

VUK JEREMIĆ

President of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia

Terry Martin, Journalist, TV news anchor

However, as a respect for time, I am going to jump straight ahead to Vuk Jeremić.

Vuk Jeremić, President of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia

Thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. It is a pleasure to be back at the World Policy Conference. I would like to thank Thierry, not only for this invitation, but also for his continuous support and guidance over the years.

I spent about 20 years in politics, but now that I'm out of the political sphere, I find it easier to speak openly—especially on issues as delicate and significant as this one. First, I want to emphasize that this is a truly tragic war. Coming from the former Yugoslavia, I have a personal perspective on such conflicts. My background is mixed—half Serbian, half Bosnian—while my wife is half Croatian, half Montenegrin. My family has lived through the various facets of the tragedy related the breakup of Yugoslavia, and I see many parallels with the current conflict. Beyond the devastating human loss, the long-term scars will be difficult to heal.

Thierry stated yesterday that this conference is about acknowledging reality as it is, and as it should be directly communicated. Therefore, I hope you'll allow me to share my perspective on reality, candidly. This war is coming to an end—and in my opinion, it is coming to an end soon. Of course, I might be wrong in terms of exact timing; it could take months, maybe even a year. But the direction is clear. I know that some messaging is currently being exchanged between Moscow and Washington, though I haven't heard of any other significant parties being involved. If a resolution is delayed, it will only mean another 100,000 lives lost before reaching the same inevitable outcome. I sincerely hope it ends sooner rather than later. If the war lasts, or escalates, the consequences could be catastrophic—potentially involving weapons of mass destruction.

Let us look at the grey rhino that is moving towards us. It is not a black swan. It is a grey rhino that is walking relatively slowly, but steadily and inevitably towards us, and this is the inauguration of President Trump, and him acting decisively on his campaign promises. Mr. McCarthy yesterday said that President Trump was elected to secure the border, to get inflation under control, and to end wars, and that he will deliver on those pledges. If that is true, and I believe it is, we will face the end of the war soon, or at least the end of the hostilities. This brings me to one of my concerns: while I understand increasing defence budgets and talking about how Russia transformed into a war economy. I sincerely hope

Europe does not try to transform itself into a war economy. In my view, that would be a recipe for a disaster. I truly hope that there will be peace in 2025.

As for Ukraine's future, I think it is manifestly obvious that Ukraine is not going to be a member of NATO. Biden didn't want it, and Trump will not want it either. As for the European Union, I wholeheartedly hope that it will not repeat the same mistake with Ukraine that it did with the Western Balkans. The European Union will never be willing to accept Ukraine as a fully-fledged member. And I have many friends in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova who genuinely believe they are on the fast track to European Union membership, and I think it is very important to set the expectations and the perception of the public straight, so that a constructive relationship can be forged in the aftermath of the war.

When I speak with my Ukrainian and Georgian friends, and they ask: "Do you think we will join the EU by 2030?", I respond honestly: "No, I don't think that's realistic. I think that the Western Balkans will join before you." And when they ask when would that be, I say "Never." It is a semi-joke, but we are all aware of how the European Council operates, and how complicated matters are. I cannot foresee the European Union taking in any new fully-fledged member into the European Council, before changing certain decision-making rules with the European Union. Are European leaders ready to grant Serbia—or any new member—a veto in the European Council? I wouldn't bet on it.

That's why I believe more emphasis should be placed on the European Political Community, an initiative strongly supported by France and President Macron. This ought to be given more effort that it currently is. In addition, expectations must be set straight. The new EU Commissioner, Kaja Kallas, recently stated in her hearing: "We are going to make sure Ukraine wins this war." Ursula von der Leyen said: "Ukraine will become a member of the European Union." Neither of these statements, in my view, has a high likelihood of being materialized. Therefore, for the sake of future relations between Ukraine and Europe, I hope there are different diplomatic and political dynamics in that relationship.

Terry Martin

Thank you very much. That was a clear statement there at the end.