

ROMAN VASSILENKO

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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

I now give the floor to Roman Vassilenko. Kazakhstan is a huge country in terms of territory with very weighty neighbors, Russia, of course, but also China. You have a very bold and so far effective policy with President Tokayev to open yourself as much as possible, economically but also politically, to the West, and particularly to the European Union. President Tokayev was on a state visit in Paris recently. You therefore have some experience. You are probably the founder of this concept of multi-vector policy. First, could you tell us a little bit about the Ukraine situation to start with. That is, do you believe that there is a real chance now to move towards some kind of diplomacy that could bring an end to this war? Also, do you think there is still a risk of escalation, even though the election of Trump probably has reduced this probability? What is your analysis as of today?

Roman Vassilenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Thank you so much, dear Mr. Thierry de Montbrial. Before going into Ukraine, can I still explain why this multi-vector foreign policy and why Kazakhstan? However, first, I will take a little bit of issue with your words from earlier about taking sides and forcing countries to take sides. We think that the only side is the international community, and I would still like to believe that we are an international community. The only side we should all be taking is the side of cooperation, not confrontation; the side of the international law, not lawlessness; the side of mutual benefit and win-win, not mutual exclusion and zero-sum games. That is the approach we have been pursuing for the past 30 years.

As you were talking about Kazakhstan coming up with this idea 30 years ago, I had the flash in my mind, and I thought about a Kazakh home. It is a yurt. It is a round felt house which does not have any corners. Taking corners and going into different corners, like in a boxing ring, is naturally against the mentality of Kazakhstan. That is why, perhaps, living in such a huge landmass, as you mentioned, but neighboring even bigger neighbors, we have pursued this multilateral, multi-vector, pragmatic, constructive foreign policy since independence. As a result of this, we have so far avoided, touch wood, the situation where we would have tense or even bad relations with any country in the world, including our neighbors. Naturally, we are proud of that, and naturally we think that this experience can be shared.

Of course, other countries' experiences are different. They are in different geographical situations. They have different neighbors, but the challenges are similar. I think the response can only be through greater engagement and through a greater search for this mutually beneficial cooperation. There is always scope for such cooperation, and I agree with you that this war in Ukraine should never have happened and could have been avoided. I am not

talking about appeasement, but I am talking about constructive engagement, listening and hearing what the other side has to say. Being realists, pragmatists, we think that there is still a chance that this situation will go according to the first scenario that you outlined in your opening remarks, that there is a growing recognition, both in Russia and in Ukraine, as well as in the West, that it is unsustainable to go on like that, to continue this war. Otherwise, this will be the war until the last Ukrainian. Is this what the West wants? I do not think so.

You mentioned Donald Trump. Yes, everybody is expecting what is going to happen on January 20 when he assumes office. I still think, despite the lack of clarity as to what exactly he as the leader of the United States would want to put on the table, that this rather radical change in approach that he and his administration are going to bring to the table will have an impact, will give a jolt to this situation. For a very long time, there was this motto of the West staying with Ukraine for as long as it takes. That is an excellent motto, but as long as it takes until what? It looks like Trump and his administration are really going to look for solutions, and I hope that they look for solutions together with the European Union and together with Ukraine, because I think in there is also a realization in Russia that this war can go on for a long time. I have recently been to Moscow, and that is palpable from their standpoint. However, I think economically there will be much bigger challenges ahead, and for Russia, they too would be interested in some kind of settlement.

That is exactly what President Tokayev mentioned publicly, including when he met Olaf Scholz and when he met Emmanuel Macron in Paris. As a country that maintains ties with Russia, Ukraine and with the West, we still remain open to playing any role if we are asked to play any role, if we are needed in that room, or maybe even serving tea to serve as a platform for these peace talks to take place. We think that the only solution is through diplomacy.