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Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

Thank you very much for being with us. 'Us' means the World Policy Conference and it means Ifri, which you know well. As you can imagine, the Ukraine war has been one of the major topics we have discussed since yesterday morning and that we will continue to discuss until late tomorrow. Many countries are represented here, not only European countries and the US, but also Asian countries and countries in the global south. My first question is to ask for your assessment of the current military situation and, again from the military viewpoint, what your prospects are for the wintertime that everybody is discussing, with of course a number of uncertainties. Please can you answer this first question?

Dmytro Kuleba

Dear Thierry and dear participants of the conference, first of all, thank you for inviting me and I would like to congratulate you on organizing this excellent World Policy Conference, which brings together so many prominent voices from all parts of the world, and this is probably the most important achievement, to bring together representatives of so many regions and countries.

One important reason why Ukraine has not only withstood Russia's full-scale attack but is actually gradually winning this war is that we have never relied on weather, on the season of the year. Be it winter, spring, summer, autumn, we keep fighting because we are defending our land and the stakes are very high for us and nothing can stop us. Nothing can stop our brave Ukrainian soldiers and our brave people of Ukraine, who suffer enormously from regular Russian missile attacks on critical infrastructure, depriving us of electricity, water and heating.

We know that our army needs to be well equipped to fight in the winter just as well as it fights in the summer, and you need artillery ammunition and all of this irrespective of the weather or the season. There is one difference between us and the Russians during the winter. We of course take better care of our soldiers fighting at the frontline. We provide them with winter uniforms and with everything that can help them to warm up and to survive in this fight. The Russian attitude towards their soldiers is different. For them, the lives of people are not important. We take many of them as prisoners of war and we see how poorly they are equipped and what they wear. This is a disgrace, but this is the choice of the Russian Army. It is not well equipped for winter, and I am afraid that many Russian soldiers will suffer enormously from the cold weather and will even be seriously wounded because of that.

The hope, therefore, that winter is a game changer, and the Russians now like to talk about the winter as a special time, represents the mood in the Kremlin right now. We have the impression



that Putin simply does not accept the reality that he is losing the war. From what we know, even a part of the Russian oligarchs and military command realizes that Russia will not win this war and the longer it refuses to accept the reality the more painful the defeat will be. However, Putin is not in that circle. He still hopes for some kind of miracle to turn the tide of the war, the tide of history I would even say, in his favor.

I am sorry for this comparison, I know they have been used too often in the past but this reality reminds me of Adolf Hitler in 1944 and 1945. He was hoping that Roosevelt's death would be a turning point after which he would win again or he was hoping that there would be a *wunderwaffe*, a wonder weapon, which would change it all and bring luck and victory back to Germany. The reality in fact is that Russia is losing and Ukraine is winning. Yes, the battles are very difficult. Yes, there are some difficult days ahead for us. Yes, we are paying a painful price. But we are fighting a just war against an invader, against an aggressor, who was not provoked, but decided to wage war against us. We are defending our territory and we are ready to pay the price, as any other nation in the world is.

The most difficult situation is in Bakhmut. In Bakhmut right now, Ukrainian soldiers are repelling waves of Russian attacks 24 hours a day and literally seven days a week. Russia is waging inhuman World War II style warfare there. They send forward poorly equipped and undertrained Red troops, some of them from the private military company Wagner, and they have recruited prisoners to this company who were promised amnesty if they go in the first line of attackers in Ukraine and survive. These are not made up stories that Ukraine is telling. This is the reality we see on the ground every day. Our soldiers intercept Russian communications on that side and you know what they call these troops – cannon fodder – who they send in hundreds to be killed within minutes? They call them 'one timers'. This is the type of cynical and inhuman war they wage, where human life does not matter. This is the difference. This is the biggest difference between Russia and Ukraine: the way we consider human life. For us it is precious. For them, these people are 'one timers'. You send them into the battle and they get killed. This is it.

Despite all the difficulties, we will keep moving forward. We do not care about weather. Whatever weather there will be, we will keep moving forward until we fully restore our territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders. Thank you.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much for this very precise answer. Now I would like to ask you about your notion of winning the war or losing the war. How do you precisely define winning the war? Is it total unconditional capitulation, like, let us say, the Germans, not in 1945, but in 1918? Is that the way you would define winning the war or the Russians losing the war? Is it the collapse of the Russian Federation, of Putin committing suicide, since you mentioned Hitler in 1945? How do you define the winning and the losing side?

Dmytro Kuleba

Frankly, I do not care how Putin ends. It is up to the people of Russia to decide. I care for Ukraine, and we are not asking for anything more than what belongs to us by history and by law, and that is our borders. For us, therefore, winning the war is fully restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, which in practice means going

back to the status quo that existed before February 2014, when Russia began its war against Ukraine by illegally annexing Crimea. This is the non-negotiable part of the victory. This is something that must happen unconditionally. Then there is a broader issue of the strategic victory, not only of Ukraine, but also of the entire international community, because what is at stake in Ukraine relates to all, to the entire world. The world cannot exist if countries can get away with violating international borders, committing mass atrocities, if these countries do not play by the rules.

The next question, therefore, is how to make Russia play by the rules and that is more complicated because it is one thing to kick them out of Ukraine, but the source of threat will remain. I do not think there is a definite answer to this question. There are many scenarios possible, but a strategic victory for the entire international community will be having a Russia that plays by the rules. This is something that we have to be focused on right now, in thinking how to make it happen. If that requires a change of the regime in Russia then, yes, the Russian people have to undergo this transition. However, again, I think this change should come from inside of Russia. It is the people of Russia who have to make a decision. The question is how to create conditions where the people of Russia will realize that they have to make this change, and this is where the international community can play a role. However, again, without a Russia that does not pose a threat, not only to its neighbors but to the world order as such, it is impossible to imagine a victory, a strategic victory.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much. That, too, is very clear. Now, I think that the Americans and the Europeans, for the time being at least, and probably for the foreseeable future, follow you in the way you are approaching the crisis, but the rest of the world do not necessarily follow you entirely. For instance, I am thinking of a recent intervention of the Foreign Minister of India, but others say that this war is not their war, it is not their cause. They consider it to be an internal western issue and they see the immense short-, medium-, and long-term consequences for them, for the economy, food security and so forth and so on. What do you have to tell them since many of these countries are represented here?

Dmytro Kuleba

We all understand why people say such things. You can say 100 times that this is not your war, but when food prices go high because of the Russian blockade of Ukrainian export of agricultural products, all of a sudden people wake up and understand that they suffer from the war which they believe has nothing to do with them, and we hear calls from many corners of the world asking to unblock the export of grain from Ukraine. However, the reason why it happened is simple. It is because Russia attacked Ukraine. It is not because Ukraine defends itself. It is because Russia attacked Ukraine. Some countries, therefore, are playing a pretty hypocritical game by saying, 'You know, this war has nothing to do with us, but please make sure that we receive our grain. We do not want to judge, we do not want to call a spade a spade, we do not care why this is happening. Just fix it. Get it done'.

Others behave differently. They try to benefit from the war. Therefore, when some countries are saying, 'This is a good opportunity to buy Russian oil at a cheap price because Russia is giving big discounts', yes, you have a right to do so because you care for your interests and for your

people. But do not forget that you are making profits and you have the opportunity to help your people to buy cheaper diesel at the station because someone in Ukraine is dying fighting the Russian Army or dying from Russian missile attacks, because without this war, without sanctions imposed on Russia, Russia would not be offering its oil with a discount, trying to sell it globally. Everyone, therefore, makes their point. That makes total sense in world politics. However, I think we deserve a frank and honest assessment and appreciation of what we are doing, and if you are benefitting from this war, do not forget to do something to help Ukraine win, at least as a gesture of gratitude. If you want problems caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine to be resolved do not forget to support Ukraine in ending this war, because without it there will not be any problems. There will not be any problems without Russia. I can tell you that with absolute certainty.

I visited some African countries and had very good conversations with very good friends. One of my colleagues said to me, 'Dmytro, we only realized how Ukraine is important for our food security when exports from Ukraine were blocked. And now for the first time in 30 years we realize that we depend on you, on Ukraine'. I said, 'Exactly, this is the point. You had not realized it before because everything worked perfectly fine and there was no reason for you to even think where this grain comes from because it was coming without any single problem. But Russia's attack changed it all'. Therefore, those in the world who are saying that this is not their war should also remember one last argument, the one that I already mentioned. No country in the world wants a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, to have the right to invade and commit mass atrocities because if Russia succeeds with this everyone else in the world who wants to change borders by force will be tempted to follow the pattern of Russian behavior. People can say 100 times that this is not their war, but the truth is that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has global repercussions, and therefore all of us should be interested in ending this war as soon as possible and ending it with the victory of Ukraine, because it defends not only itself but also the rules that this world is based on.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much. Now you are moving towards a more short-term issue, precisely on how to help Ukraine. I think next Tuesday in Paris, 13 December, a conference starts on the resilience of and reconstruction in Ukraine. Can you tell us what you expect precisely and what you need, what your demands will be?

Dmytro Kuleba

We have to go through the winter, and the winter without a stable functioning of our energy system. More than half of our energy system was damaged or destroyed one way or another by massive Russian missile attacks. Many transformers and many parts of the electricity grid are down. They do not exist anymore, and our energy experts are performing miracles to keep the country functioning. I myself spent 30 hours without a supply of electricity and water in the apartment where I live, so I now have this experience of ending up without light, heating and water in the middle of the winter with minus five degrees Celsius outside the window. This is the biggest challenge now.

Putin believes that he will break us down by destroying our energy system, making us freeze during the winter. This is a very silly explanation and another mistake that Russia is making.

They are just wasting their missiles. Yes, they cause a lot of damage. Yes, people die because of that. But as a nation we will not break down. This conference that you mentioned in Paris next week, first and foremost, we expect from it a coordinated effort of those who will participate in this conference in providing Ukraine with transformers, generators and spare parts for our electricity grid that will help us to get through the winter.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much for this very concrete answer, too. Now I would like to move to a wider issue. I think it was in March of this year that President Zelensky said that Ukraine might consider neutral status. Of course, since then you have changed your position, and you expressed it very well, but more precisely my question is: do you intend to apply for candidacy for NATO anytime soon, and if it is not soon then when?

Dmytro Kuleba

Actually, we did. We did apply. I think it was a month or two ago. We did send a formal application. I think we just do not want to waste time. One of the outcomes of this war will be full integration of Ukraine into the European Union and NATO because we have to think strategically. Yes, the country is at war now and it is hard to imagine us joining NATO right now, but the future of Euro Atlantic security is being decided on the battlefield in Ukraine, and after the war, Ukraine will have one of the most capable armies in the world and definitely the most capable army in Europe, taking into account its combat experience, morale, and military equipment. Therefore, it would be very unwise for NATO to ignore or not to accommodate such a contributor to Euro Atlantic security.

In a broader sense, it is obvious that the eastern border of Ukraine is already the eastern border of the Euro Atlantic space. It is de facto. It is a statement of fact. Therefore, membership in NATO will be just a legal recognition of it. This will come I have no doubt. We will be hearing many discussions, many statements, pro and contra. This is how the world works. We know how to live with it. We know how to work with it, but strategically I have no doubt that this is going to happen. It is just a matter of time.

Thierry de Montbrial

I am now talking about relatively practical things regarding the conditions to fulfill to be accepted in NATO versus the conditions to enter the European Union, which is much more complicated stuff. Would you say, from your viewpoint, it is easier and it should happen faster, to become a member of NATO, than to become a member of the EU?

Dmytro Kuleba

Procedurally, it is definitely easier to become a member of NATO than of the EU, but in both cases this exception implies making a clear political decision by current members within a specific period of time. As I said, I do not have a very specific answer about the timeline of when it will happen, and I do not know what will happen sooner, NATO or the EU, in terms of the timelines. However, I have no doubt that this is going to happen. If the EU and NATO compete with each other in the case of bringing Ukraine in, I will only welcome that competition.

Thierry de Montbrial

We have just a few minutes left, so perhaps we could concentrate on this time perspective, because one possible scenario, I do not know which probability you would assign to it, would be a short victory, meaning perhaps a clear victory in the next few months, sometime in 2023. That is one scenario. Intellectually, it is likely that if this came about the issue of joining NATO and this political decision to accelerate your admission to the European Union, all this could go relatively fast. However, there is another scenario, which is that of a protracted war, a war which could continue for months and months and some people even say for years, and if this happened the whole history could be rather different. Could you tell us your reasons to believe that you could achieve a victory in a short time span?

Dmytro Kuleba

Actually, we are not setting any specific deadlines for ourselves because as I said, we are fighting a just war against an invader, and if someone breaks into your apartment and you are trying to fight back against him, you do not set yourself a deadline. You do not say, 'Okay, I will fight with this intruder for 10 minutes, but if I do not succeed then I will just give up and allow him to do everything that he wants or I will propose to him that he stays in the corridor and I will keep the rest of my apartment under my control'. This is simply not how it works when you are invaded. You are fighting a just war against the aggressor. You fight until you kick him out, whatever it takes. And it does not matter how much time it takes because you are fighting on the right side of history for the right cause.

There are different estimations based on the military capacity and the economic capacity of both sides, the impact of sanctions, the impact of Russian revenues from trading oil and gas, on the economic stability in Russia. There are many, many, many calculations and estimations, but I do not think any of them will be correct in the end because there is also a black swan element that has to be taken into account. Not everything can be forecast mathematically. This is not how war works. What I learned in these 10 months of war is that war is a combination of mathematics and philosophy.

Thierry de Montbrial

Both are the same.

Dmytro Kuleba

Yes. On the one hand, you have to calculate the resources, but on the other hand it is really about perceptions, morale, and understanding of the purpose of your efforts. We are going to win. This is going to happen. This is already happening and time does not really matter. What matters is the availability of resources to win. The more resources we have the sooner we will win. The fewer resources we have the longer it will take.

Thierry de Montbrial

This is the last question because we are approaching the end and I think we have agreed to respect exactly the time span. If instead of me you were talking with Macron, what would you tell him?

Dmytro Kuleba

I would say, 'Mr. President, thank you for being a very strong supporter of Ukraine and sending the weapons that you have already sent. Thank you for supporting and for playing a leading role in building a consensus to grant Ukraine new candidacy status, but this thing about security guarantees for Russia is something that we do not think makes a lot of sense for you to embrace'.

Thierry de Montbrial

It was right, therefore, to ask you that question.

Dmytro Kuleba

I hope I gave you a good answer.

Thierry de Montbrial

Mr. Minister, thank you very much for these very open and genuine answers that you gave. Thank you very much, and I hope that, in a not too distant future, with an improved situation on the front of this war, we will have the pleasure of having discussions with you again. As you did a few months ago at IFRI, I invite you for a similar discussion within the IFRI framework during the winter, at the end of the winter. Thank you very much, and best wishes.

Dmytro Kuleba

Thank you, and my best regards and appreciation to all participants on this panel. Thank you.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you.