill and casing pipe on four ships and 1,000 trucks over an eight-month period that coincided with typhoon season in the Sea of China and congestion at a Romanian port. The final shipment happened in January and was the first non-grain product to enter the port of Chornomorsk since the invasion began.

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The company also raised \$660,000 for relief efforts.

The group was surprised to learn how many other Erie entities have ties to Ukraine.

"In the four stops that we've already accomplished, today's conversation with the business community, I thought, was one of the richest because so many of them had already invested in (Ukraine)," said Heather A. Conley, president of the German Marshall Fund. "That is fantastic that there's already that engagement."

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Buffett said President Joe Biden's administration does not have the proper strategy to help Ukraine win the war. He added that he doesn't know what former President Donald Trump would do to resolve the war if elected in November.

He noted that there is a misperception among many in the American public that funding to support Ukraine is going directly to the country, when in fact much of it is going to scores of American manufacturers, like the Scranton Army Ammunition Plant in Scranton, and even to the local Wabtec plant, which is supplying 40 diesel locomotives to the country through a \$156 million Export-Import Bank loan.

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Impact on agriculture

Buffett's foundation, he said, has largely focused on issues of food security and conflict mitigation. It worked in 44 countries in Africa and most of Central and South America. It had never worked in Ukraine prior to the invasion.

"We went to Ukraine in April of 2022 to understand the issues better and never looked back," Buffett said, noting that his foundation went from investing more than \$250 million annually in food security issues to more than \$500 million because of its support for Ukraine.

Russia has weaponized food, said Kateryna Smaglyi, first secretary of public & cultural diplomacy at the Embassy of Ukraine in the U.S.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's destruction of Ukraine's Odesa seaport was intended to cut off Ukraine's grain exports to other countries. That's crippled its economy and its ability to feed people across Europe and the globe.

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"Putin is repeating history again, because that's exactly what Stalin did in 1932," Samglyi said.

Russia is stealing grain from Ukraine to pay for the war. Ukraine is the ninth largest producer of wheat and fifth largest exporter. Nearly a third of the wheat it produced last year, said Buffett, came from Russian-occupied areas of the country.

"If you look at just the impact that Russia has had on agriculture and Ukrainian farmers, it's huge, just huge," Buffett said.

Conley said Russia will not stop at Ukraine and that the U.S. must adopt a different mindset about its support for Ukraine to stop Putin.

'We were not ready for this': Ukrainian refugees reflect on fleeing war as they resettle in Erie

'A national understanding'

"This is the difference in mindset," she said. "Russia has decided they're in a full-war economy. Everything is weaponized. Food is weaponized. Religion is weaponized. Migrants are weaponized. Energy is weaponized. Ukraine now is gearing toward a total-war economy, preserving its strength, everything going for the war effort.

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"The United States and our partners are not even close," she continued. "It's a mindset. We have to understand what is at stake. You have to gear your strategy and your economy to what needs to be done to win. That's what's missing. And that can't be just one political leader or one political party. It has to be a national understanding of what is at stake. And that's very difficult."

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