

Volodymyr Zelensky in his own words

Intervista a Volodymyr Zelensky

ON MARCH 25TH 2022 Ukraine's president spoke in person to The Economist in what he and his staff have taken to calling "the fortress". Here are highlights of what he told us—switching freely between English, Ukrainian and Russian. We have edited them for clarity.

The Economist: You are an actor and president. Now you are being called a 21st-century Churchill. It's an extraordinary change. How did it happen?

Volodymyr Zelensky: I think that these changes happened already in Ukraine when they elected me. It's what [the people] wanted. They saw my honest position on everything. Like your father says, if you don't know how to do something this way or that way, be honest and that's it. You have to be honest, so that people believe you. You don't need to try. You need to be yourself. And maybe, after you show who you are, maybe people will love you more than before, because they see that you are not so strong or are lazy at times. No, each time don't lie and show people who you are exactly. And it's important not to show that you are better than who you are.

TE: Did you always have it in you to be so brave? To be such a strong person?

VZ: It's not about being brave. I have to act the way I do. I have to do it this way. None of us was ready for the war before it began. You can't say, "If I were the President of Ukraine, then I would do it this way", because you can't imagine what it would mean. And you can't imagine even how you will do it. That's what it was like in this case with me. And all of the people around me.

TE: But you changed the way you govern?

VZ: Yes, of course. I understood what was going on. I understood many months ago what was going on. That [this] is a very big story. It's not only about Ukraine. It's about the world, about the politicians of the world and I think we can speak about it after we win. Yes, and I hope we win. I'm sure we'll win. That's why I'm saying that I am not a hero. I understood what was going on. I wanted to change attitudes towards Ukraine. On one level it's not about who has more weapons or more money or gas, oil etc. That's why we have to have agency. That's the first thing that I understood.

TE: Can you remember the moment when you understood what the conflict with Russia would be about?

VZ: I think it was when I became president. I could understand why some things were going on in a certain way and I tried to be honest with many world leaders, including those in

Russia, of course. We had meetings. You remember our first meeting, our first and last meeting in 2019, with Putin at the Normandy Four talks?

We began to come to [the] decision that we can't be part of somebody. I wanted to change attitudes towards Ukraine, because, just to be clear, Ukrainians are people who are the same as people [in] the USA and Europe and Russia. We are the same. We are on one level. It's not about who has more weapons or more money or gas or oil, et cetera. And that's why we have to have agency. That's what I understood, the first thing that I understood, that we the people have [agency]. People are leaders and political leaders are losers, some of them. We began to do things this way and to develop this policy.

TE: So, now you are speaking to the people of the West, rather than to their politicians?

VZ: Yes. Yes, of course. I think so. Sometimes I think politicians live in an information vacuum. What we see is that this is a closed atmosphere with Putin now. So, he doesn't know. I can't describe everything that is going on with him. I can't describe it, because I don't know with whom he speaks each day or each week or each two weeks. That's information we don't have. That means he can't understand or he couldn't know what's going on outside. Even me, when the war started, and I am very open to people... Even me, if I were sitting in the office and I don't go outside for three or four days, I would not have correct information about what is going on in the world.

TE: When the war started did you suddenly click and think: "This is what the people want me to do... and I'm doing it." Or was it your decision, thinking, "This is what I'm doing and you have to support me"?

VZ: I think that nobody, nobody, understood what to do when it began. I was in Kyiv, in the house, at the residence. I was home at that moment. It was 04:50am. With my wife and kids. They woke me up. They told me there were loud explosions. After a couple of minutes, I received the signal that a rocket attack was under way. They didn't know what was going on. We knew that they were preparing [to attack]. We knew it, of course. The first thing we did was call a State of Emergency and, a couple of days later, at a meeting of the National Security and Defence Council, we declared Martial Law. We understood that the Russians could attack, but we didn't understand the magnitude.

TE: Let's talk about now, about where we are in this stage of the war. Do you think there is any chance you can win?

VZ: We believe in victory. It's impossible to believe in anything else. We will definitely win because this is our home, our land, our independence. It's just a question of time.

TE: What does a Ukrainian victory look like?

VZ: Victory is being able to save as many lives as possible. Yes, to save as many lives as possible, because without this nothing would make sense. Our land is important, yes, but ultimately it's just territory. I don't know how long the war will last, but we will fight to the last city we have. From the start, when you choose an option about what people should do or not do, people don't understand what a full-fledged war is. My job is to give a signal so that people know how to act.

And when you show how Ukraine is supposed to behave, you also have to behave accordingly [yourself]. There was a decision whether to stay or leave. We are all wounded and hurt in the same way. [My decision to stay] was my signal to people about how we should respond to the attack. It's about how the war started and how it's going to end. It will end with us still standing here defending.

That's my response to the question about what Ukraine's victory will look like. Our victory may be temporary, maybe without resolving all issues, but we have chosen the direction we will move in.

TE: Do you need more help to win? And if so what kind?

VZ: We have a long list of items we need. The first thing is to put yourselves in our place and act pre-emptively, not after the situation becomes complicated. This concerns our partner countries. Here we are talking about sanctions. I am sure that if tougher sanctions had been levied earlier, a full-scale Russian attack would not have occurred.

TE: You mean it wouldn't have happened?

VZ: It would have been on a different scale and without the assistance of Belarus, giving us more time. They would have shown Belarus what could happen if pre-emptive sanctions involving Russian businesses, oil and gas exports, etc were taken, and this taking into account that Belarusians do not support [Russia's war against Ukraine]. Pre-emptive sanctions would have given more time to Ukraine's military to prepare for Russia's further invasion

I had raised the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with Biden and Merkel, when she was still in office, and Scholz. I said the first step will be to launch it, then they will block gas supplies to us, and next they will apply pressure, including on Moldova, and then Russia will block supplies in order to split countries within the EU. After that, the next step would be to launch an invasion. Russia was seeking Ukraine's official recognition of Russian sovereignty in Crimea and of Russia-occupied areas in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. They also pushed Europe to pressure us to do so.

What hasn't been done? [Our Western partners] have not completed the sanctions on disconnecting the banking system from SWIFT, many more banks have not been disconnected. They have taken very important steps to support us, but the central bank of Russia has not been

disconnected. Impose an embargo on Russian oil and gas exports. All these sanctions are incomplete. They have been threatened, but not yet implemented. Now we are hearing that the decision depends on whether Russia launches a chemical attack on us. This is not the right approach. We are not guinea pigs to be experimented on.

[Our partners] view Russia now through a military-strategic lens and are using Ukraine as a shield. We are the ones who are feeling the pain. It is good that they are on the side of Ukraine, but they have to stop being defensive in their dialogue with Russia. We insist they can act offensively. SWIFT is still operating in Russia for the leaders of Russia. Don't forget that ordinary Russians are now isolated, deprived of information. They don't know what's going on.

The situation where the Ukrainian people, not the Ukrainian president, [is being used as a shield is wrong]. Ukrainian people are dying. Russian people don't know what's going on. They don't understand. Social media have been shut down and a lot of people, I think 90-95%, are watching television, a much higher percentage than in Ukraine and Europe. It's a big problem because [the Kremlin] controls all levels of power and all this information. This is why I pushed for sanctions and to receive weapons.

Meanwhile, the Russians have blocked our supplies to Mariupol, Melitopol, Berdyansk, Kherson, Kharkiv, but they're not in the cities. What do they do? For example, in Melitopol and Berdyansk they are switching to roubles. They are kidnapping the mayors of our cities. They killed some of them. Some of them we can't find. Some of them we have found already, and they are dead. And some of them were replaced. They are doing the same thing that they did in Donbas in 2014. The same people are carrying out these operations. It's the same methodology.

[The West] can't say, "We'll help you in the weeks [to come]." It doesn't allow us to unblock Russia-occupied cities, to bring food to residents there, to take the military initiative into our own hands. People are simply not able to get out. There is no food, medicine or drinking water there. And this is something we must do. These are issues which need to be addressed today and tomorrow, not in a couple of weeks.

Some small cities have been destroyed. There are no people and no houses. All that's left is the name. Of course, Russia is to blame, but we were late in getting there, because of difficulties while bombs were flying. This is why we asked for military aircraft, why we asked for a no-fly zone to be established, because the Russians dropped bombs on these small cities, which only exist now as dots on a map.

TE: When you were asking for more arms, President Macron of France said that offensive weapons like tanks were a red line which Ukraine's partners could not cross. Why?

VZ: Because they are afraid of Russia. And that's it. And those who say it first are the first to be afraid.

TE: Boris Johnson has been much keener to send weapons.

VZ: Yes. To be honest, Johnson is a leader who is helping more. The leaders of countries react according to how their constituents act. In this case, Johnson is an example.

TE: And what about the Germans? There was a sudden shift after the invasion and German foreign policy appeared to change very quickly. Are they worried about doing more?

VZ: They are trying to be balanced. They have a long relationship with Russia and they are looking at the situation through the prism of the economy. They help out at times. I think they are trying to adjust to the situation as it develops. They are also looking at how the situation affects their own country. They can help, if there is pressure on them domestically to do so, and they can stop when they see what they have done is sufficient. I think Germany is more pragmatic than anyone else with regards to the situation among those countries which can really help. It's not always about us, what we need and what the world needs. I think the Germans are making a mistake today. I think they make mistakes often. I think the legacy of Germany's relations with Russia shows this.

Everyone has varied interests. There are those in the West who don't mind a long war because it would mean exhausting Russia, even if this means the demise of Ukraine and comes at the cost of Ukrainian lives. This is definitely in the interests of some countries. For other countries, it would be better if the war ended quickly, because Russia's market is a big one that their economies are suffering as a result of the war. They would like to see Russia keep certain markets. Other, truly wealthy countries, recognize Nazism in Russia and definitely want Ukraine to be victorious. And there are still other countries, smaller countries, which support us completely, but they are more liberal states and concerned with humanitarian issues. They want the war to end quickly at any cost, because they think people come first. And then there is the category of countries wanting the war to end quickly in any way possible because they can be considered as "the offices of the Russian Federation in Europe."

TE: What category would you put Britain in?

VZ: Britain is definitely on our side. It is not performing a balancing act. Britain sees no alternative for the way out of the situation. Britain wants Ukraine to win and Russia to lose, but I'm not ready to say whether Britain wants the war to drag on or not.

TE: As for the United States, are they in the first group?

VZ: We'll see. But they help. A lot of countries in Europe, in NATO, especially, have, as our soldiers say, many instruments. This is why the USA has pushed a lot of countries to help us, but a little bit more slowly than we needed.

TE: How has your relationship with America's President, Joe Biden, changed? Does he recognise that you are not just a recipient, that you are driving the process?

VZ: There isn't a straightforward answer to that question, because there are different centres of power in the United States. You know this better than I. Indeed, both the Congress and the Senate support Ukraine. This is true. But there have been times when there were certain battles, including elections, which have influenced steps they have taken and their resolve. Some processes move quickly, while others are held up because of domestic issues. Biden views Ukraine more as a subject [of political activity] than at the start. There have been different moments and different processes, and I recognise that this stance does not benefit everyone in the United States.

TE: What do you most want from the West?

VZ: Aeroplanes, tanks and armoured personnel vehicles. We don't have as many as we need. We have taken a lot from the Russians. They are running. They are afraid of our soldiers and they are running. I think yesterday we got 12 or 17 tanks.

TE: Are you worried about exhausting the supply of essential military hardware?

VZ: The Russians have thousands of military vehicles, and they are coming and coming and coming. If we can joke in this situation, I will. There are some cities, where there are so many tanks, they can't go away. They have tank traffic jams.

TE: Where?

VZ: We have our famous city Chornobaivka (in the Kherson region), where we have bombarded Russian military units for the tenth time. The Russians don't realise what is happening, get lost, and keep on returning to the same place. The Russians have thousands of military vehicles. It's not that Ukraine is running out of tanks, but we have fewer and fewer, because no one is selling us tanks and armoured vehicles. This is a big problem for us. We have not received planes, armoured vehicles and tanks. We have already given a list of the military hardware we are looking for. We know what we want, where it is and how many we need. Soviet hardware is available. That's fine. It's all the same to us. All the countries which possess this equipment have received our letters.

TE: Are you making any progress in getting the equipment?

VZ: I don't know. It depends on the will of these countries and on the USA, NATO. Many of these countries, especially European countries, say they need the permission of NATO, and they don't have it.

TE: Can there be a lasting peace with Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin?

VZ: I don't know. I don't know if Putin even knows the answer to this question. I think many factors will weigh on his decision. Stability in regions where Russia is present will play

a role and influence his decisions. The issue of how relations between Russia and Ukraine will change as a result of what has happened is a big one. I don't have an answer to this. This is a big problem, a very big problem.

TE: You have said you want to meet Putin face-to-face. What would you say to him?

VZ: There are a lot of things. We have to speak. It's not about one question, one answer. It's about decisions. We have to speak about concrete things, about concrete months, maybe something about years, maybe something to decide now, maybe to talk if we can't find a decision and agree not to fight about it. That is my philosophy. Let's do everything step by step. Let's find a decision one step at a time. We can talk about everything. But we can't compromise on everything. We have to understand that Ukraine is our land. He has to understand what is going on and we have to understand each other, if it's possible. It's not about respect, about love, or something else. It's not about feelings. It's very concrete. There is a problem and we have to figure it out in detail and solve it.

TE: Do you think that fundamentally Putin believes Ukraine has no right to exist?

VZ: I don't think he visualises in his own mind the same Ukraine we see. He sees Ukraine as a part of his world, his worldview, but that doesn't correspond with what's happened over the last 30 years. I don't think Putin has been [in] a bunker for two weeks or six months, but for more like two decades. I don't mean this literally, but in the sense that he has been in information isolation getting fed information by his coterie. And Ukraine, while he's been in this bunker, has changed significantly. So the way he sees Ukraine is very different from the Ukraine that actually exists in real life.

TE: Putin has a 20th-century view of a 21st-century country.

VZ: Yes. That is his problem.

TE: For you 'victory' means saving as many lives as possible, but politically that might be untenable. How can you win, save lives and at the same time save the country? Is this even possible?

VZ: To save everyone, defend all interests while protecting people and not giving up territory is probably an impossible task. You're right. This presents a difficult choice, but sometimes there exist so-called "principled" decisions. Take, for example, cities, which, if we decided to abandon them voluntarily, would be taken by Putin, who would continue advancing, farther and farther, because he has the appetite of a hungry person. What's important here is not that this choice is a "good" one or "bad" one, per se. What's important is that the decision is made together with the people.

Just take a look at the people in Kherson who waved their hands in the middle of the streets in order to stop tanks. They decided to stand up and do this of their own volition. I could

not have ordered them not to do it or to throw themselves under the tank treads. I will stay with these people until the end.

Everyone faces the choice of whether to risk becoming a casualty. It's the most difficult one to make. It's possible that some compromises, ones which don't risk our physical survival, will be made to save the lives of thousands of people. As for compromises that may risk the disintegration of the country, the ones which Putin proposes, or rather demands in the form of an ultimatum, we will never make them. Never.

We win as long as we remain resolute about not giving into these demands. I think that we are winning. The military situation is difficult, but we are repulsing attacks.

The invaders do not even mourn their own casualties. This is something I do not understand. Some 15,000 [Russian soldiers] have been killed in one month. We in Ukraine talk about our war that has lasted for eight years. Eight years! In eight years, we have also lost 15,000 lives. And Russia loses 15,000 of its soldiers in a month! He is throwing Russian soldiers like logs into a train's furnace. And, they are not even burying them. They are not burying them at all. Their corpses are left in the streets. In several cities, small cities, our soldiers say it's impossible to breathe because of the smell. It is the stench of rotting flesh. It's a complete nightmare.

Our fearless soldiers are defending Mariupol now. They could have left now, if they wanted. They could have left a long time ago, but they are not leaving the city. Do you know why? Because there are still others alive in the city along with their wounded. And then there are the dead, the fallen comrades. Ukraine's defenders say they must stay and bury those killed in action and save the lives of those wounded in action. As long as people are still alive, we must continue to protect them. And this is the fundamental difference between the way the opposing sides in this war see the world.