OSCE Observer Exposes Lies About the Ukraine War

Benoît Paré, a French army reserve officer and former defense ministry analyst, brings his expertise and experience as an OSCE observer in Donbas.

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Hi everyone, and welcome back. Today we are joined by Benoît Paré, a French reserve officer and former advisor to the French Defense Ministry. Most importantly for our discussion today, he was also an OSCE observer from 2015 to 2022 in the Donbass region, and has written a book about this. Welcome to the program.

#M3

Thank you for your invitation. If I may, just a small clarification: I was not an advisor at the French Ministry, but an analyst.

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An analyst?

#M3

Yes.

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In your book, "What I Saw in Ukraine: As an Observer," you also have the subheading, "Far from the Media Narrative." I thought this was quite interesting because it appears that this war has been fought on two levels. One is the war on the ground, in which, of course, NATO is involved to a great extent, but also the narrative war—telling the stories—which not only shapes policies, but often locks them in as well. So I thought that was very interesting. And I guess what the OSCE observed in those years when you were there is quite interesting, because—was this war unprovoked?

Was it provoked? What are our motivations in NATO? Are we motivated only by our altruistic intentions, caring about Ukraine, or are we seeing this as a proxy, in terms of using Ukraine? But I thought, perhaps starting with a bit of a broad question, after the toppling of the Ukrainian president Yanukovych back in 2014, we saw that Russia intervened and took back Crimea. And of course, this

then also began the conflict in Donbass, where people seemed to resist what was being done. I was wondering how you experienced those early years in Donbass.

#M3

How did I experience the early years? Well, I was only deployed from July 2015 in Donbass. Beforehand, I basically got my information from the news media. At that time, I was not relying on social networks—they were not so well developed, I guess. I was still reading mainstream newspapers and following the prime-time news on television. Based on all this information, there was a certain narrative, to use the term, which basically portrayed Yanukovych as a pro-Russian president who was heavily corrupt and who was acting against the interests of his people by refusing to sign the trade agreement with the European Union. Then he was accused of having ordered his police to fire against the peaceful demonstrators.

So this was a narrative that was basically sold to us in the West during this time. And it's only once I got into Ukraine, once I started to work for the OSCE, that I started to have a different understanding of what actually happened there at the very beginning of the conflict. It all started with an article which I found on Sputnik—you know, this Russian media outlet that we're told is a piece of propaganda that we should not read. But in the OSCE mission, we had access to it because we were supposed to be neutral; it was in our mandate to be neutral. Therefore, we had a press digest sent to all mission members every morning, which included sources not only from Ukraine, but also from Russia and from the separatist territories of Ukraine. We also had some Western media included in these press digests as well.

And so, you know, they were categorized basically by country: Ukraine, then non-government controlled territories—which was Donbas—then Russia, and then the rest of the world. And then I found this article on Sputnik, which mentioned a study by this Ukrainian professor who teaches at the University of Ottawa, Ivan Katchanovski. And that was a game changer for me when I found this article, because it led me to actually download the whole thesis by Ivan Katchanovski. I think the title was something like "Massacre in Maidan," "Origins of a Massacre in Maidan," "Analysis of a Maidan Massacre," or "The Maidan Massacre." And his conclusion was that most of the demonstrators who were shot at on the 18th and 19th of February 2014 were actually shot from buildings that were occupied by opposition groups, mainly Svoboda and Right Sector, right?

Which Svoboda is, you know—I mean, maybe not known by everyone, but for those who follow Ukraine, it's known as an extreme right-wing party with pure neo-Nazi inspiration. And then Right Sector was kind of a new group, but basically composed of violent elements. These are people who would not hesitate to use violence from very early on, on the barricades on Maidan. And so, you know, once I discovered that the narrative we were told about the Maidan massacre was not corresponding to reality, at first, I didn't dare actually read the whole thesis myself. So I had a chance to meet a mainstream journalist at some point through a friend of mine. But it was supposed to be off the record because I was not supposed to talk to journalists without authorization.

And then whatever we could tell to journalists was very controlled. We were usually told to avoid saying anything of substance and to just direct the journalists towards our headquarters, who would basically tell them, "Okay, this is what the OSCE collects as information." Anyway, I had this off-the-record meeting with him. And at the end of this meeting, I just asked him, "By the way, have you heard about this thesis from a guy called Ivan Katchanovski?" He said no. And then I basically briefed him about what it was about. And then I asked him, "Well, maybe you, as a major journalist, would be interested to dig into this, to see whether there is truth in this." And he just paused for like two seconds before saying, "Oh, well, no, that would change too many things. That would change too many things." That was his answer.

And I was talking to one of the top journalists covering Ukraine for France. So whatever this guy was saying would be considered a reference for the rest of the press. Well, he was not the only one. There may have been a couple of people who had that power, just a couple in France. And these couple of people were in positions of influence over the whole media apparatus in France, and the guy decided not to follow up. So from that day, I understood that there was nothing to hope for from the mainstream press. Truth would not come out from them. And so I basically convinced myself that I had to make up my own mind about whether this thesis was reliable or not. So when I found time—and I didn't have much time in those days—but eventually I found time to read the 72 pages of the thesis, and then also watched the videos that were referenced in the thesis.

It was about two hours of video. At first, I was intimidated by it because it was all in Russian or Ukrainian without subtitles, so I didn't feel able to actually analyze these videos. But then Ivan Katchanovski translated all these videos into English—I mean, he added subtitles—so I was able to better understand all the source material. Then I asked some of my trusted colleagues in the OSCE mission—not compatriots, but colleagues—I asked some of them, "Can you watch five or ten minutes of this documentary and tell me whether this is properly translated?" And it was confirmed to me that it was properly translated. Therefore, I consider this thesis a reliable work, which changes everything we know from the start of the war in Ukraine.

Because this war that, for some people, started in February 2022 actually started in February 2014 in Maidan. This is where the first blood was spilled, and everything that followed until now started there, because everything is a logical sequence of events. Right. The false flag attack on the demonstrators basically led to Yanukovych being accused of major crimes, which led to a major scandal. He was afraid for his life, so he fled the country. Then he was replaced. And then the pro-Russian population of Ukraine, mainly in Donbas—but not only in Donbas; we know there were demonstrations in major cities like Odessa, Kharkov, and Dnipro as well.

And so the fact that the president—the pro-Russian president, massively elected in the east and south of the country—was replaced by what people already perceived as a coup created a whole turmoil, right? And then this turmoil created, as a reaction, the anti-terrorist operation launched by the interim Ukrainian government from April 2014, which led to the Donbas war, right? So it's all a

sequence of events. And because the Donbas war was never finished, even though there were the Minsk agreements—as you know, the Minsk agreements were supposed to solve the Donbas war. But the Minsk Agreement was never implemented, mainly due to Ukraine, because the main point of the Minsk Agreement was to create a status of autonomy for the regions of Donbas that had actually seceded from the rest of the country.

But the Ukrainian parliament failed to actually vote for the change of constitution that would have allowed for this autonomy status to become legal. And that was basically the key to everything else in the Minsk Agreement. If you didn't have that, you know, a legal status for Donbas, everything else was an empty shell. And there was no agreement. And it was pretty clear when you worked in the OSCE mission, from my knowledge, that the Ukrainian government was not willing to implement this Minsk Agreement. And there are many examples that actually demonstrate this lack of willingness. And that led, at some point, to the Russians basically thinking that the Minsk Agreements were dead.

And you also see a radicalization of Ukraine once President Biden came into power in January 2021. Then you see Zelensky's government taking a series of measures that really seemed intended to upset the Russians and ultimately provoke them into today's war. I mean, when you analyze the events of 2021, it really looks like the American administration back then and the Ukrainian government sat down together to list all the measures they could take to provoke Russia. I describe this in detail in my book, what I saw in Ukraine. So if people want to go more into detail about these things... For me, it's pretty obvious that this is what happened, ultimately, unfortunately, and this leads us up to now.

#M2

What is fascinating, though, is how the media shifted after or during 2014. There are a lot of media clips, videos, and articles from back in 2014 by bigger outlets—CNN, I think The Guardian, and others—who reported on the fact that the people in Donbas did not recognize the legitimacy of the coup in Kiev. And then the response from the new authorities in Kiev was so brutal. So again, you have all these reports with people who have relatives and neighbors murdered in the region, and they're pleading with Poroshenko to stop the killing. They're asking for help, and you have journalists saying that they're really alienating Donbas.

They might not want to be a part of Ukraine after this brutal assault. I mean, there were media reports of this, and there was some coverage of the fascist groups. Some were asking, why are we giving money to this? And, you know, because a lot of these were volunteer groups, quite radical, from the western parts of Ukraine who came into Donbas, which was, again, almost foreign territory for them. And there were discussions in the BBC and The Guardian about the US involvement in the coup, about the Russian concerns—not just about the fascist elements and the killings in Donbas, but also the prospect of NATO moving forward.

All of this—which is now branded as Russian propaganda—was in the media, and it all got washed away in 2014. And they now more or less march according to the same tune. It's quite impressive. But you mentioned that nobody wanted to know about these things that are happening today, at least not to the extent that it would change too much. How did you experience the American and, I guess, NATO side in Ukraine? Because a lot of evidence was piling up about disappearances—that is, people from the civilian population who might not be loyal to the new authorities in Kiev just disappeared. People ended up in unmarked graves. I mean, did you see any of this, and how did you see the reactions from the West, who were there to help the Ukrainians, as we said? Well, yeah, what you say is correct.

#M3

Indeed, there was a period when some Western media, like CNN for instance, actually did some honest reporting about the events in Donbas. In 2014, I saw at least two actual reports from CNN—one about Donetsk City and one about Lugansk City—where they honestly reported on the actions of the Ukrainian military. And something changed at some point. Also, even the US Senate had forbidden any help for the Azov battalion, or Azov unit, because it became larger than a battalion afterwards. That decision was actually reversed not so long ago. So now it is legal for the US government to help Azov.

So something changed in between. Now, going back to your question—yeah, just a few weeks after my arrival in Donbas, I was asked to interview a local journalist who explained to me how he was kidnapped by a volunteer battalion, tortured for three days, humiliated, and eventually asked to sign some papers and threatened. He had a bag over his head for most of the time during the interrogation, and he was basically naked, tied to a chair for three days. He didn't want to describe all the torture he had to endure.

And I think it was probably because part of it was of a sexual nature, since this is often the case in such situations. Anyway, at the end of the process, he still had a bag on his head, and they made him hold a weapon. Then they said, "Okay, now we have your prints on a weapon. So if you don't do as you're told, we can basically build a case against you for terrorism." Then they let him go, but it was like, "Okay, we let you go, but now you will do what we tell you to do. You will write what we tell you to write." This is what they did with this guy.

So, and then I talked to my boss at that time and said, "Well, you know what? What you just did—I mean, just a few months ago, your colleagues were here before, involved in investigating dozens of cases of disappearances. People were just snatched off the street, snatched from their homes or their cars by unknown people wearing balaclavas—which are, you know, these kinds of masks. And nobody knew who the perpetrators of these kidnappings were. So the family members would come to our OSCE base, panicked, asking for help because they saw only the internationals as able to help. They didn't trust the local police. So it was pretty... how can I say, dramatic events in those

moments. It was like every second or third day, somebody would come up to the base asking for help because they had a relative who had disappeared."

It lasted for months. So at some point, my colleagues decided to conduct this investigation, which led to a report that I read. The report was a magnificent piece of professional work, about 10 pages long, detailing all that happened in those days—extremely rigorous, distinguishing facts from interpretation. I quote most of this report in my book. Unfortunately, my mission, the OSCE mission, never did anything about it, as was revealed to me by a colleague who served at headquarters. Years later, he told me, "Oh yes, I know about this report, but nothing was done about it. You know, it was just put on the shelf and ignored." So what was the reality? There were people higher up the chain who didn't want to see this reality.

As I mentioned in another interview, in those days, one of my colleagues actually had a chance to meet the U.S. ambassador who visited our base back then. At some point, the U.S. ambassador asked questions like, "Do you have any stories about violations of human rights?" My colleague started to tell him the stories of all the kidnappings I was mentioning. But when the ambassador realized this was actually something incriminating for Ukraine, he basically demonstrated a total lack of interest and said, "Okay, next," and asked somebody else, interrupting my colleague—blatantly showing a lack of interest in such stories.

So, then when I was working there, people at headquarters would usually say, "Oh, you know, the Donbass leaders are just a bunch of thugs; they have no credibility whatsoever. We should not recognize them. We should not take them seriously." I remember also, in the previous mission in the summer of 2014, I actually ended up meeting a former NATO ambassador in Afghanistan—a pretty important guy. In the summer of 2014, as we were discussing the situation in Ukraine, mainly in Donbas, he was already adamant that all the separatists were just a bunch of thugs whom we should not take seriously at all, and that we should ignore them.

That was the viewpoint of the top people within NATO countries: we should just ignore these people; they are not to be taken seriously. Right? And this is how they were thinking. I saw the same kind of thinking again when I went to the U.S. mission in Ukraine. I also met another person who was a former NATO advisor to a NATO general in Kosovo, who again had the same attitude—that all these separatist leaders were not to be considered seriously, that they had to be despised, and she was openly despising them. I found it very disturbing because I said, how can you be neutral? How can you respect your mandate, which asks you to be neutral, when you have this mindset from the start, without even listening?

We weren't even starting to listen to the people. And then it was very difficult for us. Our hierarchy created all kinds of obstacles for us observers on the ground to actually establish contacts with these de facto authorities in Donbass. We were not allowed to talk to any representative of a given ministry or the court because we did not recognize them. But our mandate was very specific in asking us to develop dialogue on the ground with all the stakeholders, including local authorities.

Okay, but if it is local authorities we don't recognize, well, that's a different topic. I mean, in some cases, we were actually allowed to talk to people at the local level, right?

But not at the government—so-called government—level, or with any agencies that depended directly on the government. Although there were brief moments when some people found a way through—sometimes due to a change of staff, sometimes just depending on whoever was in charge at a certain moment—that basically determined the local policy. But it was still not encouraged at all by headquarters for us to develop contacts with the separatists. It was never encouraged. So whenever we managed to achieve that locally, it was based on our own initiative, and only after we had actually overcome all the hurdles that the hierarchy could put in front of us.

#M2

Well, that relationship is interesting because on one hand, you guys are there as independent and neutral observers. And at the same time, the people who are handing down directions are quite obviously, well, not neutral. The United States took on a very dominant role in Ukraine after 2014. At least according to the Ukrainian general prosecutor Viktor Shokin, he was making the point that all new government appointees after the coup had to be approved by the United States, if the Americans didn't put forth their own demands in terms of who should take these positions. We also learned that in intelligence, from the first day after the coup, the United States saw it as necessary to rebuild the Ukrainian intelligence service from the bottom up, given that they had been working too closely with Russia.

And indeed, they wanted them instead as an instrument, a partner against Russia. So again, they had to reinvent the intelligence services, but also the police. We heard Victoria Nuland and others say that they were training police across the east of Ukraine to replace the old police chiefs. It seems to fit within the wider context of what was happening—that is, to cut Ukraine's economic connectivity with Russia, purge the political opposition, purge the media, purge the Orthodox Church, ban the Russian language. I mean, how does this affect the situation on the ground? With the police, when the United States is training the new police to be, I guess, loyal to the new government which they installed in Kiev, how was that received among the local population in Donbass?

#M3

Well, the role of the police was very interesting to study in 2014, and I speak at length about it in my book, taking specifically into account the situation in Mariupol. I was based in Mariupol for more than two years, and I ended up in a position where I could follow many trials of alleged separatists, as well as trials of members of the volunteer battalions who had committed violent crimes like murder, torture, and kidnapping. So, these were two different types of trials, but by following the

trials of the alleged separatists, it was very interesting because it actually gave you an inside view of the events of 2014 and how they unfolded, as well as the mindset of the population back then. Just fascinating.

And then I supplemented the information that I gathered from these trials with my own research online or through various contacts that I had with local politicians. For instance, one of my contacts was formerly the municipal secretary of the Mariupol municipality when everything was chaotic in 2014. His insight was very interesting because he spoke at length about the police. Throughout Donbas, actually, the police in the vast majority of cases remained neutral, so to speak, in the fight between the government and the separatists. They stayed on the sidelines, which is pretty amazing, but this is what happened. And even in Mariupol, the people who were favorable to the DPR, the Donetsk People's Republic, felt that the police were on their side.

And because in Kyiv, they knew that they somehow could not rely on the police in Donbas, they actually tried to change various police chiefs in the cities, like they did in Mariupol. So they first replaced the head of police in Mariupol with another guy from Donbas, but he didn't change the dynamics as they would have wanted. So that new guy, who had just been in place for one month, was again replaced by another head of police. But this time, they picked somebody from outside of Donbas, someone whom they thought would actually implement Kyiv's point of view in Donbas and not follow the local population. And that led—this appointment led—to the local population rebelling against this new guy. And even the local police itself rebelled against this new chief.

And this was in the context of the Donbas people preparing the referendum for independence, which took place on the 11th of May, 2014. This new chief of police was appointed on the 1st of May, so just 10 or 11 days before. On the 9th of May, he decided to organize a meeting with all the heads of the Ukrainian armed forces who were surrounding the city. The center of the city was controlled by the separatists, and the outskirts were controlled by the Ukrainian military, volunteer battalions, and the National Guard. So the chief of police invited the heads to his office on the 9th of May. It is believed that the topic of discussion was how they could prevent the referendum on the 11th of May.

Actually, that day, the police station was attacked. It was a very confusing situation. And this is one of the most important events of the early days of the Donbas conflict, because the local population ended up being involved in what was going on. There were demonstrations on that day, the 9th of May, to celebrate the end of World War II. In the Russian world, they celebrate the end of World War II on the 9th of May—not the 8th, but the 9th. So people who were parading in the streets, celebrating victory against fascism, as they call it, started to hear gunfire near the police station. They ran toward the place, thinking that the Ukrainian armed forces were attacking the police. So it was very confusing.

Again, if you want details, you can refer to my book, because it's a long story when you dig into the details. But the conclusion was that the local population and most of the local police were siding together, somehow, for some kind of autonomy for Donbas, you could say at least. The head of

police who came in after this attack on the 9th of May—because the guy who was pro-Kiev was kidnapped on that day, beaten up, and found a few days afterwards, but he was not in a position to run the police anymore—so another guy was appointed, who was from Mariupol. That guy tried to settle things down, but then he was accused by the nationalists of being too close to the separatists, and they tried to have him arrested.

And that guy eventually resigned as well from the position of head of Mariupol police. He actually ended up joining the DPR, which is fascinating. He then became a district governor in the DPR, in Vozovk, which is in the south of the Donetsk People's Republic. And do you know what he is now? He is now the current mayor of the Russian administration in Mariupol. His story is fascinating. He was the last head of police appointed by the Kiev government before the summer of 2014. Fascinating story of this guy. So again, I talk about it in the book. Now, going back to your question—also in Donetsk, when you read about the events that occurred on the 6th and 7th of April, this was also told to me by a regional councilor who was, at the same time, a journalist.

And he told me his story of how it all started. He said the regional councilors were in Donetsk, in a room in the offices of the regional council, and they were surrounded by pro-Russian demonstrators—thousands of them—and they were scared to go out and didn't know what to do. Then, at some point, the head of the Donetsk police came to them, and they thought, "Oh, he's going to rescue us." But no, he came to deliver an ultimatum, telling them, basically, "Either you vote to support the creation of the Donetsk People's Republic, or you're irrelevant and this council is dissolved." This was the message conveyed by the head of the Donetsk police to the regional councilors.

And then they introduced a guy who introduced himself as the new governor of the Donetsk People's Republic. And it's only the following day that the Donetsk People's Republic was officially created. So I could actually compare what is said on Wikipedia to the account of this guy, and the accounts actually match. But it shows that the local police, from the very beginning, took an active role in somehow allowing the separatists to take power because they deliberately did not oppose it, you see? And then they kind of protected the local regional councilors as they tried to go out.

But first, they actually asked them to go out through the main door, but there were all the demonstrations, and the demonstrators were upset that they had refused to vote for the new government. So some of them were beaten up, allegedly, according to this guy. Then they quickly went back inside the building, and the interlocutor said that, for him, it was a way for the police to show them that they needed the police to protect them and that they didn't have control anymore. So then the police managed to escort this guy out through a back door. And that was the end of Kyiv's power in Donetsk. And we're talking about the 7th of April, 2014—very early on. But actually, even though the demonstrators controlled the original parliament building, there were other buildings inside the city that they did not control at that time.

So the takeover was gradual. And it was that very day that the DPR was proclaimed for the first time, that on the very same day in Kyiv, the interim president decided to create the anti-terrorist operation to retake by force all the public buildings and territories that had been seized by demonstrators. This is how it all started. But again, the role of the local police is almost never spoken about, if at all, right? But it showed very early on that they were somehow in favor of the independence of Donbas. And even later on, in September 2015, once I was in the OSCE mission, I found an article from a Ukrainian government source where it was explained that basically 8,000 members of the police and military present in Donbas from 2014 actually joined the separatists.

8,000. So it's not a small number. And I could verify that in a small police station in Siversk. You know, Siversk is now a frontline city east of Kramatorsk and Slovyansk. But in this small town, which I visited back in 2015, we talked to the mayor, and the mayor told us that the local police station actually lost two-thirds of its staff because they joined the DPR—the Donetsk People's Republic. So it was a team of 15 policemen, and 10 of them went with the DPR when the DPR decided to withdraw from the area because they thought they could not handle the pressure from the Ukrainian military anymore.

So it was a local example of how many local policemen decided to join the DPR, the Donetsk People's Republic. Again, these kinds of examples—hardly anyone talks about them. And this, I discovered on the spot. So the idea that all of this was, you know, a Russian-led operation, that it was Russian aggression, that there was no rebellion of the Donbas people, that it was all a narrative put forward by Moscow to cover what was pure aggression—this is not confirmed by the facts. From so many testimonies that I gathered on the ground, there was pretty significant support for the locally led insurrection in Donbas.

Yes, Russians gave a hand at some point. We know with Strelkov, with Borodai—also Borodai, who became the first prime minister of a new country that was born on the 14th of May. But Borodai himself claimed that he was sent by the president of Crimea, like Strelkov, to actually help out some Ukrainian people who didn't want to respect the Kiev government. So they didn't really know what would develop afterwards. But from the Minsk agreement, it was clear that Russia didn't mean to actually integrate these Donbas republics into their territory. The Minsk agreement was that, no, they should just be given autonomy within Ukraine.

But that was considered unacceptable by the nationalist elements in Ukraine and also by many people in the West. I remember many Western people who thought that the Minsk agreements were unacceptable from a Western perspective, believing that this would give leverage to Russia in the affairs of Ukraine, because it was believed that these Donbas republics would, in any case, be influenced by Russia. Which is not an absurd argument, but it's just taking the reality on the ground: in Ukraine, there are people who are pro-Western, and there are also people who are pro-Russian.

That's just the reality of a divided country. And in my point of view, there's nothing illegitimate about giving a voice to everyone. Pro-Ukrainian, pro-Western people have a right to have their say in the affairs of the state, but why should you exclude another part of the country with different views? This is not how I see democracy working. So I never shared this viewpoint that it was natural to exclude the pro-Russians from debates in Ukraine. I don't see that as a democratic approach. Yet it was followed by many Western people who thought anything dealing with Russia should be considered unacceptable.

And it is this mindset, this partisan mindset, that has led us to the crisis we are in now, because all of these people in the West and in Ukraine never wanted to take into consideration the concerns—many of them legitimate—of pro-Russian people in the country, or of Russia as a country itself. They thought that this Russian point of view had to be fought no matter what. And, you know, when you study things even beyond 2014, you know that with Brzezinski, for instance, and his book, The Grand Chessboard, he basically theorized since 1997 that the separation of Ukraine from Russia was to be a strategic goal of the United States in order to weaken Russia and to prevent it from having imperialistic ambitions again. That was the argument he developed in his 1997 book.

And you can see that this viewpoint was followed by the American deep state for years and years—strengthening the separation of Ukraine from Russia was, you know, a long-term goal of every American administration. But the problem was that this was deeply hurting the Russian psyche. And it was very clear, even from people like Samuel Huntington, in his 1996 book, The Clash of Civilizations, which you, of course, know. He actually warned at that time that if Ukraine ever tried to join NATO, the most likely consequence would be the start of a civil war inside Ukraine, which would also involve Russian intervention, and that would end up in partition—which is exactly what happened. And Samuel Huntington had foreseen everything back in 1996. There was even William Burns, former US ambassador to Russia, who in 2009 wrote the so-called "Burns memo," in which he explained exactly the same thing.

If we push Ukraine to integrate into NATO, this is a red line for Russia, which could lead to war. He was explicit about it. So all these people could not ignore that pushing Ukraine to join NATO was an absolute red line for Russia and would eventually lead to conflict. I even knew that myself when I was working with the French Minister of Defense. I remember reading the telegram from our French ambassador in Moscow at that time, who was basically describing the same argument that William Burns would describe. So it was known by everyone, and yet they kept pushing for Ukraine to join NATO, knowing it was a huge provocation for Russia. So you can conclude from that—because they could not ignore that Russia would react very badly, since it was known for 25 years—they voluntarily provoked Russia into war by constantly repeating that Ukraine should join NATO, and it was just a matter of time before Ukraine joined NATO.

#M2

Back in 2008, when NATO promised future membership for Ukraine and Georgia, it was not just the American ambassador, Burns—who later became the CIA director—who warned that this would trigger a civil war. WikiLeaks revealed that both French and German ambassadors also warned that this could lead to a civil war. If you wanted to create a civil war, this is almost what you would expect, because first—so, when they toppled the government in 2014, even at that time, the BBC reported that the majority of Ukrainians didn't support the Maidan protests or the riots, and even fewer would have supported a coup. And yet, afterwards, this was done.

All criticism of this was more or less made illegitimate—illegitimate and almost criminalized—because it's pro-Russian, and you can't be pro-Russian. But this was the majority of the population who had voted for good relations with Russia. They had shown this in polling. And so, if you're going to then rob those people of all autonomy by saying, well, they're all thugs, or they're pro-Russian, or they're actually Russians, one could then expect that this would lead to an uprising instead. And again, I think this is what we saw. But I did want to ask you, though, about—because when the Ukrainians finally had a chance to vote again in 2019, you know, Zelensky at that point was running on this peace platform.

He was going to talk to and make peace with Donbass. He was going to implement the Minsk Agreement and make peace with Russia. Yet this was then reversed very, very quickly. And indeed, he was threatened a lot as well. The people who threatened him—the various right-wing groups—instead of being punished, actually ended up being positioned in his government after he reversed his entire peace platform. Again, he won 73% of the vote, and he ended up doing the exact opposite. How did you assess this situation? Because for me, this was the one... I was very optimistic when Ukrainians overwhelmingly voted to end the conflict, but they didn't get what they voted for. I was wondering how you saw this or experienced this on the ground in Ukraine.

#M3

Right, if you allow me just two seconds, I need to do something. Yes, sorry about that. So, to answer your question, I was like you at that time—I was enthusiastic about Zelensky's election, and I was hoping that at last we could have the Minsk Agreement implemented, because he had basically promised to solve the Donbass conflict during his presidency, even if it would cost him re-election. He had said that, and he seemed really sincere when he was saying so. And then you could hope that he would actually get a majority in parliament to finally change the constitution, which was the key to unlocking the Minsk Agreements. He actually quickly dissolved the parliament so as not to waste time, and there were new parliamentary elections two months after he was inaugurated as president.

And then, the good news was that he got a majority in parliament—an absolute majority, more than 50% of the seats. And then you could also see that, with the votes of the opposition bloc, which was the so-called pro-Russian party, he would have a two-thirds majority in parliament to actually finally adopt the change to the constitution that was blocking everything else. So I was really optimistic.

But then, the moment when you could see that this would not happen was in December of the same year, December 2019, when there was the first meeting at the presidential level of what we call the Normandy format, if you remember. I think it was the 4th or 5th of December 2019. So it was Zelensky together with Putin, German Chancellor Merkel, and the French President, who was Macron at the time.

So they all sat together to discuss how to make progress towards peace. They agreed on various things, like the exchange of prisoners. But the only thing that was actually implemented after that was this exchange of prisoners. Apart from that, the main topic—the Minsk Agreement—was lost once and for all after that meeting, because Zelensky declared after the meeting that Ukraine could not implement the Minsk Agreement unless the calendar of measures, as planned in the Minsk Agreement, would be changed. And this was a complete no-go for the Russians and the separatists. I explained that in another interview. I mean, the order of the different measures was key. It was not decided at random; there was a logic to it.

And the last measure, once Ukraine would have granted autonomy, amnesty, a local police force, and language rights to the Donbas people, then the Donbas people would give back to the Ukrainian government control of the border with Russia, right? So it was like a guarantee for the Donbas people that Ukraine would actually fulfill its part of the agreement before anything else. Otherwise, I mean, the border with Russia was their escape route if things went wrong. And the problem was that if you reversed all the measures, saying, no, the control of the border should come first, that was a guarantee that the separatists would never agree, because they knew, okay, once Ukraine gets control of the border back, we are stuck inside Ukraine. And what guarantee do we have that Ukraine will respect its commitments under the Minsk Agreement?

And one of the main points was amnesty, you know. In 2017 and 2018, Ukraine had sent a very bad signal to the international community and to the people of Donbas by adopting a law called the Law for the Reintegration of Donbas. First, it was a draft law in which there was a very specific article stating that the Ukrainian government would prosecute everyone involved in collaboration with the occupation authorities. This is how it was worded. And the way it was understood was that, with this wording, they could basically prosecute people all the way down to the cleaning lady who works in a kindergarten, just because she's paid by the occupation authorities, right?

Because all these people working for schools and hospitals were paid with public money, run by the so-called occupation authorities—the DPR or the LPR—it was a very bad signal. Even Western powers at that time considered this article unacceptable, so there was heavy pressure put on the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian parliament. They actually changed the law and withdrew this article. But as a member of parliament from the opposition bloc later told me, a month later, he said, "Well, you know what? The parliament withdrew the article, but they did not replace it with any article that would basically promise there would be an amnesty, which was a requirement from Minsk."

Once again, it was a requirement from Minsk to provide for an amnesty for all these people. But there was no such article, which means you could conclude that Ukraine would reserve the right to do whatever they wanted. So this opposition bloc deputy himself thought that was still a very bad signal. Going back to 2019, the people of Donbas knew perfectly well the intent of the Ukrainian government and parliament. Their intent was to prosecute all of them, down to the last one—they had demonstrated it. So, of course, they would never accept a change in the measures of the Minsk agreement, because they knew that the people in Kyiv were obsessed with the idea of arresting every single one of them and not implementing anything from the Minsk Agreement.

And they did not implement anything from the Minsk Agreement. Even the payment of social benefits, like pensions—which is something that is never talked about—was a huge problem for the people of Donbas. Many of them were elderly; we're talking about more than a million people who were living on the "wrong" side of Donbas, so to speak, in separatist-controlled territory. From one day to the next, they lost their pensions. It became hell for them to get any payments because there was no longer a banking system in the separatist territories, since nobody would recognize them. So all the banks withdrew.

At some point, the Red Cross—and this I know from a source within the Red Cross—proposed to act like a bank and to get money from the Ukrainian government to distribute to pensioners in the separatist territories. That would be in accordance with the Minsk Agreement, because the Minsk Agreement was adamant that Ukraine, the Ukrainian government, should ensure that the payment of all pensions would resume. But the Ukrainian government did something completely different. First, they rejected the proposal from the ICRC. Instead, they said, "No, we will only give pensions to people who are displaced persons on government-controlled territory." So they basically pushed all these pensioners to falsely declare that they were displaced people in government-controlled territory so that they could get their pensions.

But then the Ukrainian government knew that there was this system in place. So at some point, and very early on in 2016, they decided to create a control mechanism to make sure that all these people who were actually living in separatist territories and pretending to be displaced persons in government-controlled territories could be checked. They wanted to verify every single one of them to make sure they were actually living in government-controlled territory. It was an operation that started and lasted for years. And while doing that, what did they do? They stopped paying pensions. So from one day to the next, all these people did not receive their pensions. Even those who were legitimate displaced persons also saw their pensions suspended. On average, it would take six months to have a pension resume if everything was in order.

But I've seen many cases where it would take more than a year, a year and a half. And some people ended up being so desperate that they gave up pursuing the idea of recovering their pensions. Unfortunately, there was a small pension given by Russia—actually funded by Russia—so that they could barely survive. But we're talking about, I think, the basic pension that Russia was giving, which was 2,000 rubles, which was nothing. It was just enough to buy bread so that you didn't die of

hunger. So many people survived thanks to this small donation from Russia. More than 50%—as I asked people afterwards—by 2018, more than 50% of Donbas pensioners had lost their Ukrainian pension, which is against the Minsk Agreement, which is against the law, you know, but the Ukrainian government didn't care.

And many people in Ukraine supported that decision because, "Oh, we should not give any money to people who decide to stay in the occupied territories, because that means they are traitors. We should not give any money to traitors." See, I'm developing here a point which nobody talks about—I have never developed this specific point in any interview so far. But for us, working in the Human Dimension Unit of the OSCE mission in Luhansk, what I'm talking about was a daily problem that we were facing. So many people came to complain to us about how we could help them solve their issues with getting their pensions. It was such a hurdle for hundreds of thousands of people.

And even some of them who were shelled—wounded and shelled—they refused to be confirmed by us as victims of shelling for fear that their names would appear in some database and that the Ukrainian government would take that as a pretext to basically cut their pension forever. We had several cases where people who were actually wounded by Ukrainian shelling refused to be interviewed by us so that we could confirm the case. I'm talking about that in the Luhansk region. So we could not confirm the case because you could not interview the person. And so it tells you the amount of fear people had and how important the pensions were for them, and to what extent they were willing to go to make sure they would keep that lifeline. Right. So I'm glad I have an opportunity today to mention this case because I never did before. And it was a big, big, big scandal in my view, what happened to those people.

#M2

Well, some of these humanitarian issues should have also been addressed by the NGOs operating in Ukraine. I also want to ask you about your experience interacting with NGOs, because I know some of them may have played a negative role. I mean, historically, at least since the 1980s, a lot of NGOs have been used almost as an arm of propaganda, or to capture the civil society of other states, arguing, "Well, here's the civil society, they're Ukrainian, we represent them." As we saw with the cuts—when Trump began to cut funding—we found out that, for example, the majority of Ukrainian media was financed by USAID, which kind of suggests that they're not really independent anymore.

But after Zelensky got elected, there's this fascinating NGO—well, they say it's Ukrainian—it's the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center. And they actually published red lines, which said he should not implement any of the peace proposals or any of his election campaign promises. So, for example, he's not allowed to talk to Russia without NATO and the EU in the room. He shouldn't do anything that undermines the path to NATO—essentially, his entire election platform. Now, this NGO, again, Ukrainian—they say it's actually financed by the National Endowment for Democracy, which was set up by the CIA and Reagan, and by NATO. There's a list of donations: the US government, Swedish government, Norwegian government.

Germany, Canada. There's also another think tank—it was funded by, it's called the Institute for Statecraft—which was exposed a few years ago for the Integrity Initiative, where they created clusters or networks of journalists and academics working as influence operations out of the United Kingdom. Again, all of this is already in the open; it's available, yet it doesn't... All of this falls under civil society now. This somehow was presented as Ukrainians, but this is very much an influence operation financed by Western governments. I was just wondering, to what extent were the NGOs that you worked with assisting, or did you see them working against what was meant to be the mission? Or did you have any perspectives at all?

#M3

Well, it's an interesting question that no one has asked in any interview I've done so far—the role of NGOs. Just a quick anecdote about NED, the National Endowment for Democracy. At some point when I was in the Donbas, I had an American colleague who was a former member of NED. He had worked for five years for NED in Ukraine. And he ended up working, as soon as he joined our base, in the reporting unit. It was very important because the reporting unit was basically compiling the daily report of the base. So all the reports from individual monitors during that day would end up on the desk of this guy, who would do his own selection of what was relevant or not to send to headquarters. So it's a key role. And that guy, first of all, was given this key role. And then, because I was myself also working on these reports—since I was doing a weekly report, not a daily report...

As I was reading different reports for the weekly report, I found discrepancies that I just could not understand. So I went to the head of the reporting unit at our base and asked him, "Can you give me access to the original reports?" because I didn't have that. The guy who had set up the system made sure that we wouldn't see the patrol reports of others. He said it was so that we could control misinformation, but then you realize that it's actually a way to control information, basically. By going through different reports, we found out that this guy from the NED had grossly falsified a report—grossly. I mean, it cannot be an error; you have to do that voluntarily, there's no other explanation. The story was that one of our patrols visited both sides of a line of contact when there was an exchange of shelling.

In one Ukrainian-controlled village, the mayor told us there was no damage. In the separatist-controlled town, which was Gorlovka at that time, our patrol saw damage to five houses. Everything was detailed, and the guy in the report basically said that all the damage we saw in Gorlovka was actually on the Ukrainian-controlled side of the line of contact, in Vysovo village, where the mayor said there was no problem. So, because the mayor said there was no problem, and then we say we see five houses damaged due to shelling, it was inconsistent. That's why I asked, "Well, can you explain this to me?" Anyway, when the guy was caught doing this, he pleaded human error—"Oh, I'm sorry."

I'm so glad you found this mistake. He said it was human error because he was stressed, that they had to work fast, and so on. But that was the only defense he could offer. It was very interesting to see that such a gross falsification of a report was done by someone with a highly suspicious background, working for NED, which, as you said, was created to replace the role of the CIA in influence operations in foreign countries. Okay, parenthesis closed. Talking about NGOs.

The fact that is interesting to note is that pretty early on, from 2015, both the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic decided to actually "clean," if I may say, the presence of NGOs on the territory they were controlling. They decided to go through a process of screening all these different NGOs, and most international NGOs were not willing to go through the screening process. They said, "No, we don't recognize these authorities, so we refuse to go through the screening process," thereby de facto excluding themselves from working in those territories. Very few international NGOs ended up accepting the idea of going through this process—very few of them. Before this occurred, I remember a colleague of mine sent me a report which was considered confidential. He told me, "Please do not share this report; it's confidential." This report was about an international NGO that I will not name. Basically, the Donetsk People's Republic authorities had officially complained to the head of this NGO that their representative on the ground was spreading propaganda against the Donetsk People's Republic.

He was basically, according to them, telling everyone, "Oh, you should not respect the separatist authorities. You should, you know, fight them, you should not respect them." So they said that if true—and, you know, it was not unthinkable that it could be true—then this was not a behavior that they could reasonably tolerate. So, this guy was considered persona non grata in the territory. But interestingly, the NGO afterwards changed its modus operandi and ended up still working in Donbass, but they just withdrew the international staff. The only international NGOs who ended up working in the separatist territories afterwards were NGOs that basically agreed first to go through some form of screening, and that agreed to withdraw any international staff. So they were just basically led locally by local staff.

And the separatists could then accept that. But there were still very few of them. Actually, the ICRC is like an intermediary between a government agency and an NGO. It's so big and so official that people almost consider it an international organization, but it's independent at the same time. It was by far the most important humanitarian organization present in the separatist territories, both in terms of staff numbers and budget. They kept international staff there because it is an organization that is famous for being discreet everywhere they go.

And because they are discreet, they managed to gain the confidence of all sides involved in conflicts. That's one of their major qualities. And so they managed to continue working in the separatist territories and doing a lot of important work because they were, for instance, distributing coal to

families that didn't have the means to buy any. And winter in Donbas is very cold. And for people who cannot afford coal, it can basically be a death sentence. So the most vulnerable people were kept alive thanks to the ICRC for the most part.

But the UN was also buying a lot of coal and distributing it through local NGOs, and some international NGOs with local staff. So I did not notice, once the system was put in place—very centralized by the separatist republics—that it somehow worked, although they were giving authorization to work every six months. Sometimes they were late in their own bureaucratic process. So sometimes the local NGOs were afraid that they would not be allowed to continue working anymore, but usually it was just delays and it ended up being solved. Then, on the government-controlled side, there was a huge number of NGOs, international NGOs, because they had no problems working on the government-controlled side.

So there was a lot of help available over there, much more than on the non-government-controlled side. And then also the Ukrainian government itself was subsidizing people who were in need of coal. They had their own system of subsidies. And it was key at some point because once the Ukrainian government imposed an embargo on the separatist territories from March 2017, there was a total embargo on any form of trade from March 2017 under the pressure of nationalists. Because until then, Ukraine was secretly buying coal from the separatist territories, since Ukraine had a great need for that coal for its own power plants, because the power plants were designed to work with a specific kind of coal that was only available in Donbas. It was crucial.

Anthracite is a high-level coal, and most of the anthracite mines were under the control of the separatists. So the Ukrainian government, under the authority of Medvedchuk and with the approval of Poroshenko, developed a deal—a secret deal—to buy coal secretly. We knew this existed back then. But at the same time, you know, I personally saw nothing wrong with it because I said, well, it's a win-win situation, right? Because Ukraine needs that coal. And eventually, when the nationalists found out, they said, "Oh, no, no, this cannot go on because this is like blood money. This is like giving money to the separatists, who are terrorists." And from then on, total blackout. And this was a big problem for Ukraine for a long winter because they had to find a new solution.

How can we buy cheap coal? And they tried to study different solutions: buying coal from South Africa, buying coal from the US. But none of it was economically viable because it was way too expensive to import coal from all these distant countries. Even the only port they controlled, in Odessa—even if that port was working 24 hours a day—it would not be enough to import the amount of coal that the country needed. So eventually what they did was continue to buy this coal from the Donbas. Actually, it was not forbidden to trade with Russia at that time, so they bought it from Russia itself. But they would buy it at twice the price. And how it would work, basically, was that Russia would buy the coal from small republics that only they recognized, like South Ossetia.

So the separatist DPR and LPR would sell their coal to South Ossetia officially, and then South Ossetia would sell it to Russia. And then Russia was selling it back to Ukraine, which was the system.

So in the end, Ukraine was banning the coal from Donbas, but it was coming through South Ossetia, through Russia, for twice the price. So it was the absurd system that was put in place so that everybody could save face and say, "Oh no, we're not buying coal from separatists." I mean, we see the same absurd system now with these sanctions against Russia, right? With the idea that, you know, the West still needs coal and oil from Russia, and major countries like India have a dire need for oil. So what we know the system is now: Russia sells huge amounts of Russian oil, which we cannot buy anymore, and then we buy oil from Russia, but this is basically Russian oil.

And then we say, "Oh, you know, we don't buy oil from Russia, so we're not helping Russia. We have our conscience clean," but it's totally absurd because we know it's just a play on words. And we even pay much more for buying the same oil. So it's an absurd system. The Westerners and the Ukrainians locked themselves into this kind of absurd logic, where common sense is thrown out the window just for the sake of saving face. But they are not running the state in the interest of the citizens when they follow this kind of scheme. We live in absurdity. And the whole Western world lives in a system of absurdity now, following these rules. So that was a pretty long answer to tell you about the role of NGOs, international NGOs, that led to international trade in the end.

#M2

I did want to ask you just briefly, though, before we go—about 2021 and 2022. We saw that the shelling in Ukraine increased a lot before the Russians invaded. Do you have any insights on this? Because I've seen conflicting statements and reports in terms of what was happening in the weeks or days leading up to the Russian invasion.

#M3

It's a good question, an important one. And I have to say that before I wrote my book, I didn't have a clear opinion on this topic. Because the data that was released by the USA—and you could see it on Twitter, or X, for instance—many people would basically share a map, which was developed by our mission, showing a map of Donbas with various explosions during the period just before Russia launched its special military operation. So we're talking about the period between the 16th and the 24th of February. And indeed, there was a huge increase in ceasefire violations during this period. But the map itself cannot tell you what exactly happened, because of the way information is collected. And I know perfectly well how this was collected because I was part of the whole system.

Basically, observers on the ground report explosions. And it's not easy, oftentimes, to distinguish—especially when the explosion sound is far away. It's not easy to distinguish what is an incoming from an outgoing explosion, right? And this totally changes the perspective of how to interpret what you hear. So, when you see a map that is based on where observers heard explosions, it doesn't mean anything. It just tells you that people are sharing information, but you don't know who is

shelling whom, because you don't know if what is on the map is either outgoing or incoming. Even when the official information comes in the report that, according to local observers, it is outgoing or incoming, it's still not always reliable.

I know from experience that this is not entirely reliable because it is based on human observation. And for this specific kind of information, you can never be 100% sure unless you see it with your own eyes—either the weapon system firing or the impacts themselves, which rarely happens. If it's all based on what you hear, you know it's not 100% reliable. Anyway, the only thing that is entirely reliable is the data from the night cameras. Over time, we had installed night cameras all along the contact line. These cameras were active 24 hours a day. And there was a server in Kyiv. At the beginning, these cameras would be monitored locally in the different bases in Donbas.

So I went during those days; I could see for myself what you could see from these cameras. It was perfectly clear to me what kind of images you could get from that. Then it was decided to centralize everything in Kyiv. The moments when the cameras were most useful were during the night, because at night, when you observe shelling, it's not only sound that you can report on—it's also light. I'm talking here about tracer bullets and tracer projectiles. In different interviews, I mentioned flares, but actually, that's not what I meant; it was a mistranslation, and I apologize to the viewers who would have seen those other interviews. What I meant in my mind was tracer bullets. Once, I was on the part of the front line that was super active—south, at a little dusk, in between the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. This was the most active part of the front line before 2022. When you were observing at night in this area, you could see tracer bullets flying all around the place from all directions—it was crazy. But actually, when you know the map, when you know the positions of the cameras, based on these movements you can be 100% sure who's shelling whom. When I did research for my own book, I decided to go through—because I had saved those reports, and they are still available online, publicly.

There are public reports—most of them. The daily reports of your mission are still available online. I've downloaded all of them. And actually, as an annex to each of them, you have the details of the ceasefire violations. So I went through all of that, and I specifically focused on the data from the night cameras. Most of the information from the night cameras, when you know where they are and the positions of the warring factions, allows you to know who's shelling whom once again. Unfortunately, very few people can draw these conclusions because, as I said, you need to know exactly where the cameras are and you need to know the positions of the different sides, which we knew because we had mapped them.

We knew exactly where the different trenches were on all sides, because they have barely changed over time. So during this work, I came to the conclusion that, from the night camera data, you could see that it was mostly the Ukrainian forces that were shelling the separatist forces. That is, again, the only 100% reliable information from our reports. And this led to a conclusion that was contrary to my own—how can I say—hypothesis about what happened in those days. My original, initial hypothesis was that it was probably the Russian military that was preparing its operation by shelling.

Right. Because, you know, usually when you launch a major offensive operation, you prepare it with shelling. That was my initial idea, but it is not confirmed by the data from the night cameras. The data from the night cameras gives you a different perspective. And then I also compared this to other testimonies. When I was there, I remember one of my colleagues—I was in Odessa when the whole thing started, so not directly in Donbas, but, you know, we were all talking with each other, and I had some exchanges with colleagues in Donbas on the phone about what was going on. And one of our colleagues from Norway—by the way, I had a colleague from Norway when I was in Odessa—and he said, "I have a friend of mine who is deployed in Popasna right now."

Popasna is a small town on the line of contact in the Luhansk People's Republic. And he told me the Ukrainian military is shelling heavily in the Popasna area. The Ukrainian military is shelling heavily. And that was before the Russians launched the operation. So I had this piece of information from one Norwegian colleague of yours—my colleague, compatriot. And then, much later on, one year later, I met a former colleague of mine outside of Ukraine who was working in Severodonetsk. And he had a rather senior position in Severodonetsk. And he confirmed to me that what happened back then was based on a provocation from the Ukrainian military in the area of Popasna, he told me. And I have no reason to doubt this guy because he was not from a country that you could consider close to Russia.

It was rather the opposite. And I will not name which country it was. And I can tell you this is not a pro-Russian guy. I can tell you for sure because I had left-wing discussions with him. But he was sufficiently honest to tell me, no, that day, it was the Ukrainian military that provoked. And you can also complement that with some other information. On the 17th of February, so the day that followed the start of this major shelling—17th February in the morning—there was a scandal that was put forward in the Ukrainian media and then Western media about the claim that the Russians had shelled a kindergarten during daytime when children were inside. That was the story in the media. And, you know, again, I was still in Ukraine in the OSCE at that moment.

And I thought, well, you know, I spent almost five years in Donbas. I never heard such a story—that the separatists would dare to shell a school in the middle of the day when there are children inside. It had never happened throughout the time I had been there. So why on earth would they choose that day, when the United States had previously told the whole world that Russia would launch an operation on the 16th of February? Russia would invade Ukraine on the 16th of February. If you remember, this is what they had said. And just to make a point, they would say, "Oh, and to prove the point that Russia is attacking and in a barbaric way, they are shelling a kindergarten full of kids."

And for me, it was unthinkable. But I waited until the following day to have the report from our own organization, the OSCE, to see what my colleagues would say about that. As soon as it was available, I downloaded the report and read it carefully. Then I noticed there was a discrepancy regarding the direction of shelling, which made it impossible for the separatists to have done it, given the direction explained in the report. It was completely incoherent. I said, how can that be? It

doesn't make sense. And then, later in the report, it said that our own patrol was prevented by Ukrainian police from getting close to the building to make its own assessment of what happened.

And this was the first time in my five years in Donbas that I happened to read something like that—that one of our patrols was not allowed to get close to a public building that had been shelled. It had never happened in my experience. The only buildings that were off-limits to us were military installations. Military installations were the only places we were not allowed to go, and even our mission did not want to observe those. We were not supposed to make reports on military casualties, only civilian casualties and civilian objects. And then, on that very day when they attacked the kindergarten, our team was not able to get any closer than about 50 meters.

And I can tell you, from 50 meters away, you cannot tell which projectile caused the damage. You cannot do that. You need to gather evidence on the ground. So our patrol was prevented from doing this job. So first of all, there's highly variable and changing information about the direction of the explosion. Then our patrol is not allowed to get closer. And it is highly improbable that the separatists would target this school at that moment. So everything looked like a false flag operation to basically blame the separatists, blame Russia for barbarism. And then, when you look at the calendar, when does this happen? Well, on the 17th of February.

And the following day, 18th February, was the start of the Munich Security Conference, which was back then a yearly event where all the actors involved in the Ukraine war would gather and listen to each other. And Zelensky, of course, made a speech at that time. And what does he talk about during his speech? The attack on the kindergarten. And he uses that as a way to portray Russians as barbarians and as a pretext to say the West should give Ukraine weapons. It is even alleged that during that speech, he actually called for Ukraine to be allowed to build its own nuclear weapons. It is alleged that it was during that speech that he made that claim. But actually, when I downloaded the speech later on, I didn't find an explicit reference to that.

But then I read elsewhere that the official version of the speech was expunged of that controversial line. And then I listened to somebody who was present that day in the room, who said he actually said it—he actually mentioned it, that he asked for Ukraine to be authorized to build nuclear weapons. I mean, when you say that at that moment, it's another huge provocation towards Russia, like waving a red flag. And if you're Russia, you think, "We should act before it's too late, before Ukraine gets nuclear weapons, because then we can't control anything. It's too late to act."

So anyway, for me, it was just another false flag provocation, a false flag action to rally the whole Western world behind Ukraine and request weapons before Russia would launch a major operation. And last but not least, later on, I read this incredible interview by Oleksiy Arestovich. The interview is still available on YouTube and nobody talks about it. It goes back to February 2019—I insist, February 2019, before Zelensky is elected. And in this interview, he says, "Our goal is to join NATO, but we cannot join NATO unless we have a major war with Russia." I mean, this is what he says. I'm not saying he's right, but this was his assessment.

And then he says that this major war with Russia should have happened before 2022. Because, he says, without this major war with Russia, NATO would never accept us into their ranks. We have to have this war with Russia to demonstrate that we can fight Russia, win against Russia, and then NATO would accept us into their ranks. And anyway, they would also help us to fight Russia. This is what he says during a 13 or 14-minute video. And then this guy becomes a major advisor to Zelensky. He becomes part of Zelensky's team of advisors. And he then had a show every single day, once the Russian operation was launched, where he would basically comment on what was going on on the frontline. He was the mouth of the Ukrainian government every single day from that moment on.

It's like he was put in a position to comment on what he had wished for three years before, and nobody mentions that. But just the fact that it exists shows that at least some people had foreseen that they should organize a provocation against Russia to have this major war. And what happened is that, since they managed to have Russia attack first by provoking it in every way they could, they could then assume the role of the victim in the eyes of the world. And for most people—the vast majority of people around the world who are not familiar with what happened in Ukraine, the history of the conflict in Donbas, or what American strategic thinkers were considering decades before—nobody knows that.

So all they see is, oh, a country invades another. It's like, you know, unprecedented. It's World War II. Hitler is coming back. So they managed to sell this narrative to the entire world. But when you look deep inside the whole thing, you can conclude that it was all prepared and provoked to happen. But Arestovich, the same guy, it's very interesting to listen to what he says now, because he understands that his plan failed. And now he says completely opposite things. He says we should actually do the opposite, because now it's clear that NATO won't accept us. So we should actually try to mend relations with Russia. So now he doesn't believe in NATO anymore.

#M2

He made a point once that the only countries who would actually fight and die for Ukraine would, ironically, be Russia and Belarus. So now it's interesting how he has shifted dramatically since those days of advocating for a big war with Russia. I think he called it "the coolest thing ever" to fight Russia, thinking NATO would join in on the side of Ukraine and collectively defeat the Russians. So, yeah. Anyway, thank you so much for your time. It's really important to get this perspective from an actual OSCE observer, so it's much appreciated. You're welcome.