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Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

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

Good afternoon. Thank you very much for being with us again this year.

We are close to the end of the second year of this war and I would like to ask you the first question. How do you assess the Ukrainian counteroffensive? As you know, it is usually not considered to be a great success. It is not a defeat either, but it is not a great success.

I think it is important to have your assessment of the situation.

Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

Ukraine's great success was on the battlefield throughout the summer, and autumn of 2022 raised expectations that every battle we will be fighting will be producing as impressive results as the counteroffensive in the east of Ukraine last year, when we liberated the Kharkiv region in an undoubtedly impressive and striking counteroffensive.

This counteroffensive is not as impressive as the previous one and people feel disappointed about it. However, everything that has been achieved by our soldiers in this counteroffensive is an act of heroism, because I cannot imagine another army in the world that would be able to break through the first lines of the defenses Russia built in the south of Ukraine.

This is very similar to the Second World War allied operation on the Western front. There was the famous Siegfried Line built by Germany. Russia built very similar defensive lines.

It is not easy, but we are still making good progress in the south. We are approaching the city of Bakhmut in the east. We have to understand one thing: this is a war, and a war is not just one battle in a history book. It is a sequence of battles and we should not allow anyone to speculate that, if one counteroffensive is less impressive than the other, then things are going in the wrong direction. No, they are not. We are still fighting and we are still liberating our territory from Russian occupying forces.

Thierry de Montbrial

You mentioned the Second World War. Does it not look more like the First World War, or the end of it?

Dmytro Kuleba

This is a perception. I know this debate and it is interesting because those who want to emphasize the point of the stalemate and certain impasses on the battlefield, they refer to the First World War and they compare the current situation with the First World War.

Those who want to emphasize temporary difficulties in liberating territories, and I belong to that camp very openly, they compare it to the experience of the Second World War.



I think it is rather more an intellectual debate and the point each side is trying to make. If I recall some of the allied operations in the north of France or in The Netherlands, like the famous Market Garden Operation, which was considered to be the counteroffensive to end the Second World War and defeat Nazi Germany, it did not deliver. It was a failure, but still it was an important part of the overall fight against Nazi Germany and, in the end, allied forces prevailed over Nazis.

Therefore, I really think that the Second World War comparison depends on the broader point you are trying to make about this war.

Thierry de Montbrial

That is extremely interesting, but would you say the same about the question of whether it will be a very long war or not? Would you say that those who forecast that it will be a long, perhaps a very long war, are just following behind Russian propaganda?

Dmytro Kuleba

I think that there is no room for deadlines when it comes to the fight for territorial integrity and sovereignty of any country. If you are attacked on the street, and you clearly see that the attacker has the intention of killing you, you are not saying to yourself, 'I am going to fight for five minutes but, if I see that I am failing, that I cannot beat him off, I will simply give up', right? This is simply not how people nor states think.

I want peace. Ukraine wants peace, more than anyone else in the world, but not at the cost of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Just last night, Ukraine was attacked with 36 Russian drones and missiles. They are undertaking offensive operations in the east of Ukraine and this is not how you behave when you want peace. This is not how you behave when you want to stop the war.

To be honest with you, we are not making the timeline calculation. We are focused on sorting out problems, mobilizing support, ramping up production of weapons, increasing resilience of our economy. We will fight as long as it takes for Ukraine to win because, if Ukraine does not win, there will be no lasting peace.

I am in Berlin now and I was reminded of the famous words by Helmut Kohl, who once said, 'The end of war does not necessarily mean peace'. This is something that people should always remember while considering different options about the end of the war in Ukraine.

We need the end of the war that will bring peace and not another war, another aggression by Russia. This is why the basis of this peace should be the peace formula proposed by Ukraine, based on international law and the UN Charter.

Thierry de Montbrial

Would you say that the willingness of the armed forces in Ukraine, and the willingness of the people, those who are behind the front, that their determination to continue to fight is as strong as it was a few months ago?

Dmytro Kuleba

The army is part of the society, and so am I. This war will continue as long as the people of Ukraine are ready to endure all kinds of hardships related to the war.

When I look at the most recent polls conducted, I think, in September and October this year, I recall that 73% of Ukrainians said that they categorically reject any kind of territorial

concessions Ukraine should make in this war. I think 56% or 58% of Ukrainians said that they are ready to endure hardships as long as it takes for Ukraine.

These are the numbers. This is what people say. We are a democracy. You can find different opinions and it is true that it is difficult to fight this war. However, the vast majority of Ukrainians believe in victory, and they believe that we are on the right course. Therefore, we keep fighting.

Thierry de Montbrial

Of course, you understand that all the questions I am asking are the questions that everybody is asking in France, in Europe, in the US, and everywhere. This is why I ask you these questions. One of them is that Presidential elections are scheduled next year in Ukraine. What can you say about these elections? Will they take place or not? Is it still a question to be debated?

I was thinking of when the Turks had the terrible earthquake a few months ago, the question was whether the elections will take place in Turkey or not. In Ukraine case, it is not an earthquake. It is worse than an earthquake: it is a war. What can we say about that?

Dmytro Kuleba

We are a democracy. We went through many tests. Sometimes it seems that some friends are trying to turn Ukraine into the global laboratory of democratic tests and I think there is no other country in the world that would be even considering holding elections against the background of such largescale invasion.

However, we are not closing this page. The President of Ukraine is considering and weighing different pros and cons, but it is not because he is unwilling to hold elections. It is because holding these elections under the current circumstances will require an unprecedented effort and will require to address unprecedented challenges. I can name a few of them.

As Foreign Minister, I will be in charge of Ukrainians voting abroad. If we estimate that between five million and eight million Ukrainians are currently residing in foreign countries, with some countries hosting one million or two million Ukrainians, it simply means that the whole country where they reside will have to be covered with polling stations. Many countries do not allow holding foreign elections outside of the diplomatic missions of the country that is holding the elections.

How do I address this challenge? If I go back to Ukraine, how do I ensure that polling stations will not become perfect targets for Russian missiles and drones? People will go to vote and everyone will know where the polling stations are. How will soldiers in the trenches vote? I do not mean the choice they are going to make but technically. More importantly, how will people in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine vote?

These are the challenges that need to be address. However, I am not saying no to the idea of an election. I am saying that this is something that needs to be addressed. We are a democracy and we want to further develop as a strong democratic country, but we also ask to understand the enormous difficulties that the country is facing at this point.

Thierry de Montbrial

It is not only in Ukraine that major elections are supposed to take place next year. The most important country for the world is certainly the US. Are you worried about the prospects of the presidential elections in the US? The Republicans in particular seem to be more and more



divided on the issue of supporting Ukraine. Even in the Democratic Party, it is not totally clear. Could you tell us what your assessment is of the, if I may say so, American risk?

Dmytro Kuleba

To be honest, the only thing I really worry about is the health of my children and of my parents. Everything else is just part of the job. After everything that has happened to Ukraine, I really do not worry about anything. Every time we face a greater challenge than the one that we faced yesterday, we just have to double or triple our efforts to overcome it.

We are a year ahead of the US elections and, frankly speaking, I understand the dynamics of the electoral campaign and the closer we get to the elections, the more tense the debate will be. That is clear, and I understand that Ukraine will be one of the issues at the center of the debate. However, I think we will cross that bridge when we come to it.

At this point, we are focused on another issue, which is the decision by the Congress that needs to be taken on allocating sufficient resources to support Ukraine throughout 2024. This is something that we are working on. I think, starting early next year, we will be getting more focused on handling the right positioning of Ukraine in light of the internal debate in the United States.

The world is full of risks but, if you want to win, if you want to succeed, you have to accept it and what you should not allow yourself to do is to be afraid of any kind of risks.

Thierry de Montbrial

That is obviously a very good answer. What about the Europeans? In December, the EU leaders are supposed to decide whether to open negotiations and access negotiations to the EU with Kyiv. However, we have observed over the last months events that many of us would not have anticipated in Europe. For instance, the Poland incident about corn that was said to be related to election process. Now, the results of the elections in Poland are very comforting.

However, there are some difficulties in Hungary. The result of the elections in Slovakia was also probably disappointing. Do you think that the EU, the Europeans, are a reliable partner for Ukraine?

Dmytro Kuleba

Yes, because we are all Europeans and the EU realizes that its security and prosperity depends on what is happening in Ukraine and on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, and on the future membership of Ukraine in the EU.

Of course, we all feel tempted to judge books by their covers and, in politics, the statements, the headlines that we see in the papers coming from different political forces, they create a lot of emotional discussions and emotional reactions.

However, we have to judge these countries by the decision they make and, as long as we see that decisions related to Ukraine's accession to the EU, decisions related to the continuing of macro-financial support of Ukraine, decisions related to the provision of military support and imposing of sanctions against Russia, are taken. Everything else is politics. We can find the way to steer through these debates and political agendas that countries are having.

We will have a couple of these decisions by the end of the year to be adopted by the European Union and we will see how some members will handle this situation.

As of now, we are working very diligently, carefully and with full respect to domestic political situations in some European countries, to make these decisions happen.

More broadly speaking, the role of the European Union in supporting Ukraine in this war is underestimated and we should speak more about the unprecedented decisions that the European Union has made since last February to defend Europe. By helping Ukraine, EU helps to defend the whole of Europe and we all should be more outspoken about that.

Thierry de Montbrial

This issue is related to the NATO issue. From your viewpoint, is it conceivable that Ukraine becomes a member of NATO while the war is still going on?

Dmytro Kuleba

NATO membership cannot stop this war, but NATO membership for Ukraine will prevent further wars. In this sense, there is no alternative to Ukraine's membership in NATO.

The message that was sent to the world and to Ukraine at the NATO Vilnius Summit was very clear: Ukraine will become a member of NATO when security conditions allow.

Therefore, a country in an active phase of an armed conflict, of course, cannot be integrated into NATO. However, as long as we see that NATO is not just keeping the door open, but also makes specific effort to increase interoperability and bring Ukraine closer, that will be a process moving in the right direction.

Thierry de Montbrial

So far, we have spoken as if our meeting had taken place before October 7th, but on October 7th, something happened which maybe changed the whole game. Since the Hamas aggression in Israel on October 7th, in the West in particular, one hardly speaks of what is going on in Ukraine, as if the war had disappeared from the front pages of the newspapers.

What is your assessment of the impact of the Middle East war which has started, and which also probably will be quite long, on the Ukraine war?

Dmytro Kuleba

We did disappear from the front pages, but we did not disappear from the radars of world politics. This is pretty clear to me because we are in constant communication with our partners in the United States and in Europe and other parts of the world. Therefore, these are two different areas and this has to be taken into account.

I am sorry to say it, but the longer the war in the Middle East lasts, the fewer front pages it will occupy as well, because this is the law of the world. People get used to it. People get used to wars, to disasters. We even get used to pandemics, as humanity.

What brings you back to the front page is something big, something that goes beyond people's routine perception of the conflict. For example, every day, Ukraine is being attacked massively with Russian drones and missiles. The fact that this massive destruction and killing is not making the front pages of the world is not our problem, it is the problem of readers and viewers who are not interested in the topic anymore. But the war continues and we are fighting it. However, if you want to get back to the front page, you have to secure a big victory or you have to suffer a big loss. Then you make it back. Of course, we are working hard today to return to the front pages with big victories.

Speaking about trends, we currently do not see any decrease in the support that we are receiving from partners because of the war in the Middle East. However, there will be a different challenge if the conflict in the Middle East spills over and takes it to the next level of violence and involvement of other players. This is the risk that needs to be permanently kept in mind while assessing the dynamics of the process.

Thierry de Montbrial

The challenge goes beyond that. It is also related to the so-called Global South and, with a new war in the Middle East, the hostility of the global south against the West involves both Ukraine and Israel. Nobody knows exactly but that might have a serious impact over the years. In a word, how do you see this issue?

Dmytro Kuleba

I see that countries who spent many months seeking arguments to explain why they are not supporting openly Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression are the loudest today in accusing the West of double standards in the treatment of the war in the Middle East and Ukraine. Because, finally, they believed they found an excuse to explain why they behaved one way and not another towards Ukraine.

I do not have the impression that the Global South is lost. We recently held a coordination meeting of the peace formula proposed with the countries who are taking part in the peace formula proposed by President Zelensky. It was held in Malta.

The previous meeting we held in Saudi Arabia two months ago, we had 44 participants. This time, in Malta, against the raging war in the Middle East, we had 66 and we see that many of the newcomers are coming from beyond the West. We had Arab countries, African countries, and South American countries.

Third, I think the conversation about double standards is the most famous discussion in world affairs and in diplomacy. Therefore, there will always be those who will try to reinforce this thing and accuse Ukraine or the West of mistreating the Middle East conflict. Russia is, and will be, reinforcing this message because it perfectly fits their narrative.

However, I think the picture is far more nuanced than just black and white or you lost, you gained. It is far more nuanced and the situation is not as critical as it may seem.

Thierry de Montbrial

I hope that in a year from now, we will have a third meeting of this kind with you, and perhaps even before, if you have a chance to go to Paris. We would be extremely honored to welcome you at Ifri.

My last question will be, is there, from your viewpoint, any chance to have some kind of negotiations with Russia starting before we meet next time?

Dmytro Kuleba

I know that, as you mentioned before, you are asking me this question because this is floating in the air in some places in the world, but I encourage everyone who is talking about negotiations to learn history. You do not have to go too deep into the history books. It is a very recent history.

In between 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea, and February 2022, when Russian launched its largescale invasion against Ukraine, there were about 200 rounds of negotiations



between Ukraine and Russia, mediated by Germany and France as participants of the Normandy format, supported by the United States in one way or another. Almost 200 rounds. Twenty ceasefires were officially announced in the same period of time, and all of them were violated by Russia.

To everyone entertaining the idea of how nice it would be to have negotiations, they should first ask themselves: 'What makes me believe that Russia changed for the good since then, that this Russia can be trusted more than the one that treacherously launched the war instead of seeking diplomatic solutions, the country that violated all ceasefires it signed up for?'. Once you answer this question in an honest way, there will be no questions about when negotiations will begin.

Second, no-one wants peace more than us, but we do not need a peace that will lead to another war. We need a peace that will be lasting. When I see daily morning reports about the situation on the front line, I do not see the slightest indication that Russia is interested in peace, that Russia is seeking solutions. They are sending more weapons to more soldiers, more missiles, more drones. They want to fight and sometimes we have to accept this is the reality. Sometimes there are moments in history when you have to defeat the evil on the battlefield before sitting down at the table and signing papers.

This is the reality. And this is what Ukraine is doing. Instead of crying out for negotiations, I want everyone to focus on a different question: how can I help Ukraine to win on the battlefield, to put Ukraine in the best position to negotiate and to put an end to this war?

When you change these optics, when you start asking yourself realistic questions, then this war will end sooner rather than later. There is this word in Germany, '*lumpenpazifismus*', which means misconception of peace or hypocritical understanding of what real peace is. Therefore, let us work towards real peace and not hypocritical peace that will lead to another war.

Thierry de Montbrial

Mr. Minister, thank you very much. Time is up. I would like to thank you again for everything you told us. You know that all of us in Europe and beyond admire the extraordinary resistance of your people, and the way Ukraine fights to become a long-lasting nation.

We admire you and I wish you personally and your country all the best. Thank you for taking a moment of your precious time for this discussion with us. Thank you very much indeed.

Dmytro Kuleba

Thank you for this conversation.