

**Lex Fridman Podcast #456 - Volodymyr Zelenskyy: Ukraine, War, Peace, Putin, Trump,
NATO, and Freedom**

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Lex Fridman

The following is a conversation with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine. It was an intense, raw and heartfelt conversation, my goal for which, was to understand and to do all I can to push for peace. Please allow me to say a few words first about language, then about the President, and finally about history. Please skip ahead straight to our conversation if you like. We spoke in a mix of languages, continuously switching from Ukrainian to Russian to English, so the interpreter was barely hanging on. It was indeed in many ways a wild ride of a conversation. As the President said, "The first of many. Language, like many other things in a time of war is a big deal." We had a choice, speaking Russian, Ukrainian or English. The President does speak some English, but he's far from fluent in it and I sadly don't speak Ukrainian yet, so Russian is the only common language we're both fluent. In case you don't know, the Russian language is one that the President speaks fluently and was his primary language for most of his life. It's the language I also speak fluently to the degree I speak any language fluently, as does a large fraction of the Ukrainian population. So the most dynamic and powerful conversation between us would be in Russian without an interpreter, who in this case added about two to three second delay and frankly translated partially and poorly for me at least, taking away my ability to feel the humor, the wit, the brilliance, the pain, the anger, the humanity of the person sitting before me, that I could clearly feel when he was speaking fluently in the language I understand, Russian. But all that said, war changes everything. The Ukrainian language has become a symbol of the Ukrainian people's fight for freedom and independence, so we had a difficult choice of three languages and faced with that choice, we said yes to all three. To the consternation and dismay of the translators. We make captions and voice over audio tracks available in English, Ukrainian, and Russian, so you can listen either to a version that is all one language or to the original mixed language version with subtitles in your preferred language. The default is English overdub. On YouTube you can switch between language audio tracks by clicking the settings gear icon, then clicking audio track and then selecting the language you prefer English, Ukrainian, Russian. To listen to the original mixed-language version, please select the English (UK) audio track, big thank you to ElevenLabs for their help with overdubbing using a mix of AI and humans. We will continue to explore how to break down the barriers that language creates with AI and otherwise. This is a difficult but important endeavor. Language, after all, is much more than a cold sequence of facts and logic statements. There are words when spoken in the right sequence and at the right time they can shake the world and turn the tides of history. They can start and end wars. Great leaders can find those words and great translators can help these words reverberate to the outskirts of a divided civilization. On another note, let me say that President Zelenskyy is a truly remarkable person and a historic figure. I say this as somebody who deeply understands the geopolitical complexity and history of the region. I am from this region. My parents were both born in Ukraine, Kyiv and Kharkiv, both my grandfathers too. I was born in Tajikistan and lived for a time there, then in Kyiv, then Moscow, then United States, and while I am now for almost 30 years and to the day I die, I'm a proud American. My family roots grow deep in the soil of nations that comprised the

Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Tajikistan. I've gotten to know and have spoken for hours with members of the President's team and people close to him. I spoke to hundreds of Ukrainians since 2022, including soldiers, civilians, politicians, artists, religious leaders, journalists, economists, historians and technologists. I listened to hundreds of hours of programs that both support and criticize the President in Ukraine, in Russia, and the United States. I've read countless books about this war and the long arc of history that led up to it. If forced to recommend two at this moment, I would say *The Russo-Ukrainian War* by Serhii Plokhyy and *The Showman* by Simon Shuster, which is a good personal behind-the-scenes biography of the President focused on 2022, but there are many, many more. This is why I can comfortably say that he is a truly singular and remarkable human being. It was an honor and pleasure to talk with him on and off the mic. Now, it is true that I plan to travel to Moscow and to speak with President Vladimir Putin and I hope to be back in Kyiv as well as President Zelenskyy said, this was our first of many more meetings. In all of these cases, I seek to do my small part in pushing for peace. And in doing all this, I'm deeply grateful for the trust people have given me on all sides. For the people attacking me, sometimes lying about me, for the critics in the stands chanting the latest slogans of the mass hysteria machine like the sheep in *Animal Farm*, I love you too. And I assure you that drawing lines between good and evil on a world map is much easier than seeing that line between good and evil in every human being, including you and me. This is what I try to do. I'm simply a human being who seeks to find and surface the humanity in others, and as I've said, no amount of money, fame, power, access can buy my opinion or my integrity. Now, finally, please allow me to briefly overview some history to give background for several topics that President Zelenskyy references in this conversation. I recommend my conversation with Serhii Plokhyy and many others about the history of the region. But here, let me start with 1991. When Ukraine declared its independence and the Soviet Union collapsed. From this point on Russia-Ukraine relations were defined in large part by whether Ukraine aligned more with Russia or with the West, meaning Europe, United States, NATO, and so on. In 2004, with the Orange Revolution, a pro-Western candidate, Viktor Yushchenko became President. In 2010, it went the other way. A pro-Russia candidate, Viktor Yanukovich became President. The internal tensions grew and in 2013 Euromaidan protests broke out over Yanukovich's decision to suspend talks with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. This set forward a chain of important events in 2014. On the politics front, Yanukovich was ousted and fled to Russia leading to the election of a pro-Western President. Also, in 2014, on the war front, Russia annexed Crimea and war broke out in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, which eventually killed over 14,000 people and continued all the way to 2022. When on February 24th 2022, Russian forces initiated a full scale invasion of Ukraine. This is when the world started to really pay attention. Now some history of peace talks. Volodymyr Zelenskyy won the presidency in 2019 and he discusses in this conversation the ceasefire agreements he made with Vladimir Putin in 2019, which was one of many attempts at peace from the two Minsk agreements in 2014 and '15 to a series of ceasefire agreements in 2018, '19, and '20, all of which failed in part or in whole. All this shows just how difficult ceasefire and peace negotiations are, but

they are not impossible. It is always worth trying over and over again to find the path to peace. I believe that Presidents Zelenskyy, Putin and Trump should meet soon after January 20th this year and give everything they got to negotiate a ceasefire and security guarantees that pave the way for long-lasting peace. We discussed several ideas for this in this conversation. As I said, this was one of my main goals here, to push for peace. This trip to Kyiv and this conversation was a truly special moment for me in my life. It is one I will never forget, so to reflect I say a few more words and answer some questions at the very end if you like to listen, but here let me say thank you to everyone for your support over the years. It means the world. This is a Lex Fridman Podcast and now dear friends, here's the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. If we can explain why the Ukrainian language is very important, our conversation will be most effective and impactful if we speak in Russian.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I speak Russian perfectly of course, and I understand everything you are talking about. However, I can't respond in Russian the entire interview. It's because this is how it is today. I'm not making anything up. You can see it all for yourself. You can feel and hear it. Today, there were 73 missile attacks against us and people were killed. There were over 100 drones today, and this is a daily occurrence. The people who attack us, they speak Russian. They attack people who were only recently told that this was actually in defense of Russian-speaking people, and this is why I respect neither the leader or director of today's Russia, nor the people. That's it. And I don't think that you can just pretend that nothing's happening and give Putin a pass once again for saying that, "We are one people, that we speak one language," et cetera. They speak the language of weapons. That is a fact, and we are peaceful people. Peaceful people who want to protect themselves and defend their freedom and their human choice. At the beginning of the war, I addressed Russians in Russian, zero effect. They're mute. They do not listen. They did not listen. Some are afraid, some have other issues. They have different reasons. It's like when a person is drowning and people walk by because they can't hear them. And someone walks on by crying, afraid to save them. It doesn't change anything for the one drowning. They need someone to help them. This is why I honestly despise these people as they are deaf. They began the occupation in the supposed defense of the Russian language and that's why with all due respect, I would like to give an interview in Ukrainian. This is very important to me. If there are some points that you want me to explain in Russian, I can certainly do that. I can certainly occasionally speak Russian, but in general, no. I'm not sure that you will understand me completely, despite your Ukrainian roots, you are a citizen of the United States, right?

Lex Fridman

Yes.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That's why I'm surprised that you don't understand. Well, it was a long time ago. I understand that it was a long time ago. Moreover, a lot has changed. A lot has changed.

Lex Fridman

If I may, please allow me to say this in Russian. Yes, many things have changed, but I have hope. I hope that today many Russians will hear this, that Vladimir Putin will hear this, that the American President, Donald Trump, and the American people will hear this, that everyone will hear this. And yes, Ukrainian language is important symbolically, but what is also important is that we understand each other well.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

For Donald Trump? Is it important for Donald Trump whether I speak Russian or not?

Lex Fridman

Yes, yes, yes. Because unfortunately, and it hurts to admit, but I cannot speak or understand Ukrainian yet, so your wit, dynamism and your humanity will not come through as well and as quickly. Remember, I need to wait for two to three seconds to hear it. You have a great sense of humor, great stories. With an interpreter translating, I simply won't see this, but I understand that it's painful. Another reason is that I hoped we could show that even though it is sometimes said that Russian is banned in Ukraine-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

This is not true. I'm speaking Russian now, right. We have people who speak Russian. This is not true. Really, it's not. It's really not true. We disrespect Russian now because of Russians. That's all. When they were saving Russian speakers, they killed Russian speakers. Many people who actually... Many of whom are in the East, right. They lived in the East. They destroyed their houses, destroyed their lives. It's not a rhetorical thing. It's not all talk and blah, blah, blah. I don't have time for blah, blah, blah. Yes, so it's a very, very, very important and sensitive moment. The message is that we are not one nation. We are not the same country. We're different countries. Yes, different countries, and I think what is most important is what we're talking about, not how we're speaking about it. This is what I think. You are a smart guy, so you have a lot of experience in dialogue of this kind. That's why I think you will understand me. Yeah. Anyway, I think it is far better for Donald Trump to hear my English, not my Russian.

Lex Fridman

Your English is much better than my Ukrainian. You're getting better and better every day.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That's true. I'm a very honest guy. That's why I will be very honest with you.

Lex Fridman

Okay.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Your Ukrainian is not very good, but we will work on it.

Lex Fridman

Yes. I have many flaws, that's one of them.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Sometimes I can speak English. Sometimes as I understand, we can be very flexible, right?

Lex Fridman

Very flexible. Spanish, Swahili.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah. You see?

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

You're very flexible-

Lex Fridman

Javier Milei needs to understand this, so...

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

By the way, Javier understood me without any words.

Lex Fridman

The language of love, maybe.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Of respect.

Lex Fridman

Respect.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I respect him. I had a very good conversation with him. Really brilliant.

Lex Fridman

May I sometimes speak Russian and sometimes English?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah, yes. You can use any language you like, and I think that's a very good rule for this first meeting between us. As you said, maybe we will meet in the future for the second time.

Lex Fridman

Second and third and fourth?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah, this is good. You can ask questions in the language you'd like and I will answer in the language I can.

Lex Fridman

Well, you said you wanted to meet by the sea at some point, so for our next meeting, let's meet by the sea.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

With pleasure next time. It would be much better to meet by our Ukrainian Black or our Azov Sea.

Lex Fridman

I have traveled to many cities in Ukraine, but I have never been to Odessa and everyone tells me that, and I don't know why.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

You have to.

Lex Fridman

Can you explain to me why everyone loves Odessa so much? What's there?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

What's in Odessa? That's how they say it. What's there? In Odessa, we've got it all.

Lex Fridman

Okay.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Odessa. I love Odessa because of its particular temperament. People have their own accent, and there are many nationalities. There are a lot of stories, authentic, Odessa cuisine. By the way, the cuisine is very different from others. The dishes are not like any

other dishes and everything is very tasty. Also, there are beautiful people, and today, you understand people very well, especially after the attacks on Odessa. You understand what the people are like, just how Odessites are, very Ukrainian, and that's very cool. I love Odessa. I go there several times a year. I go there several times a year now because... Well, now because of strengthening of air defense systems, because of this grain corridor, et cetera. I go there more often. They have the sun there. They have the sea. It's Ukraine, and it's very cool there.

Lex Fridman

Well, when you come and visit me in Texas as a guest for the third time-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

With pleasure.

Lex Fridman

Let's do this. How about you, my friend Joe Rogan and I, we'll go get some Texas barbecue together.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Who will pay?

Lex Fridman

That's a good question.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Putin. Putin for everything. He has to pay.

Lex Fridman

Well, yes. We'll invite him too.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, no, no, no.

Lex Fridman

Okay.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Without him.

Lex Fridman

Okay, I get it. Understood.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

But if the Rome Statute will be accepted by your government before this moment.

Lex Fridman

Okay. By the way, I don't know if you know this, but Joe has a great comedy club in Austin.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Joe Rogan?

Lex Fridman

Joe Rogan, yes. And I think that as a person who respects comedy and stand-up comedy, it would be interesting for you to have a look at it.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, no. He is, I know him and I saw a lot of different videos. He's a very talented person, so it would be a pleasure if you invite me and I'm able to do it. I am a little bit busy, but if I'll be in the United States, I hope that I will have a conversation and a meeting with President Trump, and of course during my visit, if I'll have the time, it would be a pleasure if you'll invite me. With pleasure.

Lex Fridman

You know what? I will pay.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Good.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. I had to think about it, but you are the President.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, with you, with pleasure.

Lex Fridman

When the war is over, please come.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thanks so much.

Lex Fridman

And when you're less busy.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thanks so much.

Lex Fridman

If we can go back many years, World War II, tell me the story of your grandfather who fought in World War II.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

My grandfather, he graduated from the military academy, and from the very beginning of the war, he went to fight. He was in the infantry and he fought through the entire war. He had many wounds, as they used to say back then, "His chest is covered in medals," and it's true. He had more than 30? Yes, more than 30. He was the kind of man... He was such a serious man. I loved him very much, and we had a very close relationship. He didn't like to tell details about the war. He never boasted, although I asked him as a boy would, "How many fascists did you kill?" He never talked about it. He believed that the war was a great tragedy. A tragedy for everyone. And Ukraine was occupied, and it was a tragedy for Ukraine, a tragedy for Europe, and a tragedy for the Jewish people. His own brothers, his entire family were executed. They were tortured by fascists who had occupied Ukraine and their village. His father was the head of the village and he was killed. They were shot. It was a mass... A mass grave, right? Yes. It was a communal burial. Some of them were killed outright and others, they were buried alive. His four brothers, they all went to war. As soon as the war began, they were all there. He was the only one who had a military education, and they all died in the war. He was the only one who came back. He had nobody. He came back and he found my grandmother, his future wife, and she managed... What was it called then? I don't know. They don't have them anymore. It was a child care facility, an orphanage, so to speak, a place where orphans lived, children who don't have parents, children of war. And she managed this child care facility with difficult children, as they used to call them, difficult children who went through the war, who saw their parents killed, and this is how they met, because these difficult children, they, well, sometimes behave differently. They could steal something, do something bad. There were many, many children in the orphanage. Yes, that's how she met my grandfather, and I loved him very much, and I think that my grandfather, frankly would never have believed that this war is possible. He would never have believed it because he worked in the police after the war. He was a colonel. He worked in a criminal investigation all his life, so he fought with bandits all his life, after the Second World War, but also I believe he fought for justice all his life. And we all lived in one apartment, and even after his death, I lived with both of my grandmothers and my parents, two grandmothers who both lost their husbands. Both of them died. Well, it was an ordinary family, an ordinary family that lived like everyone lived back then in the Soviet Union and even after the Soviet in the nineties, we lived in one apartment all together. What else is there to say? But I think the most important thing was values, respect. They gave me an education. My parents gave me an education, no one left me money or apartments, so I

didn't inherit anything material. But I believe that our real inheritance is here, in our minds and in our hearts. I believe that. Understood.

Lex Fridman

There's just a one-second delay, so if... I'm sorry, if you-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

It's fine.

Lex Fridman

... tell a joke, I will laugh about one, two or three seconds later. There's a delay. So ordinary family, but not an ordinary time. World War II. Speaking of mass graves, I was at Babyn Yar yesterday. A large part of my family died there. In moments like this, such a place serves as a stark reminder of the profound historical gravity of the Second World War. I remember this song from my youth, "On June 22nd at four o'clock, Kyiv was bombed and the war began." I always wondered how it would feel to live in a moment when everything changed. The path of humanity completely shifts in a single moment just like that. What do you think about that moment in 1941 now, after the 2022 invasion, how do you perceive the Second World War after you have witnessed all of it?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Well, firstly, the war actually started earlier. It started here in Ukraine. Kyiv was bombed as you quoted, but the war had already begun before that. And I think I perceived it as a start of the full-scale invasion. Well, I think it's hard to understand why nobody wants to listen, look at and analyze history. War, the rise of fascism and Nazism, the emergence of Hitler, Goebbels, and their entire team at the time, this wasn't just about one party or even one country. It was essentially a wave. A wave of hatred, a wave of one race, one race above the rest. They were in fact constructing and ultimately implemented a theory around this idea later seizing Europe. They created a theory of one nation, one race, one world, their world. Of course, this idea is absolutely senseless, but it has become radicalized over the years and even gained support. A vision of one world and in principle, the so-called Russian World, the ideology Putin promotes and imposes, it wasn't originally like that. He was a different person back then, or maybe he was always like this, but his rhetoric was different. At the beginning, remember, he talked about the EU, and- At the beginning, remember he talked about the EU and even about Russia's future being tied to NATO. There were even talks of joining the European Union, NATO. He spoke about shared values with the West. That's how it all sounded back then. We must also look at Hitler, who was seriously... Before the radical idea of taking over the whole world, he actually made certain steps and everyone believed he was helping the economy. And to be fair, he did take some steps in that direction but he was a terrifying person. None of those actions justify him, nor do they excuse his actions and that's why we cannot look at the Second World War as if it started in 1939. It didn't begin in 1941 either. We need to draw conclusions. When did it start? With the weaknesses of the

world? The division of European states, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. All of this happened before 1941. People who were more informed, those who dug deeper, whether they were politicians or not, whether they were from different walks of life including business, which was different back then, we're speaking about all of this. Hitler won't stop. There'll be a world war. Hitler will destroy nations, nations, and that's what happened. Someone looked the other way. What I told you about. Europe was sinking then, I gave you an example of it but the whole world looked the other way and didn't pay attention and said, no, we can negotiate with him. I'm telling you he's okay. We can negotiate with him. He's just more right leaning, or it does not matter what they said. He's just very pro nationalist. This is all nonsense and this is not the first time and Hitler isn't the first such case in history. We're dealing with a person who is allowed to stick to this desire to destroy. He was consumed by it and enjoying it. And what happened to Hitler? Now, what about Putin? This invasion was also at around four in the morning. There were missile strikes on Ukraine. This is the same. I believe that intentions are also the same but more on that later. By the way, you tell me if this is too long, you can stop me.

Lex Fridman

Never long enough. It's beautiful.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Okay, so it happened here around four in the morning. Before this, I must honestly say everyone said something, predicted something, et cetera but I asked only for one thing primarily from the United States, if you are sure, if you have the evidence, if you talk to him and he tells you that there'll be an invasion, if all this scares you, I only asked for two things. Send us weapons or better yet, strengthen us with preventive measures so there would be no war. It wasn't the weapons that I was asking for. I asked for sanctions. Intimidate him. Please don't say that if he comes, if he crosses borders, if he kills, we are imposing sanctions. Well, this is complete bullshit. Sorry but really.

Lex Fridman

Oh, I understand this.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Oh, wonderful. Yes.

Lex Fridman

I understood one word.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

So, they did not help.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I believe that no and this is a fact. We didn't receive help. If we assume that words are help, well then yes, we received a lot of it because there were plenty of words. Even more than plenty, yes. At four in the morning there were strikes. Morally, is it possible to prepare for war? No. It doesn't happen like you read in books, see in movies and so on. What happens to you? I was just looking at my wife and children. My children were asleep but my wife was awake. There were strikes, missile strikes. We heard them. To you as a living person, how can this be? You just can't fully believe this. You just don't understand. Why now, given everything that happened in World War II when millions of people died? None of it mattered still at four in the morning around 4:00, 3:40, 3:45. Remember, around this time? Yes, there were missile strikes and later. By the way, a few days after the first days of the war, I spoke with Lukashenko on the phone and he apologized and he said that it was not me. Missiles were launched from my territory and Putin was the one launching them. These are his words. "I have witnesses and I apologize," he said. But believe me, that's what he told me. "Volodymyr, this is not me. I'm not in charge," he told me, "I'm not in charge. These are just missiles. This is Putin." I told him, "Don't do that." This was done without me. That's it. On the phone, I remember this conversation. I told him, "You are a murderer too, I'm just saying." He told me, "You must understand, you can't fight the Russians." I told him that we never fought them. I said, "It's war. The missiles came from your land, from Belarus. How did you allow this?" Then he replied, "All right, retaliate then." I still remember him telling me, "Hit the refinery. You know how much I care about it." Mozyr Oil Refinery, is that it? Can't recall. Mozyr Oil Refinery. I told him, "What are you on about? What retaliation?"

Lex Fridman

Forgive me, Volodymyr.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes.

Lex Fridman

This was at five in the morning?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, no, no. This was during the first or maybe the second day. Second or third day of the war.

Lex Fridman

Ah, I see.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

After that I went back home. I was home with my children, with my wife. I just went to my wife very quickly that night at four o'clock and just told her, "Get the children, get ready. You'll probably need to go to my office very soon." And I left. That's it. At this moment, you are no longer a father. What happened to me, unfortunately, because I believe that this is, and not only do I believe I understand, especially now, that all of this is the most important thing because your country is your family. The strength is in your family and this is the most important thing. I'm the president and therefore, I had to stop being a father in my own family. And my wife had to do everything... She had to do everything regarding children, regarding safety and I had to deal with the state because I'm the president and this is my duty. And I, by the way, am taking this very seriously. I went to the office and here we are now. You're very welcome.

Lex Fridman

Well, at that moment on February 24th, 2022, everything changed again. Just like in June 1941, everything changed and history took a turn. The history of humanity took a turn and for you too, you were the president. You were talking about fighting corruption, about the country's freedom, about interesting and innovative reforms but that morning of February 22nd, everything changed. Could you tell me about that morning, the details of your actions when you had to quickly make difficult decisions? What was the process for you? How did you make these decisions? Did you discuss them with people you trust to understand how to respond to this invasion in every technical, political and military aspect? What was the process for you? How did you make the decision?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

According to our legislation, in principle, I am the supreme commander of the Armed forces of Ukraine, so I had to give corresponding orders. Yes, I have a military office and then later there was a military headquarters where all key people gathered. This is not only about the military, it's about energy, et cetera, all key things. But at that moment, I made the decisions quickly and without a doubt and I cannot say that I am just that kind of person. I'm just a living person who believed that if help is needed right now to help, to help evacuate people, help with children. Several cities were blocked. I was only thinking about how to deliver food there within a day. We did a lot of things, although we understood that they in fact occupy part of our state. We distributed weapons to people, that's how it was. Trucks came and simply distributed weapons to people so that they could defend the capital, to ordinary people just on the street, to ordinary people who understood that if the Russians entered a city, then we would have the same thing that's happening in other cities per the information we received. Thanks to digitalization, by the way, we had very good digitalization before this. We preserved a lot and even when they were surrounding certain cities, a lot of things still worked. The banking system, the internet, we had television, and thanks to this, I made several decisions to ensure that people are united and have all the information. Russia is very good at spreading large scale disinformation. Fortunately, I have two decades of

experience managing a production studio, TV channels and large media resources. I understood that we needed to build an information network very quickly. Thanks to this, I began to address the people constantly. This happened several times, three to five times a day. In fact, I became an information source for people who were in cities that were cut off from other information and it was very important for me to keep all things digital, to keep the internet, to stay in touch with everyone with all the people. Initially, that's the contact we had and then we also built a media platform where we had all the news agencies of Ukraine and this network was called Marathon. It was also very important for the people to trust us and people had to receive information. Why? There were waves of Russian on the first day who said he ran away. I had to go out into the street, I left the office and went outside. I had to do this because I was showing that this was no green screen to show that it was the street, not some digital manipulation. I did these things. Then I touched various objects. Now, people might think that these are small things, but I was actually showing that I was in a real place. All of this had an impact. I was absolutely sure of my actions. And these contacts, several contacts and then I spoke to the Russians, I addressed Russians, I really did, and then only after that I gathered... It was the first day when I invited all of the journalists here, wasn't it? That was on the first day, I think. Well, not here, to the press center in this building. I talked to journalists. I asked them not to leave because we needed weapons. At that moment, they were handing out rifles to people and for me, journalists and media platforms were essential voices. There were various journalists from different countries here and they were essentially stuck and I asked them for contacts, those who had access to Russians, Belarusians, Kazakhs who understood everything, the same information, and I spoke to them and I spoke to them and spoke in Russian. I told them, "You must stop Putin. This is terrible. This is horror. This is war. You must stop him. And if you stand up now, if you speak out and if you go out into the streets..." This was very important. I spoke to them in Russian to show them that there was no problem and that all of these pretexts were made up. This is why it's so painful to talk about the Russian language too because look, if a person does not want to listen, they will not listen no matter what language we speak.

Lex Fridman

I disagree with you here. I think and hope that many people in Russia will hear us today.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

They blocked YouTube recently. Are you aware of this? In their country.

Lex Fridman

I know. I simply guarantee that this conversation will travel fast on the internet. Everyone will hear you. They will hear you, including the president of Russia will hear you. This is why I have hope.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

He is actually deaf. Even if he speaks to you, he is deaf by his very nature. Do you understand the difference? For instance, when you talk to Musk, you are talking to an innovator, a scientist about rockets. You talk about how to save on costs and how they land. On the other hand, Putin doesn't launch rockets to save money but to kill people. Do you think you can talk to Putin about technology? Your guys were interviewing him and he told them about tribal history. Do you understand? Imagine a Russian man in his country listening to him. You know what Musk is about, technology, Mars, artificial intelligence. And this guy Putin is standing there bare-assed pontificating about tribes. You've got to understand, you think that when you do interviews like Mr. Tucker who did an interview there that you're about to make them friends. What does this have to do with friends? He is different. He's simply different.

Lex Fridman

But it's still necessary.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

A mammoth stands before you.

Lex Fridman

By the way, I must say that when you said bare-assed, it was not translated. Could the interpreter please translate?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

This is so that you can understand.

Lex Fridman

Now he explained everything to me, I understand.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah, that's great.

Lex Fridman

Now I fully understand.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That's great.

Lex Fridman

Anyway, but we still need to talk.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

One should always speak with someone who listens and you must speak when you know that this will benefit you bring peace and calm to the world, not the other way around. I love President Trump's message. When he speaks, I think that we share a position on peace through strength. That is very important. It means that if you are strong, you can speak. And we need to be strong and Ukraine has to be strong enough, otherwise what for? Like Voldemort who must not be named. Yes, he's like Voldemort. He thrives subsists and lives on being subjectivized instead of isolation. He has offered to step out into the light. He is darkness personified and you offer him, as it were, to be subjectivized. Why? There's only one reason, fear. And you say we need to talk. Listen, we need to be in a strong position and not talk but end the war. Yes, it is possible through dialogue. We're not opposed to it. You just need to be in a strong position to make the other person want it. Do you think he wants to end the war? That's what you suggested. I think this is naive. I'm sorry. With all due respect, it's naive to think he wants to finish the war.

Lex Fridman

Tell you what-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

The circumstances... Sorry for interrupting. There's something we need. I think that President Trump not only has will, he has all these possibilities and it's not just talk. I really count on him and I think that our people really count on him. He has enough power to pressure Putin not into wanting to stop it. No, he will not want to. To pressure him to actually stop it, that is the difference. Don't rely on Putin's will to stop. You won't see it. That's what I think. Sorry.

Lex Fridman

No, sorry. I interrupted you first. I do have what some might call a naive dream of you sitting down with Putin and Trump and negotiating a deal about a ceasefire and together, finding a path to long-term peace. I think this requires strength, requires negotiations. There are a lot of carrots and sticks here that can be used to make a real deal. Trump is very keen on making a deal and ready to negotiate.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Can I ask you a question?

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I just really want you and I to be on the same page. It's very important to be in the same information space. Extremely important. Let's talk a bit about the ceasefire. Let me

describe the situation to you. In December 2019 in Normandy, in Paris at the Elysee Palace, Macron, Merkel, Putin and I agreed on the ceasefire. The U.S. wasn't there and this, by the way, was a weak point of the meeting. If you'd like, we can later discuss why they weren't there. It's a security guarantee thing in general. It's Germany's position, et cetera. We agreed on an exchange of hostages, an all for all exchange. We made a deal to exchange everyone for everyone, I think you know that. There was also a meeting that lasted many hours, a meeting where we made a deal with him. Everyone was tired. It was just the two of us in the end and I proposed a ceasefire. By the way, no one in Ukraine believed. Few believed in the ceasefire and he wanted troop withdrawal. I calculated that if there were a withdrawal of troops from the line of contact the way Russians proposed, it would take 20 years. I proved it to him just in terms of time, square kilometers, namely the length of the line of contact or delimitation line, and we agreed on what I told him that it will not work out but I had many points because I was deeply involved in the issue. I was involved very deeply. It's my thing in general. If I start doing something, I can't stand there like that guy I spoke about with my ass out. I must be dressed. I must be prepared. I must be prepared better, better than anyone in front of me. You do sports, right?

Lex Fridman

Mm-hmm.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I practiced for many years and we know what fights are like what boxing is, what Thai boxing is. This is what I did and I loved it very much. When you step into the ring, you understand everything pretty much, and so I stepped into it and I was definitely well-prepared but he wasn't, no. He was not deeply involved in the process. What border? Where is it? How long will it take to disengage troops? Why wasn't he involved you want to know? Because he wasn't going to do any of this. This is what confused me. If you are not deeply involved in the issue, it's as if you don't really need the result. That's what I think. So, what happened? We agreed that there will be gas continuation, gas transit in 2019. We agreed with him. This was the security for Europe. Merkel asked me for it and this was extremely important for Germany. We agreed with him. For him it was just money. Secondly, we agreed on an exchange. For me, this was the most important thing. For them, gas was. For me, was the people and this is a fact because I wanted to have a humanitarian advantage so that there would be further meetings that would lead to sustained peace. And third, ceasefire. Ceasefire, you spoke about. What happened? The gas contract was signed because he needed it. And by the way, he knew everything about it. As for exchange, we took the first step and exchanged the people. Regarding the ceasefire, well, they started killing us in about a month, so I called him and I told him, "We agreed on a ceasefire, didn't we?" Well, it wasn't a piece of toilet paper, was it? This is serious business or so it seemed. It really was serious. "Merkel, Macron, you and I, we all agreed on this together. A ceasefire is important, isn't it?" Not for New Year's because everyone was celebrating New Year's. And now, they're offering us a Christmas ceasefire. It's all the same. A ceasefire for two, three days just to

get some praise but this isn't a performance. This isn't some kind of theater. No, this is about people's lives and that's what happened. After that, I called him a few more times. I think I only had two, three calls with him in total. I asked him for a ceasefire. He told me it couldn't be. We will figure it out now. People from the occupied territory, Russians and separatists, they were all there together. They continued to shoot and kill our people. Yes, the front lines were quiet but they killed people. They were killing people and I kept calling him. I called again and again, but there was nothing until after a few months the Russians stopped answering the phone. We did not have any contact since. I wanted another meeting like we had in Normandy. I wanted the next meeting. I wanted to find a solution but the Russians refused. We tried to make it happen through various European countries and not only European, but the Russians refused. They passed along some kind of bullshit, made excuses. They didn't want it. Meanwhile, they were sending their snipers. We had evidence, living proof, even video evidence because some of them were captured back then. Those were the snipers in training. They were training them. They were training them. And later, those snipers operated in Syria and Africa. These snipers were training in our country in the east. Ukrainians were living targets. They were shooting from the other side, killing people, women, people, children. They were shooting. It was a hunt. By the way, it was in the Russian-speaking region in the east where according to him, everyone is speaking Russian. That's where they were shooting. Where the situation currently is the most tense. They killed people. We sent this information, sent pictures, we sent them to the UN, sent them everywhere. We worked very hard, very persistently. I met with everyone but who thought of Ukraine back then. They didn't notice it much. They didn't pay much attention to Crimea being illegally occupied either. To be honest, the United States of America too, everyone was somewhat silent about this issue. That's how it was. It was like that before a full-scale war. I want to ask you a question about the ceasefire. For example, in Mariupol today, there are American and Ukrainian journalists, and everyone will tell you who has contact now with Mariupol, who fled from there in the last minutes, just before the occupation or who was able to leave to escape after the occupation? Chernov, who won an Oscar was among them, and the journalists that left Mariupol, they are here by the way. We had a conversation. They will tell you that 20,000, 30,000 civilians were tortured and buried there. We do not know the number of victims. People who didn't want to work with them, who refused to cooperate with them, people who went on strikes to protest, people who did not want to work with the Russians who occupied Mariupol. And this is one example just with this city. And I have a question for you. What about the millions of children? I will ask you in Russian so that you hear this without delay, what about the millions of children over there? What if we just arranged a ceasefire without understanding what would happen next without understanding what will happen to Ukraine's security guarantees? What about the millions of children in the occupied territories? What should I tell them? What am I to tell them? What is it I should tell them? What? Whatever? Hey, all of you over there, see ya. And those tens of thousands of people buried there, they were... Is that what we want? Are we ready to forgive them for this? We must at least take the first step. If this is a ceasefire, we must know that there is a security guarantee for the part of Ukraine under our control. We need it

so that he will not come back. This is very important. What do we say to the people who live in those territories? These are millions of people. Did you know that since 2014 in Donetsk, in the Crimea, this is happening in Melitopol as well as in Berdiansk now, they are making all these kids of drafting age go and fight? And if they don't go, they will be killed. So, you understand what's happening? That is why a ceasefire, everything I said, what I wish for, and I believe in President Trump's power to use all of this information to come up with a way to make Ukraine strong. Why am I saying that? I will give you an example. President Trump will be in the same situation as I was in 2019. Precisely the same situation. I want to end the war. We want a lasting piece for Ukraine. We must do this, the ceasefire, exchange people, and then diplomatically return all territories. And we will do this through diplomacy. What will happen next with- ... to diplomacy. What will happen next with President Trump? If the ceasefire happens without security guarantees, at least for the territory we control, what does he get? If he manages to make a ceasefire deal, and three months later, Putin launches a new wave of attacks, what will Trump look like? What will Ukraine look like? What will everyone look like? Putin will just do it, and why would Putin do it? Because today he's afraid of Trump. But once Trump manages, for example, to do a ceasefire deal without serious security guarantees for Ukraine, he will give a pass to Putin. Not that he wants to, no, he does not want that. I believe in what he says. But he will give Putin an opportunity, because in Putin's head, he wants me to fight with Trump. Putin's plan is to end the occupation of our territory. This is in his sick head and I'm absolutely sure of this. That is why I told you don't wait for Putin to want to stop the war. Pressure him so that he is forced to stop the war, that's important.

Lex Fridman

It's important to say that what you said about the children is a tragedy. War is hell, but let me say again, we must find a path to peace.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

There is one.

Lex Fridman

What is it?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

There is one. Before ceasefire, strong Ukraine. Strong Ukraine's position, yes, we can speak about it with Trump. For me, we can speak about security guarantees, but a quick step is NATO. A partial membership, NATO, yes, I understand. I understand Trump's feelings about NATO. I heard him, he's thinking through all of it, of course. But anyway, yes, NATO is a strong security guarantee for all the people, for us, part of security guarantee. The second part is the arms aid package, which we will not use. If a ceasefire works, nobody will use the weapons. For what? But it has to stay. But with all due respect to the United States and to the administration, not like before, I don't want the same situation like we had with Biden. I

ask for sanctions now, please, and weapons now and then we will see. If they start it again, of course, we'll be happy if you'll give us more and you will stand with us shoulder to shoulder. Of course, that is right, but, but it's different when you have weapons. Putin wouldn't have been able to occupy so much territory. It was very difficult for us to push him out, but we didn't have weapons before and that is the same situation. It can be the same situation. I'm just sharing this with you, like I said at the very beginning, I want to be very honest with you and with your audience. Yes, it's true. If we do not have security guarantees, Putin will come again.

Lex Fridman

To make it clear, let's describe the idea that you are speaking about. I would like to offer you other ideas too. But right now, your idea is that NATO accepts Ukraine, minus the five regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Crimea.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Just so you understand the situation, the invitation to NATO is legislatively issued to Ukraine. So to us, all those territories are still Ukraine, but NATO so far can only act in the part that is under Ukrainian control. This can be negotiated, I'm sure about that. Yes, this would not be a great success for us, but if we see a diplomatic way to end the war, this is one of the ways. So it is, sorry, that is a start. Secondly, weapons, arms aid package, I'm not ready to discuss this publicly right now. It's all written down and President Trump might have seen it or not, but we've got no secrets from him, yes. But mostly it depends on the willingness of the United States, because some of it will come from the EU, some from the United States, of course, together. So not just from the United States, no, no, no, we need unity with this package, so the package and sanctions. Yes, sanctions, but I think it's in the interest of all the smart people to not have Russian energy on the market in general, so he has to stop it. That's all, it's fine. American oil, American gas is okay. Why not? And it's cheaper, so it will be cheaper for the whole world. The money will go to the United States and I think he will be happy, and the president and your people will be happy, but it's your decision. I'm just sharing. Yes, and cheaper oil. So Putin won't have so much money for the war, and that's it.

Lex Fridman

But this is difficult because it's a lot. You're saying to continue the sanctions on Russia, to accept Ukraine into NATO, I need to ask you some difficult questions about this.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, go on.

Lex Fridman

I trust and respect your words today. Many people respect and love you in America. Trump respects you.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Loves me.

Lex Fridman

Oh, come on now. Remember, last time you corrected me when I said that you love Javier Millet, you said, "No, no, no, I respect him." So let's not talk about love today, but could we talk seriously about guaranteeing Russia's security?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Okay. Can I interview you a little? Question is what land is the war happening on and where did it start? On our soil, on our territory, international law was violated. The sovereignty of our country was violated, civilians were killed. Tens of thousands of our people were taken hostage, and everyone will tell you this happened. This is what happened when I speak with the Global South, which is trying to balance the two sides because of the history, because of their roots and because of their shared economic interests with Russia in the past. And now, of course, when you talk to them, they are speaking a little bit like you. They're balancing a little bit. Yeah, a little bit in between, but we will work on it.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

It's our first meeting. During the second one, you will be more on our side, but it's just-

Lex Fridman

You're very convincing, very charismatic.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah, thank you. But when I speak with them, when I speak, it's very important. Even with their balancing attitude towards the war, they all recognize that this is a war. This is not just internal conflict, this is a full-scale war that began, that Putin began. And all of them, all of them, if you talk to them, they say... But then they all recognize that, that it's his own big mistake, Putin's mistake, and that he's not right. That's why I said, "No, no. He's not right, and you have to begin from this." If you begin at the middle, between Ukraine and Russia, of course, we can speak like this. You are in the middle and say, "Okay, what's going on? There is a fight. Where is the fight?" It's not the fight like in Europe when Napoleon is fighting against somebody in the middle of Europe. No, this is not in the middle of somewhere of the planet. Not the planet, it's concretely on our land. So one country with one army, one person came to another. That's it, it's very clear.

Lex Fridman

Again, I would like us to find a path to peace, so let us nevertheless try to start in the middle. What other ideas do you think might? You are a very intelligent person and-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Your Russian isn't that good either, and I told you that this is only our first meeting.

Lex Fridman

My English is not very good either.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Your English is very good.

Lex Fridman

Thank you. To be honest, I'm terrible at speaking in every language. Well, there are other ideas. For instance, sorry to say this, it sounds crazy.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Please.

Lex Fridman

But what if both Ukraine and Russia are accepted into NATO?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Putin himself spoke about Russia, maybe about NATO. What you just said is very correct. What are the guarantees for Russia? It's not like I'm even interested what happens to them. To be honest, I don't care what will happen to them in the future after the war ends, but these are our borders and we must understand what is going on there. Well, the NATO guarantees for Ukraine. Actually, this is also a security guarantee for the Russians. Frankly, I talked about this many times before. Sorry, I'm speaking figuratively, but as an example, if you were a father who lost his children, a grown man. A grown man, a man, an adult, and the war has ended and he never got justice for real. For example, somebody decides to freeze support. We won't give you anything. You can't fight. You can't continue, so we stop when we stop without any guarantees, without any support, without financing, without okay. And nobody is held accountable, but the man lost his children. He will not get anything. None of the killers will be in prison. All the sanctions will be removed, and he lost his children, and we have thousands of such people. Why do you think they will not go to Russia? We'll find a way and will not kill the Russian soldiers there or somebody there. Why wouldn't they? It's human nature. It's not about us, it's everyone. Read American writers. Always after any war, if there is no justice for people, there must be punishment for the crime, it is only justice. How come my child was taken away? The war took him. This is very scary. And even whether it was my son, who was fulfilling his constitutional duty, or simply a missile that struck a

civilian child, and if there is no justice and the killers are not punished, why wouldn't these people come back with hate? They will definitely come back. So when we talk about NATO, NATO is not only stopping Russia. Do not forget, NATO is stopping us too, because there will not be justice for everyone. We know that NATO does not have the right to solve certain issues with war. NATO is a security alliance, it is protection, not brainwashing. What Putin claims that this is offensive is not true. NATO is a defensive alliance, a security alliance, and it is security for Russia.

Lex Fridman

But unfortunately, there are many options for peace that don't involve NATO inviting Ukraine as a member. Can you imagine security guarantees without NATO membership? For example, if America simply leaves NATO, I believe there is a high likelihood that Donald Trump would do such a thing.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think it's very bad for NATO. That's the end, that is, that's the death of NATO. It is a pity, because I think that it's a very good alliance. Maybe not everything's good there from the bureaucracy or money, et cetera, but totally countries who are in NATO, they don't fight. There is no war on the land of any of these NATO countries. I think that is the answer. It works or not. It works politically or militarily, I don't know, but it works. So without Trump, without the United States of America, there will not be NATO. That is the first, so and you say, "Can we imagine that?" That what?

Lex Fridman

That there could be security guarantee without.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, we don't need guarantees without the United States. That's it, because the United States is a very strong, powerful country. The United States puts the point. Of course, Putin said that it's just the Soviet Union where, by the way, Ukraine was the second strong republic militarily, yes, by the way. But he, of course, always forgets about it. But during the World War II, without help of the United States, support of your troops, support of your industry. Industrially, militarily, without your money, without your people, Hitler could win, so the United States helped a lot. Of course, Europe, USSR, and of course, everybody fought. Everybody did a lot. But without the United States, it couldn't be such. I don't use the word success, because I think that there is no war which ends successfully because this is a war. Seven figure losses, heavy losses in World War II, millions of people, and that's why without the United States, security guarantees are not possible. I mean these security guarantees, which can prevent Russian aggression. Of course, we have security guarantees bilaterally with some countries financing support of our internal military and defending, and humanitarian issues and demining, which is very important, in helping our children in the school networks. By the way, this is a very sensitive point. How many bomb shelters? How

many bomb shelters we built with the partners for the children? And it's a pity that they are underground, but can you imagine their eyes when they came after COVID? You understand what does it mean COVID, but they had COVID and the war, and together they didn't see each other for so many years. And when they saw each other even underground, they were very happy and smiling. So we have such security guarantees, but it's not enough to prevent. Yes, preventive measures also work to prevent the aggression of Putin.

Lex Fridman

Your English is better than my Russian. This is wonderful.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I'm not sure.

Lex Fridman

I'm just giving you a compliment.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you. No, no.

Lex Fridman

You're supposed to do that kind of thing to a president.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you so much.

Lex Fridman

Okay. Once again, without NATO guarantees, I have a dream that, let's say, on January 25 or sometime at the end of January this year, you will sit down with Donald Trump, with Vladimir Putin. And together negotiate a ceasefire with strict security guarantees and an agreement will be signed. What will this look like without NATO?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I will make it clear. So first of all, I think January 25th or some other day, well, you just call it January 25th and I don't mind, it's my birthday. And we sit down, first of all, with Trump. We agree with him on how we can stop the war, stop Putin. It is important for us to sit down with him. Secondly, it is very important for us that Europe, which is very important for us because we are part of Europe. And not only geographically, geopolitically, but also in the European Union where we will be. For us, it is very important that Europe also has a voice. It's the second thing. It won't be long because Europe will be looking at us and we'll be looking at Trump. And by the way, I now see that when I talk about something with Donald Trump, whether we meet in person or we just have a call, all the European leaders always ask, "How was it?" This shows the influence of Donald Trump, and this has never happened

before with an American president. I tell you from my experience, this also gives you confidence that he can stop this war. That is why we and Trump come first and Europe will support Ukraine's position, because they understand that Ukraine has every right to have its voice heard in this because we are at war. Trump and I will come to an agreement. And then if, and I am sure that he can offer strong security guarantees together with Europe, and then we can talk to the Russians. That's right. Not just three of us sitting down at once, and you still talk to me like that? Do you know how? As if Putin wants to sit down and talk, but Ukraine does not. This is not true.

Lex Fridman

I think that yes, he is, in fact, ready to talk.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Did you talk to him?

Lex Fridman

On the phone or what?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

How do you normally talk to him?

Lex Fridman

I don't know. Normally, by the sea, the same as with you. He invites you to the sea with me, just the three of us.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, no. One of us may drown.

Lex Fridman

Who? Are you good at swimming?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, I'm a good swimmer.

Lex Fridman

You're a good swimmer. Well...

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

And I would like to add that if you have any contact with him, I just want to hear what happens then.

Lex Fridman

I have never talked to Vladimir Putin, but I have a feeling that he is ready, because Donald Trump is ready. I hope you're ready, and this is not just a feeling, but a dream. I have a dream here that the three of you will get together in a room and make peace, and I want to understand what it looks like. What security guarantees look like that will satisfy Ukraine, that will satisfy Russia.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Ukraine needs security guarantees. First and foremost, we are in danger, that is why they are called so. This is no joke to me. Let's take a few steps back. Interesting, why are security guarantees a strong position of Ukraine, strong weapons and so on, so important? I will give you a little history lesson, although I think you have prepared yourself and know everything perfectly well. You can correct me on that. Yes, Ukraine had security guarantees. The Budapest Memorandum, nuclear weapons are the security guarantees that Ukraine had. Ukraine had nuclear weapons. I do not want to characterize it as good or bad. Today, the fact that we do not have them is bad. Why? Because this is war. Today we are at war because you have unleashed the hands of a nuclear power. A nuclear power is fighting against us, against Ukraine, and doing what it wants. By the way, even you are now talking about ceasefire, just a ceasefire. Maybe give flowers to Putin, maybe to say, "Thank you so much for these years. That was a great part of my life." No, we are not just ready for this. Why? The Budapest Memorandum, nuclear weapons, this is what we had. Ukraine used them for protection. This does not mean that someone attacked us. That doesn't mean that we would have used it. We had that opportunity. These were our security guarantees. Why am I talking about this in detail? Because if you take the Budapest Memorandum, by the way, I discussed this with President Trump. We have not finished this conversation yet. We will continue it. Regarding the Budapest Memorandum, the Budapest Memorandum included security guarantees for Ukraine at first, three, three. The most important security guarantors for Ukraine, three strategic friends and partners of Ukraine. This was in agreement. United States of America, Russia, Britain, France, and China joined. There were five states that these are not even security guarantees. We now understand that this is not a guarantee of security, because on the one hand, these are security guarantees, but there was an English word, as far as I understand, assurance. It is translated as assurance, assurance, right? And in Russian, it'll be and what assurance? That is give up nuclear weapons because you were under pressure of the US and Russia for Ukraine to give them up. These two powers were exerting pressure. These two states negotiated to ensure that Ukraine does not have nuclear weapons. Ukraine agreed. These are the largest states. This is the nuclear five that does not even provide security guarantees. Now we just need to find these people, and we just need to put in jail all of those who frankly invented all this. So confidence, assurance, assurance that Ukraine will be territorially integral with its sovereignty. It was a piece of paper. If you are curious, by the way, that after occupying part of our Donbas and Crimea, Ukraine sent diplomats three times. I don't think I remember, three times within a few years, we sent letters to all security guarantors, to all members of

the Budapest Memorandum. What did they send? That what was written on the piece of paper, consultations, Ukraine holds consultations. If it's territorial, integrity is violated and everyone should be in consultation. Everyone must come. Everyone must meet urgently, USA, Britain, Russia, France, China. Did anyone come, you ask? No. Did anyone reply to these letters, official letters? They are all recorded by diplomats. Did anyone conduct consultations? No, and why not? They didn't give a fuck. This is understandable in Russian, that as Russia didn't give a damn, neither did all the other security guarantors of the Budapest Memorandum. None of them gave a damn about this country, these people, these security guarantees, et cetera. We take a break, this will be a Budapest Memorandum. The last time with me, imagine how many years it was with me in February 2022? In February 2022, the war began, a full-scale war. Letters for consultations have been sent. No one answers. Next, we are taking a break from the Budapest Memorandum. The question is simple about Budapest. Can we trust this? No. Whichever country out of these five sat at the negotiating table, just a piece of paper. Believe me, we will save you. No. Another, this is a train. This is a train with wastepaper, with security guarantees, which Ukraine has been riding for many years. The second car on this train is the Minsk agreements. The Normandy Format and the Minsk agreements where it was written, where the signatories were, the United States of America was no longer there. I understand that Obama was here at the time, and as far as I know, I think they were simply not interested in what happened to Ukraine, and where it was in general, where it was located. Well, somewhere there, part of something. People, well, people and let it be, let it be with these people. The United States simply did not participate. In the Minsk agreements, there are no claims to the US because they were not guarantors. Where is the claim? A step back. 2008, Bucharest, everyone has already learned from the Budapest Memorandum. Bucharest, 2008. Bucharest, Mr. Bush, President of the United States, Republican says that Ukraine should be in NATO. This is the voice of Republicans. Check it out, Ukraine should be in NATO. Everybody's looking at the US always, all in favor. Who is against? Merkel, so she opposes and she forced everyone not to give Ukraine an invitation to join NATO because that would be a step. Seriously, Republicans were in favor, the US was in favor, because Republicans and Bush were not afraid of anyone. They were not afraid of anyone, and they knew that Ukraine rightly wanted to join NATO. She chooses so. And what is the question? Well, people made their choice. Well, and the Russians will not look that way. That was not the case then. Why? Because the Russians were different. Next, Minsk, we didn't succeed. After the Minsk agreements, as I told you, hundreds of meetings were held. I have had hundreds of meetings since 2019. We could not think about a ceasefire. A ceasefire is our offer, this is not somebody's suggestion. This is mine, I would like. I wanted to. In Ukraine, society was divided. Not everyone wanted to, half did not want to. Half were against, half were in favor. Some of them shouted, "Do not believe it." Some of them shouted, "Believe it." I am the president of Ukraine. I was given a mandate of trust by 70% of the population to take appropriate steps and I made them. This is not a joke, we'll just sit the three of us. I am simply telling you what is. This is how can I tell you? These meetings must be serious and prepared, and prepared with those who want peace. Ukraine wants peace, US wants peace. We have to sit down

with Trump, and that is 100%, first and foremost, number one. Moreover, he told me on the phone that he is waiting for us to meet, and there will be an official visit. And my visit would be the first or one of the first to him. And for him, this topic is very important. I know that he has his own matters, American issues, I understand. I heard his election program, but regarding international affairs, I think our issue is one of the most pressing issues for President Trump. Therefore, I believe very much I trust his words, and I hope we will meet again. We need to prepare. We have many plans to build on, and they exist and they are supported by many countries, but we need his vision. He needs to look at all these details, but his vision, please, because he can stop Putin because Putin is afraid of him. That's a fact, but Trump is a president of a democratic country, and he does not come for life. He is not Putin. He will not come for 25 years. He will come for his term. Please, tell me. Well, for example, he came for four years and for the fifth year, Putin came with a war. Will it make Trump feel better that there was no war during his time, and that Ukraine was destroyed after him? Why destroyed? Putin is whoever, a killer, whoever, but not a fool. He will be prepared. He knows our mistakes. He understands how we defeated his army after the invasion began. He realized that this was not a Soviet war, and that this would not happen with us. He will prepare. He will let everything into arms production. He will have lots of weapons, and there will be a very large army. And you think that after such humiliation, four years without a war, he did not finish us. He will return and fight only against Ukraine. He will destroy everything around. And if you say there is a risk that President Trump will withdraw from NATO, for example, this is a decision of the United States. I'm simply saying that if it does, Putin will destroy Europe. Calculate the size of army in Europe. Calculate the size of army in Europe. It's just that I say it for a reason. Do the calculation. Why did Hitler conquer all of Europe then? Almost. Just count, remember his armies of millions. Calculate what Europe has. What are the largest armies? We have the largest army. The Ukrainian army is the largest in Europe. The second place after us is four times smaller than us.

Lex Fridman

France?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes. 200,000. I think the French have about 200,000. We have 980.

Lex Fridman

So this powerful coalition of European nations.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That will not be enough.

Lex Fridman

Yes, it's not going to be enough. But you're a smart man. There's a lot of ideas. Partnerships with global South India, Middle East, Saudi Arabia, [foreign language 01:36:57] partnerships, political partnerships. It all protects you.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

First of all, look at one example. North Korea. Just look at this example. 12,000 has arrived. Today, 3,800 killed or wounded. They can bring more. 30-40,000 or maybe 500. They can bring many people. Why? Because they have order, autocracy and everything. Can Europe bring people together? No. Will Europe be able to build an army consisting of two to 3 million people? No, Europe will not want to do this. And for what? We definitely don't want a world war with you. There is no such purpose. There is no such purpose as gathering everyone. We do not want any war. We want to stop the Russians and they invite North Korean soldiers. Invited. Their faces are burned. They themselves burn their faces. Those who cannot escape, injured or killed. There's a video. Everything I'm telling you, there is evidence of this so that they are not recognizable. Right? What does it mean? It's out of values which share Europe. Europe counts. It means that those guys, they don't count. [foreign language 01:38:54] It's count. Yes. They don't count the number of people. That is the answer. Can they move more? Yes. Can they move dozens of thousands? Yes, because we see what they have. Last year, for example, Europe gave us 1 million artillery rounds. We produced a lot ourselves, but they gave us initiative. It was initiative. 1 million artillery rounds and of 155 and et cetera. We produce more but North Korea gave Putin 3.7. Just gave him. So he also has a deficit for today. It means he needs what? He needs time.

Lex Fridman

But the number of soldiers...

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes.

Lex Fridman

And the number of artillery rounds is not everything. As you have said. Let's say Donald Trump guarantees security for four years. You can form partnerships with India, with Saudi Arabia that enforce punishment to stick on oil prices, for example, if any aggressive action is taken. You can actually even build the... I've met a lot of incredible Ukrainian tech people, IT people. You could build great companies that form partnerships with the United States, that form partnerships with China, and that is a big leverage against aggression of however many million artillery rounds. And that, a sheet of paper, you don't need a sheet of paper of protection.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Ah, that's you. Well, when you speak in English. You don't even need answers because when you now are talking, you already answered on all the questions. The first one is that during this time you need just cooperation. A lot of money for this military industry. In Ukraine or in Europe, with India, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, you need a lot of money. So the question is where you will get it. My answer was to Trump. I said this is one of the security guarantees. Take 300 billions of frozen Russian assets. We will take it. Take money, what we need for our interior production, and we will buy all the weapons from the United States. We don't need gifts from the United States. It will be very good for your industry, for the United States. We will put money there. Russian money, not Ukrainian, not European. Russian money, Russian assets. They have to pay for this. We will put it and we will make it. This is one of security guarantees. Yes, of course. Because this is a military guarantee. Yes. But then the second you said that energy price and a lot of sanctions on products and the Russian shadow fleet and etc. That is the second answer we spoke about before. Yes put more sanctions on them. More sanctions. It's okay, but not to take off sanctions.

Lex Fridman

It's okay with you, but it's not going to be okay with the president of Russia.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, but I'm not thinking how it'll be very good for him. He's still a killer.

Lex Fridman

I understand, but unfortunately the reality is that a compromise is needed in order to reach an agreement.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

So in your understanding, the fact that he is not in jail after all the murders, he's not in jail assuming all the murders and no one in the world is able to put him in his place, send him to prison. Do you think this is a small compromise?

Lex Fridman

This is not a small compromise. And to forgive him will not be a small compromise.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

To forgive. No one will forgive. It is absolutely impossible to forgive him. We cannot get into the head and soul of a person who lost their family. Nobody never will accept this. Absolutely impossible. I don't know. Do you have children?

Lex Fridman

No, not yet. But I would like to.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes. God bless. And this is the most important thing in life, and they simply took away the most precious thing from you. Will you ask who ruined your life before going to rip their head off? I'm just curious. They took your child away. Are you going to ask who did this? And they will answer that that dude did this. You will say, "Oh, well then there are no questions." No, no, no. You will go fucking hell and bite their head off and it will be fair. Can murderers be forgiven? That's why you make security guarantees. What I told you, for those who are here and what we control and what will not happen. And that those who lost, we will never forget in a matter of time. But when you gave us NATO, I just said this means that after a while, everything I said about NATO. After a while, Ukraine will not go against Russia and Russia will not go against Ukraine because you are in NATO. I am just saying is not that a compromise? NATO is a compromise. This is not just a security guarantee, in my opinion. Look, when rockets were attacking Israel and Israel is not in NATO. NATO countries, aircrafts were deployed. The air defense worked, operated by different Middle Eastern countries. These are also security guarantees. And by the way, Israel has nuclear weapons. So why do they need NATO when in fact they have more than NATO has? The American, British and French aviation stepped in. There was ADA. I don't remember from Jordan. Listen, thousands of missiles were shot down that way. What is this? So it's a guarantee of safety. It's just that it's not called NATO. Is some Uncle Vova irritated by the word NATO? There's a problem with the word and I think he's simply irritated by people who are alive and living here.

Lex Fridman

If you believe this, it will be very difficult to negotiate. If you think that the president of a country is completely crazy, it is really hard to come to an agreement with him. You have to look at him as a serious person who loves his country and loves the people in his country. And he conducts, yes, destructive military actions.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Who are you talking about now? Who loves his country?

Lex Fridman

Putin. Do you think he doesn't love his country?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No. What is his country? He happened to consider Ukraine, his country. What is his country? Explain it. Tomorrow he will say that it's America. No pity for the Chechens. Do they look like Russians? Do they speak Russian? Of course, they learn in schools like anywhere there's been Russification. Who are the Chechens? A different people, another faith, other people, another language. A million eliminated. And eliminated how? How did he kill them? With love? I know fuck by hugging. In Ukrainian, as we say, "Strangling by hugging. I love you so, so much. I love you so much that I want to kill you." That's his love. And that's

not love. You are mistaken. He does not love his people. He loves his inner circle. It's only a small part of the people. He doesn't love them. Why? I'll explain. You cannot send your people to another land knowing that they will die. Children, my daughter, she is 20 years old. For me, This is a child. She's already an adult of course, but she's a child. The boys he sends are 18 years old. They are children. He sends them. It's not that fascists came to his land and he needs to defend it. He came to ours and he sent them Chechnya. He sent them Syria, he sent them Africa. He sent them Georgia. He sent them Moldova. Transnistria, that was before him. Fine, we can leave that aside. He has enough sins of his own. And then there's Ukraine, the largest part. 788,000 killed or wounded Russians. He calls them all Russians. Even those who don't know how to speak Russian on his territory of Russia, everything they've enslaved. Yes. Proud [foreign language 01:48:48]. So I wonder, is that love? What love is this? And for what? Does he love his people? No. Does he love his land? His country is bigger than America. How much land do you need? America is huge. America is simply an outstanding country. Outstanding country. Russia is bigger. Well, just bigger. So ask yourself, does he love them? What is he doing and what does he love? Do you think he's been everywhere in his Russia? It's impossible to get around it. He hasn't been everywhere. He just hasn't.

Lex Fridman

Well, I believe that Donald Trump loves America and I don't think he has been to every single American city.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, no, no. I saw his rallies. So many rallies. No, no. Let's be honest. Let's be honest. He had it and I saw it and it's very difficult. I mean he's not 18. Yes, but he's strong and this is his will. Everywhere where the war is, I'm sure, I pray to God it never will be on your land. Yes. And I'm sure that it will not be, but I'm sure that if you have in some region the problems, how to say, earthquake, hurricane you have it all. Well, I'm sure that President Trump would be there after one day, two or three days. I don't know the security of all these things, but he will be. Otherwise, how will people look at him? Yes, of course he will. Of course the same about me. I'm not comparing myself with him. I'm just where it is difficult for people, I have to come. The next question is very simple. Region, Kursk region. The operation there. Was Putin in Kursk during four months? No.

Lex Fridman

Listen, I have tremendous respect for you, admiration for many reasons. One of which is you stayed in Kiev and another one is that you visit the front and you talk to the soldiers in the front and you talk to people all across Ukraine. Absolutely tremendous respect for that. And not enough people say that. I had a conversation with Tucker Carlson for example, and I said that, "You're hero for staying in Kiev." And he said, "Well, he just did a thing that every leader should do." But I think not enough leaders do the thing that every leader should do. So tremendous respect. I agree with you totally. Yes a leader should go to the front of a war.

That said, America has waged wars all across the world. The war in Afghanistan and Iraq costs \$9 trillion and killed over a million people. War is hell. And just because war is waged in terrible ways that it does not mean the leader does not love their country. But I take your point. I once again have a dream that even if there's hate, that you sit down with Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and you find a way to peace. Let me ask you a question. What do you think? Will there ever be a day when the Ukrainian people forgive the Russian people and both peoples will travel back and forth again and marry each other, rekindle and form friendships? Will there be such a time in the future?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think history has long answered this question. I don't know how be for us. It'll be in the future without a doubt. History has shown this time. And again after every devastating war, one generation, one country recognizes that it was an aggressor. And it comes to realize this is impossible to forgive. This is precisely the kind of education they've had in Germany for many years. Even though these children had nothing to do with it. It was their grandfathers who participated and not all of them were participants of Nazi Germany's war essentially against the world. Yes. And against life. And therefore they're still apologizing. Apologizing is not easy. They know that they were the aggressors, they were guilty. They do not look for compromise in history. Compromise in itself buys time. And they understand this. There are convicted murderers condemned both historically and by their own people. Reparations have been paid and security guarantees have been established by the way. And all this is done. And when all this is done and recognized, in any case, people develop relations with each other. That's clear. But it can only happen the way it always has, always has in history. Russia will have to apologize. It will. This will happen because they are guilty. They're guilty. And as I told you, the guilty are different. Both those who participated and those who remain silent because silence is also about participating, in my opinion.

Lex Fridman

Can I ask about Donald Trump? We've already mentioned him a lot, but let's focus there. What do you admire? What do you respect about Donald Trump? And also maybe why do you think he won overwhelmingly the election in 2024, that American people chose him?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

He was stronger. He was much more stronger than Kamala Harris. Biden first and then Kamala Harris. Yes. He showed that he can intellectually and physically. It wasn't important point to show that if you want to have a strong country, you have to be strong. And he was strong. And this number of rallies, what I said is not a simple thing. He showed that he can. He's strong. So he doesn't have any questions with his, I mean this age and et cetera. Nothing. He is young. He is young here and his brain works. So I think it's important, very important. And of course a lot of interior questions. I understand the prices and et cetera. Economic questions and you have the questions with other things.

Lex Fridman

Immigration.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

A lot of things. I understand. So maybe he answered on those questions, which people had.

Lex Fridman

One of the questions-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That he will finish the war.

Lex Fridman

That he will finish the war.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

For me, this is the main question, but I said that for him, he's the President of the United States. For him, his priority is his questions in the United States. And I understand and I respect it, but the second he was speaking about the world, yes, he said that he will finish the war. And I hope very much because I think that our people really support his idea. And that's why I said it is for me. It's very, very important to have enough people around him who will have connections with him, with the right things. For me, the truth is very right things. What's going on really in the battlefield, what's going on really with Putin and Russia, what he really wants and that is just to have it. Before any decision, you have to be at the same level of information. Really we need him to know everything from us, from you, from people in Ukraine, from people around who are really afraid. Afraid that Putin doesn't want to stop the war, afraid that he will come back with his aggression.

Lex Fridman

So first of all, I should mention that our conversation today will be translated and dubbed into Ukrainian, English, Russian, other languages, Spanish. So you're in your voice. So there are great guys originally from Poland. It's a company called ElevenLabs. They've trained an AI. Artificial intelligence sounds truly remarkable in your voice. You have the freedom to speak in any language you choose, but no matter what, you will always find yourself returning to speaking in Ukrainian. That is, when you talk about Donald Trump, you can do it in Ukrainian or Russian.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Everybody understands.

Lex Fridman

Everybody understands. But you said that there's some things about the war that maybe Americans don't understand. So we talked about Putin, we talked about the security guarantees, the reality of war, what's happening on the ground? What do you think that people should understand?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

First of all, they have to understand the idea of Putin's war. It is very important for him. I consider this process. I think it is very important for him not to give Ukraine independence. To prevent Ukraine from developing as an independent country for him, influence. Influence on Ukraine cannot be lost. And four, for him, it is like... I think for him, this is such a goal in this last mile and certainly for him, the last mile and of his political life. And I think that this is the goal for him. The second story, I do not want to talk about these banalities that he wants to return all the territories of the Soviet Union influence over them. He does this little by little. I just don't want to... People need to know details. For example, Georgia, which was headed towards the EU and NATO completely turns towards Russia regardless of the fact that they have frozen conflicts. They have in Abkhazia what we have with Donbas, which is controlled by militant rebels. Abkhazia is not developing. It's just a very beautiful part of Georgia that has died. And if you have the opportunity, then go there someday. You will understand. It simply died because Putin wanted to. He wanted not to allow them to develop because a frozen conflict means that you will not be accepted in the EU and certainly will not be accepted into NATO. Because right now, yes, they do not take you because of a frozen conflict. And this is what Putin did. It's very important for him not to lose this influence. That is he turned back Georgia, young people, students, everyone leaves. And this is a fact. Georgia is quite small and they will leave. They want to live in Europe. They want to develop. Somebody in the United States, somebody in Europe, somebody in the EU, somebody in Britain. He will now fight for the Moldovan parliament. This is his second step. You will see in April what happens. You will see he will start turning Moldova away from Europe. Although they want to go there, he does not care. They will be a pro-Russian party and they will do something with the current president because she has won the elections. She is pro-European but he will turn this back. The next steps are completely clear. He will do everything wherever he has lost influence, where there was influence of the Soviet Union. He'll turn it back as much as possible. And we understand at what price. You have seen Syria, you saw these tortures. What we saw in [inaudible 02:02:19], what we saw everywhere we came and where our territories were occupied. In Syria, the same happened. There were a thousand people there. And you have seen it. Scientists were found. Doctors were found. It's clear that any people are capable of generating their own opinion. So their skills developed society, everyone who can express an opinion, everyone who can shape the independence and maturity of society. Such people are not needed. And he wants this in Ukraine. And therefore everyone should understand that Ukraine is like a large wall. From that Europe, and if God willing, President Trump does not withdraw from NATO. Because again, I believe that this is the biggest risk. I think two steps. Two steps that

Putin would like to see is a weak NATO and this without Trump. And a weak Ukraine, which cannot survive on the battlefield, simply cannot survive and prevent me from building a strong relationship with Trump. I think these two steps, leaving NATO and Ukraine's weakness will lead to a large-scale war, which Putin will wage on all the territories of that post-Soviet Europe. I mean Soviet Europe, not post-Soviet, but post-World War II period. That is Soviet era Europe, in order to completely control everything there. This is what he will do. And besides this, this will happen in any case. Even if the US is thinking about leaving NATO, this war will affect the United States because North Korea is the first sign. North Korean skills, North Korean knowledge, which they are now gaining from this war. These include mastering new technologies, large-scale drones, missiles, how it works, the kind of technological war we have today, cyber war, etc. All these skills, Korea will bring home and scale up in that region. And this will be a risk for the Pacific region. Security, first and foremost. For Japan and for South Korea, they will face these risks a hundred percent and it will be clear that Taiwan will also have to face them. Without this, it is impossible. This is already happening. This is already happening. Therefore, I think that President Trump has all power to stop Putin and give Ukraine strong security guarantees.

Lex Fridman

We've been talking for two hours. Have to pause. You want to take the break?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

We will make a pause. We can have coffee, right? Coffee.

Lex Fridman

Let's do it. And give the interpreter, he's struggling.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Some water.

Lex Fridman

We keep switching languages

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Like a dragon. Three heads, three translators.

Lex Fridman

So one of the difficult decisions you had to make when the war began is to enact martial law. So when you won the presidency, you were the warrior for freedom. In fact, this war is for freedom. For freedom of the individual, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom. But a lot of freedoms had to be curtailed, sacrificed in this fight because there's so much focus on the war. Do you see the tension? Do you feel the tension of that, the sacrifice that had to be made in democracy, in freedom, in fighting this war?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

In any case, this war is for our freedom. Generally speaking. To be honest, when you understand, over time when the war passes, you understand that your main values are at home. This is your home, your children, your love, God willing, parents are alive and if not alive, then their memory, visiting their grave, choosing how to work, how much, preferably choosing where to work. All this is freedom. Freedoms are not just a desire, they are an opportunity. In any case, you are right because war is a limitation of opportunities. In any case, you fight for these opportunities. Your parents and God gave you life, right? You fight for your life. Your life. But we need to understand that first there is a war. And then- But we need to understand that first there is a war and then martial law is introduced. Martial law is not introduced because someone wanted to. You say, this is not Pinochet, this is not Pinochet, and so on. This is a completely different story. An aggressor came and according to your legislation, if the border is violated, if there is armed aggression, you have all this written down long ago, written out in legislation, you introduce martial law and the introduction of martial law everywhere at all times means, in any case, a restriction of opportunities. If opportunities are limited, rights and freedoms are restricted. Therefore, the war itself restricts rights and freedoms. Yes, and you can't do anything about it. We try, honestly, to balance as much as possible. I believe that the business sector works despite the difficulties of the war, and we do everything somewhere, there somewhere to reduce some load. Unfortunately, we cannot reduce taxes. On the contrary, military tax is used for war. You need to take money somewhere. This, by the way, is about the fact that the US gave us a lot and Europe too, but compared to how much we needed for the war, this is not all. As for military salaries, you know that we could not pay the salaries of a million strong army. We could not pay it using the money from our partners. These are all expenses. This is all the money that the country and people have accumulated. You can't do anything. I really want to reduce taxes. I will tell you frankly, I really want to. Well, I think that the whole new tax system, new deregulation, new steps, new reforms, all this will be after the war. Although there is something to brag about, this is proof. And this is a document because if you want to get a candidacy for European Union, you must implement the appropriate number of reforms. We do everything. During the war, we voted for many reforms, including anti-corruption, banking reforms, land reforms, major reforms. We started a large privatization and the war did not stop us. Yes, it slowed down, but we went through a lot.

Lex Fridman

When do you think you'll hold elections? Because for people who don't know, part of the martial law elections were suspended and they were delayed and delayed and delayed and I think the next sort of plan is in February of 2025, but when do you think there will be presidential elections in Ukraine?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Elections were postponed once. They were not delayed, to be clear. Elections did not take place in 2024 that year. First of all, we need to understand the constitution. They were scheduled to be held in the spring of 2024. Due to martial law under the constitution, you cannot do this. These are the presidential elections. The parliamentary elections did not take place in the fall of 2024 according to the constitution. Yes, there are security things, there is the constitution, but there are security things. That is, everyone in Ukraine understands that this cannot be done until the war is over or legislation needs to be changed. I believe that elections will take place immediately after the end of martial law. This is according to the law or members of the parliament need to get together and change legislation, which will be very difficult to do because society is against it. Why society against it? It is understandable why. Because we want elections that we want to trust. 8.5 million people went abroad. The infrastructure needs to be created for these millions of people to vote. Millions of people in the occupied territories. I'm not even talking about the occupation of 2014. I'm talking about the occupation right now. What to do with these people? This is a difficult question. And one of the most unfair ones is how to vote without having a million soldiers. It is impossible. We need to think about how to change the system if the elections are held in times of war, change the legislation, which should include changes to the voting system, to think about online voting. Everyone is afraid because of certain attacks like cyber attacks and so on, but we need to think about it. I really think that it's possible that we can end the war in 2025.

Lex Fridman

In January?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

We've already agreed on it. I would very much like to. I would very much like to-

Lex Fridman

After the war?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

And immediately. Yes, immediately. In the year of the end of the war. It's a fact. Why? Because when martial law ends, you can immediately vote in parliament to hold elections and then everyone will vote because there are no restrictive measures. And after they vote, I think elections can be held in 90 days, something like that. Yes. And this means that immediately after the end of the war, elections may take place in 90 days.

Lex Fridman

Are you running for reelection?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Even I don't know, really. I don't know. I don't know. It is a very difficult question. It depends on how this war will finish. It depends on what people will want. Mostly, it depends on people, first of all, and of course my family. We had no time to speak about it with my family and of course didn't have a chance because we don't think about it now. I mean, it's something... There are a lot of, some, not a lot of, but enough voices in Ukraine from politicians, opposition and et cetera, about this, I guess. But we don't think really seriously, didn't think seriously with my family about it. So this is war. I mean, how to think about what will be after. It's very difficult, really very difficult.

Lex Fridman

If we look at the field of candidates, maybe you can give your opinion about the set of ideas you see out there, including your own about the future of Ukraine. As I understand the candidates include Poroshenko, Zaluzhnyi, Arestovych, Budanov, Klitschko, there are many others. This is the internet speaking to me. What do you think are the space of ideas that these candidates represent?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think there can be even a bigger number of candidates. Yeah, I don't really know what will be. They have rights to participate if they want to. Yes, if they really want to, and can, they can go and do what they want, honestly. Most important is what are they doing now? I think that all these people are famous Ukrainian people and it's important for them to do everything they can today, not begin any election campaign. I think this what can divide our people to have the elections during the war. I mean this make steps, speak about elections a lot, make a big mess about it. I think this is not right. That's why I'm not agreeing with some of these people. But they can and I think that they can and maybe some of them will. And it's okay. It's normal. It's very normal. Our system differs from the system in the United States. You have two parties and the parties decide who will be the leader. And in Ukraine, everybody can participate. Let them.

Lex Fridman

You think you're going to win the debate? You versus Zaluzhnyi, Poroshenko or Arestovych and you decide to run, do you think you're going to win the debate or you're again focused on the war and everybody should be focused-

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Oh, I'm really focusing on the war and-

Lex Fridman

I understand.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

... I think the most difficult debate is what will be brought to the table and we spoke about it. It'll be during the war, how to finish the war. I think that is my goal because it will be one of my most complicated debates and for any president who is in a war, of course, but I think this is my goal to win those debates and the other things are not for today.

Lex Fridman

As I said, the dream I have is it's a historic opportunity to make peace, to make lasting peace soon. So I'm glad you're focused on that. Let me ask a question that a lot of people in the United States think about, and I care a lot about the future of Ukraine is corruption. This is something you have cared a lot about for a long time. You won the presidency in 2019, in big part your message of fighting corruption. But there's a lot of accusations that during war, I mentioned \$9 trillion in the United States, war breeds corruption. So can you speak to that, how you have been fighting corruption and can you respond to the accusations there has been corruption in Ukraine?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

It's very simple. First of all, we really have a very sophisticated anti-corruption system. Sophisticated not in the sense that it's difficult to understand, but in that it really consists of many elements. It's the most sophisticated in all of Europe. This is another requirement of the European Union. It was a requirement for Ukraine and for many years, Ukraine was not trusted. I want to tell you that under me, we all voted for bills, all the anti-corruption reforms, well, almost all reforms and all anti-corruption bodies today are independent. They work as requested. I still believe that they are not perfect yet. There are many issues. There is a judicial system, but also a judicial reform that our partners, the United States plus the EU, demanded from us. This is all written out. This is written out in specific laws, in specific decrees, in specific decisions. We did this, we've done 99% of this. If something has not been done, it means that it is on the way. But in principle, all this exists and there is no such system as we have in Europe. To say that we do not have corruption would be lying. We just talk about it openly. We are genuinely fighting against it. Look, we have sitting in our prison, Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who is the most influential Ukrainian oligarch since independence and no one could do anything about him. The United States of America wanted to have Kolomoyskyi and they went to great lengths because of money laundering, etc. There are criminal cases in the United States, I think in Delaware, something like that. Neither Europe could do anything about it. That is, we did a lot with oligarchs. Russian oligarchs, sanctions were imposed, they were thrown out. Some of them fled the state, but they are all under sanctions. We exchanged some of them for our soldiers such as Medvedchuk to whose daughter Putin is godfather. That is, we fought against the strongest influential oligarchs, which are, and were in Ukraine and we eliminated a lot of corruption. Of course corruption exists in everyday life. It exists. But institutionally, I am sure that Ukraine will overcome all this. This takes a little time. I would say honestly, that listen, what we call corruption and in some state of the world it's called lobbying, but this does not mean that there is no

corruption there. Let's take the aid you mentioned during the war. First of all, we have no money. We have no money except for the war. We received weapons from the United States of America, from Europe. If we take for example money from the United States of America during all this time of the war, around 177 billion have been voted for or decided upon, 177 billion. Let's be honest, we have not received half of this money. The second point, which is very important, just as an example, is it corruption? The first question, whose corruption? This is the second. Here is just one small example for you. When the United States began to transfer US weapons, it was American money, but American weapons, money for these weapons. As a president, I had cargo jets, not in Ukraine. Because of the war, we moved them very quickly to Europe. We had cargo. We have good cargo fleet, very good because of Antonov. So I asked American side to grant me the opportunity because our jets are at another airfield and I asked America to give me the opportunity to use our jets for transfer, not to pay a lot. To whom? To your companies, to American companies. No, I didn't get this opportunity. My jets stayed put and the United States jets, cargo jets moved these weapons. But everywhere you have to spend money so we could get more weapons, but we have to pay for this very expensive fleet. My question, is this corruption or not? Or lobbyism? What is it?

Lex Fridman

You mean corruption on the part of the US companies?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes. Making such decisions.

Lex Fridman

Yes, I got it.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

The lobbying for such decisions involves some companies that make these decisions, but I can't be open about it and I couldn't speak loudly about it. I didn't want, nor did I intend to cause any scandals to arise because otherwise you can freeze the support and that's it. And that's why when we talk about corruption, we must ask who is involved? If we had 177, and if we get the half, where's the half? If you will find the second half, you will find corruption.

Lex Fridman

There is a perception of corruption. People like Donald Trump and Elon Musk really care about fighting corruption. What can you say to them to gain their trust that the money is going towards this fight for freedom, towards the war effort?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

In most cases, we did not receive money. We received weapons. And where we saw risks that something could be a weapon, we would slap everyone on the wrist. And believe me,

this is not only about Ukraine. On the supply chain everywhere, there are some or other people and companies who want to make money because everyone makes money on the war. We did not profit from the war. If we found someone, believe me, we slapped everyone on the wrist and we did that, and we will continue to do so because to this day when someone says that Ukraine was selling weapons, and by the way, Russia was the one pushing this narrative, we always responded, our soldiers would kill such people with their own hands without any trial. Do you honestly think anyone could steal weapons by the truckload when we ourselves don't have enough on the front lines? And yet we have to provide proof to defend ourselves because when there's an abundance of such misinformation, distrust starts to grow. And you're right, people listen to various media outlets, see this and lose faith in you. In the end, you lose trust and with it you lose support. Therefore, believe me, we are fighting more against disinformation than against particular cases. Although I still emphasize once again at the everyday level, such things are still important. We catch these people and we fight them.

Lex Fridman

I mentioned Elon Musk. I would be interested to hear what you think of him, why you respect him as a person, as an engineer, as an innovator, as a businessman. I would just like to hear from you, what do you think about Elon Musk?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

First of all, I had a conversation with him at the beginning of the war. I talked with him. I respect him, first and foremost. I respect the self-made man, right?

Lex Fridman

Yes.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

In English, I love such people. No one and nothing fell into their lap. But the man did something, did it all himself. I worked myself, created a big production company and I know what it means to make money, to select talented people, to impart knowledge to them, to invest money and to create something, something important for certain people. And I'm not comparing myself to Musk, he just, well, the man is a great leader of innovations in the world. And I believe that such people move the world forward. Therefore, I respect the result of his work. And we see this result. And for me, it has always been important that your result can be used. That these are not words but facts. Let's take the war. We are very grateful for Starlink. It has helped. We used it after Russian missile attacks on the energy infrastructure. There were problems with the internet, et cetera, with connection. We used Starlink both at the front and in kindergartens. It was used in schools, it helped children. We used it in various infrastructure and it helped us very much. And I would very much like Elon to be on our side as much as possible to support us. And yes, I'm grateful to him for Starlink. Truly, I am. First of all, so that our guys have a connection, and children too. And I am really

grateful to him for that. I think I would like him to come to Ukraine, to talk to people here and to look around and so on.

Lex Fridman

Has Elon visited Kyiv or Ukraine yet?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No.

Lex Fridman

I hope the Kyiv airport will open soon, then it will be easier to fly in.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, I am looking forward to it. Maybe we will open it, but only, and you must understand if the war is over, there must be sustainable peace and air defense systems to be honest. And we must ensure that they are long-lasting and effective. Let's take the airport for example, and let's focus on the airport in Dresden, which very well as it is handling important cargo for Ukraine in Poland. And there are patriot systems there because everyone understands what the risk is. Well, Russia is a risk and therefore we need air defense systems. And today, today, take for example, the air defense system of one city or another that is being shelled and move it, move it to the airport. Well, that would be dishonest. People are more important than planes. But there will be a moment, and Trump, by the way, I think that the war will end and President Trump may be the first leader to travel here by airplane. I think it would be symbolic by airplane.

Lex Fridman

Again, January 25th around that date. Right? Flying in, meeting the Air Force One.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

That would be cool.

Lex Fridman

Elon Musk. I will meet you there for the second time too on the plane.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

With pleasure.

Lex Fridman

And you, by the way, before I forget, let me ask, are you coming on January 20th for President Trump's inauguration?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I would like to, of course. I will be considering what is happening then in the war because there are moments of difficulties, escalation, many missiles, etc. But honestly, well, I can't. I can't come especially during the war, unless President Trump invites me personally. I'm not sure it's proper to come because I know that in general, leaders are for some reason not usually invited to the inauguration of presidents of the United States of America. Well, and I know that there are leaders who can simply come, want to come and will come. Yeah, I know. And I know the temperament of some of these people. They can come at their discretion. This is very, very difficult for me. I am the kind of person that cannot come without an invitation. This is Putin. We did not invite him. He came to us, so to say. And me, I can't do that.

Lex Fridman

No, but he publicly say that it would be great if you came to the inauguration or you mean did he invite it officially?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

No, wait. Look, look, look. Listen, I am against any bureaucracy. I get rid of it as much as I can. But well, there are some complexities involving security. I decide and I fly, and the United States of America officially provides security. Not that I need this, mind you. I do not ask for helicopters to fly around and protect me, but they will simply do it themselves. The security service itself. They had to do it. I don't want it, and sometimes I don't need it. And I'm asking them. It was for example, before the war, I think, yes, it was before the war, I had a meeting, yes, with President Trump. It was in 2019. I just wanted to go for a run early in the morning because I really wanted to exercise. And they, those tall bodyguards, a lot of them, they decided to join me, but I couldn't really do it because they were in suits and I was in sportswear. I said, no, I can't. It's always funny. I don't want to disturb anybody and cause anyone problems with me. And that's why if he will invite me, I will come.

Lex Fridman

I thought he invited you.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah?

Lex Fridman

Yeah. I thought he publicly invited you. But okay, I hope to see you there.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think they had to do some of their steps. I don't know, but...

Lex Fridman

Step, yeah. The stamp was missing.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

But with pleasure with my wife of course. And I think it's important. It's important.

Lex Fridman

All right, let's get back to a serious question. Sometimes they say it in America, this question of who is really in power? So let me ask, is someone controlling you? For example, oligarchs, American politicians, Yermak? I wanted to bring this up because I have been here in Ukraine twice since the invasion of 2022. And one of the things I've learned well is that actually nobody controls you. And this is one of your strengths as a president, as a person that oligarchs and other rich and powerful people like that cannot control you. Can you explain why that is? How you see it?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think, and it is indeed true that I'm generally difficult to deal with. I am an ambitious person. I can't submit to anyone. I can live by rules, by laws. I believe that this is the only thing that can control any person today. These are the rules and laws of the society or state where you live. And I believe that this is the most important thing. There's no person who could control me as I once told President Trump when we had a meeting. By the way, journalists asked if Trump influenced me during the phone call. I told the journalist the truth then, who can influence me? Only my boy, my son. This is a fact. When he calls asking for something, well, then I lift up my arms, yes, and I cannot do anything about it because children are children. I have so little time with them. And therefore when there are these moments, they are precious and important to me. I am ready to do anything. Also, probably my parents, they are an authority for me. Beyond that, I view it more as a system. No one can control the president. Therefore, we have oligarchs who either fled or are in prison because oligarchs usually control cash flows and people and influence politics. And we have concrete examples with sentences. They are not just under house arrest. Not just that there are some judgments under which their assets were frozen or sanctions were imposed. There are specific people who are behind bars. I think this is the answer regarding the influence. Would they like to influence me in the same way as any president of Ukraine because finance and cash flows always influence politics? Well, at least they want to do this. This is regarding the influence and other people on the vertical, they perform tasks as my managers. Andrii, you mentioned is one of those managers. Well, I am glad that I have such people. Well, probably there is nothing else to add here.

Lex Fridman

I will just say that your team that I spoke with is an excellent team. Excellent people.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you.

Lex Fridman

Okay, one last question. The future of Ukraine. If you look 5, 10, 20 years into the future, what can help Ukraine flourish economically, culturally, politically in the future?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Digital, it's very important. Digitalization of all the process. We began this work. We have special ministry of digital transformation.

Lex Fridman

Yeah?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yeah. So this is very good. And we also have our Diia. This is the name for all of these services. So I think that is the most important. This is, again, this is not only convenient, that will cancel any possibilities for future corruption because you don't have any personal connections with people in the government or elsewhere. So you are just on your phone or any other device. That's it. And I think we are doing very well. We are the best in Europe. All of Europe recognizes it. Some countries of the African Union asked us to provide this, the same service and we will do it after the war immediately. And I think that we can bring money to Ukraine from this. And I think what we also need, we need a tax reform. I think it will be very important for the businesses to return. A lot of support will come, I think from USA business investment, not as direct aid to us, just to the private sector and resources. And I mentioned this to President Trump and to some European leaders who are our key strategic partners that will be happy, especially with the Americans, will be happy to sign these contracts and engage in joint investments in many areas. And I think we can develop oil, gas, green energy, including solar power. And we already have the resources. We can invest money into this. We have oil reserves in the Black Sea that we can exploit and we need your expertise and the investment of your companies. We have gold and uranium reserves, the largest in Europe by the way, which is also very important. For example, Russia has pushed France out of Africa. They urgently need uranium, which we have. So we are ready to open up for investments and this will give us of course, opportunities, jobs for people, revenue. I don't want cheap labor, honestly. What I truly want, especially after the war, to open up for those people... I truly want, especially after the war, to open up for those people who can really contribute and earn.

Lex Fridman

Yes, and give a reason to the eight million people to come back.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, it's so important. And they will come and we will recover and rebuild Ukraine. We will be very open to companies, and of course we will welcome our people back. It's so important culturally. I think the most important thing is to remain open and not change our direction because culturally aligning with Russia, it's one idea, while aligning with Europe is another. Our people have chosen Europe. It's their choice, it's our choice, the choice of our nation, and I think it's very important.

Lex Fridman

But first, you have to end the war.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Yes, you're right. And we will. We want peace. Just to make it clear, we want peace. Just what I always say, you have to come to Ukraine and see for yourself. And people will tell you, "No, we can't forgive those murderers who took our lives, but we still want to make peace." And honestly, I think that the highest approval rating of the president of the United States, of Trump now is in Ukraine. People really believe that he can truly help bring peace. Now they have faith, faith that he can make it happen, that he can support Ukraine and he can stop Putin and that he will make sure Putin doesn't get everything he wants. This is very important, and it's why we believe that we must not lose this opportunity.

Lex Fridman

I hope you find the path to peace. Thank you.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you so much.

Lex Fridman

Thank you for talking today.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you for coming.

Lex Fridman

[foreign language 02:42:01].

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

[foreign language 02:42:02] Yeah. You started. Thank you very much.