



**UKRAINE  
IS CENTRAL EUROPE!**



# INTERVIEW

*with Dmytro Kuleba, Foreign Minister of Ukraine, spoke Sławomir Dębski*

**Minister, this year Ukraine is celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. Has Ukraine made good use of these three decades?**

Since the era of our first state, that is, old Rus', Ukraine has never enjoyed such a long spell of independence, spanning three decades. This is our victory. And this is no gift of fortune but a result of our intense struggle. It is a success of all generations of fighters for the Ukrainian state's independence, of all those who fought for independence in the past and those who are defending it right now. It is a victory for all those who risked their necks to defend freedom and a democracy in Ukraine and believed that Ukrainians have the right to self-determination, to independence and to being co-authors of Europe's history, all those who kept Ukraine on its European course of development, not by the compulsory course of integration within the "Russkiy mir".

**Still, Ukraine has not managed to join the European Union and NATO...**

I am convinced that Ukraine will join these organisations in the future. They are considered institutional

manifestations of the free world and Ukraine has been successful in defending its freedom and democracy. So, it is a matter of time for Ukraine to be able to be fully co-responsible for Europe's security and prosperity. Our economy is becoming increasingly integrated with the European Union and with our neighbours in Central Europe and in the Baltic-Black Sea region. We are actively pursuing our EU and NATO aspirations and implementing our policy defined in our Constitution and in the Foreign Policy Strategy. Of course, we have numerous problems that need to be solved, just like any other state. However, in the historical aspect, as regards our statehood in general, the last three decades have been a spell of major success for us. In 30 years, Ukraine has transformed from a former Soviet republic into an ambitious European state. We have a robust democracy, we believe in democratic values, we apply democratic procedures to elect our authorities, and we enjoy freedom of speech. Civil society is another asset of ours—it actively participates in public life and avails itself of the right to peaceful protest. When we

look at Ukraine's neighbours to the north and to the east, we see that our state is a stronghold of freedom and democracy.

**In this sense, one could say that Ukrainians have been more successful in using their historical window of opportunity than Belarusians.**

As I followed last year's events in Belarus, I have continuously felt deeply grateful for our Revolution of Dignity. I am proud of it. The only way to describe how Russians and Belarussians are treated today by their authorities is to interpret it as a violation of fundamental human rights and human dignity. Due to the Euromaidan in 2013-2014, Ukraine will never again see a return to such feudal relations between the authorities and society.

**A century ago, Ukrainians made an attempt to establish their own state and failed. At that time, they did not manage to defend their independence. What, in your opinion, is the decisive factor that enabled Ukrainians to recently defend their dream of their own independent state?**

In my view, there were three factors that contributed to this success. The first one was our bitter lessons from the past. The second, the emergence of a new generation of Ukrainians who are determined to

fight for freedom and independence. And finally, the third one was the conviction widespread in the present-day world that freedom is among universal values and human rights.

While we remember the bitter lessons from the past, we know that in order to defend our independence, we should look for partners and build alliances, but we should rely mainly on ourselves. No one can ever defend our state on our behalf, they can only help us in our efforts. We have learnt that we should never give up on our freedom and independence—we must fight for them under any circumstances. We should never allow domestic infighting to weaken our resolve in the face of a stronger external enemy.

**You mentioned the new generation of Ukrainians—back in 2014 they, fairly spontaneously, rose up to defend their country against Russia. What factors have shaped this generation?**

Those Ukrainians who are now 30 years old never lived in the Soviet Union. They are a new independence-oriented generation anchored in the free world. This generation has already taken part in two revolutions—the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014—and continues to live in circumstances of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. Many of them are already

raising their own kids. They have never witnessed Ukraine becoming independent: from their perspective it has always been independent. The vast majority of these individuals will never consent to any force—be it foreign or domestic—seizing their rights and freedoms which they enjoy as citizens of Ukraine. One manifestation of this is Ukraine’s robust civil society, which is capable of self-organising to implement initiatives of any scale, from organising a revolution to mobilising wide popular support to urgently supply the army.

**You said that this new generation has anchored Ukraine’s independence in the free world. Am I right to assume that what you also mean is that the external world has changed its attitude towards Ukraine as well?**

Exactly. The era of empires and colonialism is over. At present, the view that all nations are equal and no nation has the right to decide another nation’s fate is universally accepted. This shift has changed the situation of the Ukrainian nation. A century ago, proponents of Ukraine’s independence were considered dreamers, while the world was full of various types of racists and colonists who were eager to grant some nations the right to dominate others. At present, our fight for freedom and independence is widely recognised as

our irrevocable right. A century ago, Ukrainians were equally enthusiastic in their attempts to establish their own independent state. Similarly, their enemy was no less aggressive and insidious than our present enemy. Back then, within a couple of years, Bolshevik Russia managed to destroy Ukrainian statehood using weapons, deception, and misleading slogans that emphasised equality and brotherhood. Today, Russia can no longer succeed, no matter how hard it tries.

So, today’s world is different and so is the international situation. Moreover, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014, has boosted the unification of Ukrainian society. These aspects have immensely contributed to the preservation of our independence, although the invincible spirit of the Ukrainian nation, combined with its fervent desire for freedom, are the decisive factors.

**Several years ago when I visited the faraway city of Irkutsk in Siberia, I came across a plaque commemorating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pereyaslav Agreement, which was celebrated in 1954. The plaque was mounted again in 2004. In Russia, this Agreement’s anniversaries were holidays. Back in the imperial era, they were celebrated to commemorate the reunification of two Russian “tribes”—the**

Great Russian one and the Little Russian one—whereas in the USSR a slightly modified version of this event was celebrated: it was considered an act of eternal marriage of two brotherly nations. It is precisely in this context that back in 2014 Vladimir Putin said that Crimea was Ukraine's dowry, and since a divorce happened, Russia is entitled to withdraw this dowry. What, in your opinion, was the reason why Russia stopped promoting the concept of two related nations, which, alongside Belarusians, form a unique civilisation, one that is distinct from Europe, and revived 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalism with its main concept of one nation? But by doing so, Russia is stripping Ukrainians

of their subjectivity, which in turn undermines the prospects for attaining the goal which Russia seems to be viewing as its strategic goal. It involves winning Ukrainians over to cooperating with Russia in order to convince them to sever their ties with the West and to undermine the ideas promoted by Ivan Mazepa, Symon Petliura, and Stepan Bandera. What is the phrase used in Russia to denote the proponents of the Russian-Ukrainian divorce?

Not much has changed in Russia's ideology and its attitude towards the neighbouring nations. All these elements that you have just mentioned are just different facets of one specific phenomenon, that is, Russian imperialism. It has always taken many different forms. However, its essence has remained unchanged: it involves Russia enslaving other nations. As long as Moscow believed that verbal persuasion would be sufficient to suppress the neighbouring nations, it continued to use softer methods. But when this plan failed, Moscow went on to implement a brutal variant—military aggression. Still, the essence of the empire remains unchanged: it involves contempt for other nations and a patronising attitude towards them.

As regards the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement, it continues to have numerous vague aspects. One thing



is certain—the limited military alliance between Cossack Ukraine of Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the tsar in Moscow ended in the Pereyaslav Agreement documents being falsified and, ultimately, in the Ukrainian state becoming enslaved. Russian propaganda always used the issue of the Pereyaslav Agreement to plant or to solidify the idea of a voluntary reunification of the two nations in Ukrainian society’s awareness. Had Ukraine failed to break free from Moscow’s hands in 2014, it is likely that on the 360<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pereyaslav Agreement the Kremlin would have striven to permanently bind Ukraine to Russia and to make it a component of the Russian dominion.

For many centuries, Moscow was waging an incessant war against Ukrainian culture, language and traditions, and was imposing the false “Little Russian” identity on the Ukrainian nation. Despite this, after many years of bondage and fight for independence from the tsarist regime and the communist system, we managed to retain our Ukrainian identity, to secure the independence of the Ukrainian state and to defend this state.

**But you did not manage to maintain friendly relations between Ukrainians and Russians?**

I am convinced that we could have had good neighbourly relations

with Russia. However, for this to be possible, the Russians would need to come to terms with reality and to accept the fact that Russians and Ukrainians are two separate, free nations living in their sovereign states; that they decide on their fate independently and freely choose their development models and alliances. Sadly, Russia refuses to acknowledge this reality and this is why in 2014 it launched its aggression against Ukraine. This resulted in thousands of fatalities on the Ukrainian side and in parts of Ukrainian territory being occupied by Russia. In this way, Russia destroyed the prospects for good neighbourly relations between Russians and Ukrainians. Putin’s claim that Ukrainians and Russians are “one nation” does not correspond to reality and is nothing more than the Kremlin’s imperial delusion. You are right saying that this is a nationalist concept dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, what the phrase “one nation” really means is that there is one Russian nation and all other nations are doomed to assimilate into it.

**But a recent opinion poll showed that as much as 65% of Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine and 56% in southern Ukraine agreed with Putin’s claims that Ukrainians and Russians are “one nation”—in other words, that they are very similar to each other and belong to**

**one cultural space. The poll showed that there were no major differences between age groups as regards the answers. This proportion is huge. Are you not worried that, should the economic situation deteriorate and people become embittered at the policy oriented on Ukraine's EU membership, these individuals may begin to support "Russkiy mir"?**

Frequently, in opinion polls the answers depend on how the questions are asked. The questions can be asked in such a way as to make it difficult for the respondents to actually understand them and to make the researcher who will analyse the answers feel free to suggest various interpretations. The poll you have mentioned is one such example. The point is that in this specific question the researchers combined two different claims proposed by Putin: the "one nation" claim and the "common historical and cultural space" claim, although in Putin's original statement these two claims were not connected. This is how, by dulling and diluting the question, the researchers obtained such a dubious result.

What makes me so certain that this result does not reflect reality? Around the same time, other polls were conducted that gave completely different results. For example, according to a poll

conducted by the Razumkov Centre between 29 July and 4 August 2021, 70% of Ukrainians did not support Putin's "one nation" claim, 12.5% supported it, and 17% were indifferent. In eastern Ukraine, 52% of the respondents rejected this claim, 22% supported it; in southern Ukraine, 59% rejected the claim, 19% supported it; the figures for central Ukraine were 74% and 12% respectively, and for western Ukraine, 90% and 0.4% respectively. For many decades, Ukraine and Russia made up components of a single empire, which is why, understandably, we share certain common cultural elements. However, Ukraine and Russia are two separate states, not only in the political sense. We are two different nations, we follow two fundamentally different development paths. Ukrainians are not interested in any forcible assimilation offered by "Russkiy mir". Over many years of Russian and Soviet occupation, Ukraine had the opportunity to experience the "love" offered by "Russkiy mir". Millions of Ukrainians died of starvation or were tortured to death in tsarist and Soviet prisons. Ukraine will continue to follow its own path as a European country and a component of the Western world. It has definitively renounced "Russkiy mir".

**If not to "Russkiy mir" then where should Ukraine belong?**

Ukraine is a part of Central Europe. Until 1654, most of our history, interests, political, cultural, and economic ties had been rooted in Central Europe, which bordered Scandinavia to the north and Byzantium to the south, and in later years the Ottoman Empire. The Union of Lublin (1569), the Battles of Orsha (1514), Khotyn (1621), and Vienna (1683) are elements of our history. So are Konstanty Ostrogski, a great commander and the Lithuanian Grand Hetman; who is buried in Kyiv, and Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki, who was elected King of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth by all representatives of the nobility, Poles, Lithuanians and Ruthenians. Both of them came from Ruthenian/Ukrainian noble families. So, Ukrainian identity is Central European identity. This is why our

return to Central Europe and our integration into European space is a natural historical trajectory for us.

**Minister, you are one of the co-founders of the Lublin Triangle, a new format of close political cooperation between Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. Moreover, you are a co-signatory of the Vilnius Declaration, the first such act in which Ukraine considered itself, alongside Lithuania and Poland, as an heir to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its political culture. Does the fact that we are neighbours who once lived not in separate homesteads but in a single house and were family, result in any type of commitment on the part of Ukraine to nurture special relations with Poles and Lithuanians? “Special” meaning “characterised by a different**





**quality than Ukraine's relation with its other neighbours"— Hungarians, Romanians, as well as other European nations, such as Germans.**

Recently, in a year and a half, we managed to establish numerous international formats: the Lublin Triangle with Lithuania and Poland, the Association Trio with Georgia and Moldova, the Quadriga with Turkey, and the Crimea Platform joined by 46 states and international organisations. This activity is proof of the fact that Ukraine has become an active participant in international politics. For integration agreements, in particular regional ones, to be effective, be it in the field of security, the economy or culture, the signatories need to share the conviction that they have a lot in common, they formulate convergent assessments of the political reality and pursue a joint vision of the future. We were guided by this principle when we were establishing the Lublin Triangle, the Association Trio, the Quadriga, and the Crimea Platform.

This principle has proved effective in the operation of the Visegrad Group, the Bucharest Nine, and even the European Union.

As regards the Lublin Triangle, our common history and cultural heritage form the basis for understanding and uniting in order to confront the

present challenges and to attain our common goals in the future.

What the Lublin Triangle envisages is not only political cooperation but also specific, future-oriented collaboration initiatives. On 6-7 July 2021, in Vilnius together with my counterparts from Poland and Lithuania I signed the roadmap for cooperation within the Lublin Triangle and a joint action plan on countering disinformation.

New formats of this type are welcome in Europe. We are witnessing the difficulties encountered by such large organisations as the EU and NATO. We are aware of increasing hybrid threats posed by Russia, combined with energy blackmail and other types of blackmail. This is why the Lublin Triangle clearly is an effective platform for cooperation between the three countries; a platform on which as early as today we can base the entire set of issues we consider important and prepare our own agenda for our region, without the need to wait for decisions from Brussels.

We assess our good relations with our Polish and Lithuanian friends very highly because they are active in supporting Ukraine in its pursuit of its EU and NATO ambitions, as well as in other important global and regional fora. Lithuania and Poland are considered leaders shaping EU and NATO policy towards Ukraine;

they are our trusted allies in repelling Russian aggression.

This year, for the first time in its three decades of independence, Ukraine developed its Foreign Policy Strategy. This document defines our most important goals and tasks, both in the context of boosting Ukraine's national security and restoring its territorial integrity and in the field of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and in the development of relations with our strategic partners and numerous other states. The establishment of the Lublin Triangle is an important and effective instrument facilitating the implementation of our Foreign Policy Strategy. One key element in this strategy involves Ukraine joining the EU and NATO. Our joint declaration to establish the Lublin Triangle contains explicit support from Poland and Lithuania for Ukraine's prospective EU and NATO membership. The Lublin Triangle is a manifestation of shared values that form the basis for European and Euro-Atlantic unity and solidarity.

**In February 2021, in *Politico*, together with Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, you published a thought-provoking article in which both of you called on the international community to halt the construction of the Nord Stream 2 (NS2) pipeline because it undermines the West's unity and**

**poses a threat to peace in Europe. In response to this article, the Biden administration in the U.S. stressed that it supported the arguments contained in it and denied that low-profile U.S.-German talks were underway to agree on the conditions for launching NS2. In June 2021, both President Zelensky and Foreign Minister Rau admitted that they had only learned about this shift in U.S. policy towards NS2 from media reports. Minister, in the context of these developments, what is your opinion on President Biden's slogan "America is back!", and what is back, actually?**

The United States is the global leader, Ukraine's strategic partner, and principal ally in countering Russian aggression and preventing the Russian Federation from escalating the situation.

The diplomatic intervention carried out by President Biden's administration regarding Russia's provocative troop build-up near the Ukrainian borders in spring 2021 was proof of the potential and effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy, as well as Washington's capability to effectively impact the security situation in Europe. Inflated language is not uncommon in politics and therefore only those words matter that are followed by actions. The Biden administration has demonstrated that supporting

Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity is and will be an important element of its foreign and security policy.

**But can Ukraine hope to receive support from the Biden administration for its NATO membership aspirations?**

Ukraine and NATO members share a striving to ensure peace in Europe. So, we are pursuing the same goal and Ukraine will persist in its NATO membership ambitions because this alliance is the most effective peacekeeping instrument. We are working on expanding our defence partnership with the U.S. Security consultations with the American side are ongoing on all levels—between the presidents, the U.S. Department of State and Ukraine's Foreign ministry, and between the Pentagon and Ukraine's Defence Ministry. The assistance offered by the U.S. to reform Ukraine's security and defence sector in line with NATO standards is playing an important part in efforts to boost our state's security and is bringing Ukraine closer to NATO membership. I believe that it will contribute to an increased level of security across the continent.

Ukraine is an indivisible part of the democratic West, a European state which in its constitution and its Foreign Policy Strategy has chosen a Euro-Atlantic orientation. The decision for Ukraine to join NATO

will be made by Ukraine itself and by NATO member states—its allies. No other country has a say in this process. Ukraine's full NATO membership is just a matter of time. Last year, when NATO recognised Ukraine as its Enhanced Opportunities Partner, our country joined the group of six states NATO considers its closest partners globally. This is a manifestation of Ukraine's importance as a strong country on NATO's Eastern Flank and in the Black Sea region, which has increasingly witnessed threats posed by the Russian Federation. Moreover, it is the result of many years of close, mutually beneficial cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, of joint involvement in peacekeeping operations and mutual help during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Russia, peace has no value. Russia has demonstrated that it is ready to launch a military attack and annex a certain territory in order to undermine the unity of the democratic West.

**To achieve this goal, Russia is using not only military measures—it builds pipelines in order to subsequently blackmail Europe, saying that it might suspend gas supplies. Meanwhile, the German government launched cooperation with Putin's Russia in this field by taking part in the construction of the NS2 pipeline. President**

**Biden's administration abandoned its attempts to stop this initiative by imposing sanctions on it. As a consequence, it failed to contribute to an improvement in the security situation of both Ukraine and Europe. What else can be done regarding NS2?**

Our stance on this issue has not changed. The NS2 project is economically unviable but it has a certain geopolitical motivation as a tool to undermine the unity among American and European allies. Gas should be viewed as a commodity, not as a weapon. However, as regards Russia this claim is unrealistic due to the fact that the Kremlin uses the energy sector as the main source of funding for its aggressive policy, which includes Russia meddling in U.S. and European elections, carrying out destructive cyberattacks across the globe, waging a war in Ukraine, and occupying Crimea and a portion of the Donbas.

Ukraine's partners know our stance very well. We have communicated it both to Washington and Berlin. NS2 poses a threat to Europe's security and needs to be stopped. I am convinced that this indeed will happen once Europe experiences problems similar to those that Ukraine and other Central European states have experienced. Russia will blackmail Europe—this is the purpose for which it has built

Nord Stream. We have repeatedly stated that Europe needs stability and energy security that can only be ensured by gas transit guarantees based on mutual benefits and on the non-discrimination principle in line with international standards. The Nord Stream 2 project is based on completely different purposes and principles. At present, all Europeans are witnessing how Gazprom is using its monopoly on gas supplies to the EU: the price of gas has skyrocketed while European gas storage facilities, most of which are owned by Gazprom, are empty.

It seems that Putin couldn't wait to launch his gas blackmail policy—he is putting pressure on Brussels to accelerate NS2's certification process, bypassing the requirements defined in the *acquis communautaire*. This should be viewed as a test of Europe's readiness to act should Russia use gas as a weapon. We have repeatedly told our allies about it. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed this issue during his recent visit to Washington.

During their talks with the U.S. president and several members of his cabinet, representatives of the Ukrainian delegation discussed their proposed actions to mitigate the security threats in case NS2 is launched, and to make sure that Ukraine retains its role as a transit state. The U.S. administration

shares our view that NS2 is “a bad deal” that undermines the energy security of a major portion of the Euro-Atlantic community.

In a joint statement summing up their meeting, the presidents of the U.S. and Ukraine explicitly emphasised that the U.S. and Ukraine will continue to oppose NS2.

Due to our own tragic history, we are very well aware of the cost that may be associated with agreements made with the Kremlin and with guarantees issued by the Kremlin. This is why, alongside our partners, in particular Poland and the United States, we persist in our efforts to prevent NS2 from being launched until solutions are developed to overcome the security crisis and to mitigate the threats to peace and energy security in the region. The only way to break the Kremlin's monopoly on gas supplies is to demand that both the spirit and the letter of the EU's third energy package are observed in the process of certification of NS2's operator.

In this context, we would like to congratulate the Polish company PGNiG on its success and on the fact that it defended its right to take part in the certification of the Kremlin-sponsored project. It is our common task to prevent the certification of NS2 as long as it fails to meet both formal and substantive requirements defined in the EU's third energy package.

We are continuing our fight for our rights: the Ukrainian gas market operates in line with European standards, our state has carried out an effective unbundling initiative, and at present it is positioning itself, alongside our European partners, on the same side of the front line.

The key to solving the security crisis in Europe and to building a future that would be beneficial to all is for all members of our community to observe the norms and principles of international law and to follow civilised standards regarding partner relations between states.

**Rumour has it that the Biden administration has decided to accelerate the U.S. shift to the Pacific, and in this context it has made some sort of “truce” with Russia in order to pull Moscow away from its alliance with China. Are you not worried that this may equate to decreased U.S. interest in offering support to Ukraine?**

I believe that for the time being there are no indications that this may be the case. The U.S. is trying to deepen its cooperation with its allies. As regards NATO's Eastern Flank, at present it is Ukraine that is in the vanguard of peace, security, and prosperity. A thousand kilometres to the east and to the north of Kyiv there is neither freedom nor democracy.

Our American partners understand this very well. This is why they continue to support Ukraine in its fight for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in its pursuit of its fundamental Euro-Atlantic reforms. Similarly, it is extremely important for us to make sure that both chambers and both parties in the U.S. Congress continue this lasting support.

The fact that our relationship with the U.S. is a relationship between allies was confirmed during President Zelensky's visit to Washington at the beginning of September, which was considered a major success. During President Zelensky's meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden, plans were made for both states to adopt a Joint Statement on the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership. In the three-decade-long history of our bilateral relations, this document is unprecedented in terms of both volume and content. It once again emphasised that we share the same values and strategic priorities, and listed specific actions to support Ukraine's national security in the field of defence, energy, climate, science, technology, infrastructure, and healthcare.

The U.S. is ready to continue to support Ukraine, which is evidenced by the fact that during the visit 20 bilateral agreements were signed to boost our country's security and ensure its stable growth and economic success.

**Do you believe that driving a wedge between Russia and China is feasible at all?**

The idea that the free world should launch cooperation with authoritarian Russia in order to prevent an alliance between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China is unwise. It tends to pop up from time to time in intellectual and expert groups in France, Germany, the U.S., and the EU. Moscow has already come within Beijing's orbit and is likely wary itself of getting even closer with a much stronger China. China has considerably outdistanced Russia when it comes to socio-economic development. At present, Russia is a supplier of raw materials to the Chinese industrial sector and an importer of Chinese-made goods with high added-value, which is favourable to China.

**German Chancellor Angela Merkel is leaving European politics. What role has she played in the history of Ukraine?**

For most of her rule, Merkel has been skilfully manoeuvring between German and European interests. This was the source of Germany's leadership in the united Europe and of Ms Merkel's popularity outside Germany. The history of Europe in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, among other things, the history of Merkel's success and her

masterly ability to maintain the balance between the prosperity of her own nation, her international leadership, and her attachment to European ideas and values.

We are grateful to Madam Chancellor for her contribution to the development of Ukrainian-German strategic partnership. Starting from her role as the leader of the Normandy process, to her support for the implementation of the most important aspects of internal transformation in Ukraine, in particular the very successful decentralisation reform. Sadly, it is a pity that in our account of Ms Merkel's merits we need to resort to suspension points due to her support for the NS2 project ...

**Chancellor Merkel was the co-founder of the Normandy Format. Will this format survive once she leaves politics and is no longer an active participant in it? How will Europe benefit from deciding to expand the European and transatlantic structures to include Ukraine? What would be your response to concerns that this move could pose a threat to peace in Europe due to Russia's policy—Moscow views Ukraine's aspirations as provocation and reacts to them using force?**

We are grateful to Chancellor Merkel for her many years of effort and personal involvement in the peace

process. However, the prospects for continued cooperation under the Normandy Format depend not so much on Merkel's successor as on Russia's readiness to engage in substantive cooperation in fulfilling the commitments agreed within this format. For more than seven years of Russian military aggression, Ukraine, which is on the main line of resistance as regards the threats posed by Moscow, has had to defend its right to independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and to considerably boost the potential and improve the quality of its armed forces. It is obvious that our NATO membership will facilitate the development of the Euro-Atlantic security system as a whole and will additionally strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank.

The conservative policy pursued by several Western European states—NATO members—regarding Ukraine's continued Euro-Atlantic integration, under the pretext of "not provoking Russia", is fundamentally wrong.

For example, in 2017 Ukraine was not offered the status of NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner, as this could have allegedly posed a threat to the talks on the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which were ongoing at that time. At least these were the counterarguments we have heard

at that time. However, from today's perspective we can tell that this decision back then had no impact on Russia's attitude whatsoever. Moscow maintained its destructive stance both within the Minsk process and in the Normandy Format.

In 2020, we were finally granted this status, which was possible due to our consistent diplomatic efforts. However, when at President Zelensky's request I had launched activities to lead Ukraine to join NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership back in 2019, everyone told me that this was a hopeless

case and advised me not to speak too much about it in public. Despite this, I continued to believe that the plan would succeed, and it did. The situation will be similar in the case of NATO membership. We will continue our consistent cooperation with our allies—we will explain, present our arguments, strive to convince our partners and look for a shared viewpoint. Sooner or later we will reach a consensus and the window of opportunity will open for us and we will make good use of it.

**Thank you for this conversation.**

