

# HOW THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR BROKE OUT

– on the backstage of international politics from Jakub Kumoch's perspective

This conversation between Igor Janke and Jakub Kumoch is an important source for research into the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the role of Polish diplomacy in the winter and spring of 2022. After all, it is not often that direct participants in high-level international talks share their memories of key historical moments, along with many important details and observations, less than a year after the events themselves. This is what Jakub Kumoch does – and he does it in a colourful way. A Polish political scientist and diplomat who has served as Poland's ambassador to Switzerland, Turkey and other countries, Kumoch was State Secretary for International Affairs in the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland from 2021 to 2023. During this time, he was in close contact with many governments, including those of Ukraine, the United States, France and Germany. In the form of a long chat between two friends, he shared his memories of this period with Igor Janke, a well-known Polish journalist. This conversation is also extremely interesting because it vividly illustrates the thinking in Polish government circles about the challenges to regional and global security associated with Russia's war against Ukraine and the future of Polish-Ukrainian relations, including the historical dialogue. This interview was recorded on 19 January 2023. It was broadcast three days later on Janke's *Układ Otwarty* podcast and on this author's YouTube channel.<sup>1</sup> Jakub Kumoch resigned from his government post just one week before the interview, on 12 January 2023. He cited important family reasons.

The original Polish version of this interview is available on the *Układ Otwarty* YouTube channel. We are publishing an English translation of it here. The lively, spontaneous exchange of ideas and the colloquial language of these two friends, as well as some broken thoughts and threads – a feature characteristic of many live conversations – may give some readers the impression of an under-edited conversation. This is a false impression. In accordance with the requirements of the source material, we are publishing the interview in its entirety, without any cutting or editing, and with editorial insertions in only a few places to make the flow of thought more understandable.

Łukasz Adamski

<sup>1</sup> 'Strategia dla Polski: silny blok. Szczery wywiad po opuszczeniu Kancelarii Prezydenta – Jakub Kumoch', "Układ Otwarty – Igor Janke", YouTube channel, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTQ\\_7H\\_TZ\\_os](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTQ_7H_TZ_os) (4 February 2023).

**IGOR JANKE:** What should Poland's great strategic goal be today? What is the result of the situation we are in today? This is what we are talking about today on *Układ Otwarty*. I would like to thank all those who support my work. I would like to thank all the patrons, as it is thanks to you that this programme can exist; it is thanks to you that I can hold these talks. I would like to invite you to support *Układ Otwarty* on my profile on Patronite.pl. And now I invite you to the conversation.

Jakub Kumoch, until recently Secretary of State and Head of the International Policy Bureau of the President of the Republic of Poland, welcome.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Hi.

**IGOR JANKE:** We have known each other for more than 20 years probably because we used to work together at PAP.<sup>2</sup>

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** You once sent me to Moscow as a correspondent,<sup>3</sup> so that's how you created the man of the East a little bit.

**IGOR JANKE:** Well, no, but Jakub Kumoch has become president. He hasn't become president yet, but...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I have not and will not become president.

**IGOR JANKE:** We don't know that. He became a correspondent for the Polish Press Agency (PAP) many years ago in Moscow, and that's how we met. He won a competition that we organized there at PAP at the time. Okay. Then you worked in many places: you were an expert then a diplomat in several places. Now, you supported the president in such a key area of his competence. What do you think today? You can detach yourself because you are not a civil servant at the moment. You remained in the [diplomatic] service, but now you can speak more freely. What should our strategic goal for Poland be? An ambitious but realistic one for the next five or ten years? Where should we be?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Give me a moment's break from my former role to speak here more as an observer than as a participant in these processes. I think that... I don't even so much think that, as it seems obvious to me that our neighbourhood in the East will be shaped in the coming years. Well, the main objective is to shape it in such a way that Poland will not be physically

<sup>2</sup> Polish Press Agency.

<sup>3</sup> Jakub Kumoch was PAP correspondent in Moscow in the years 1999–2004; Igor Janke was the Editor-in-Chief of PAP in the years 1998–2003.

threatened. What am I talking about here? Well, I am talking above all about the war in Ukraine, on which Poland has a specific position – a certain attitude. Poland wants Ukraine to win; it wants Russian forces to be ousted from Ukraine, from Moldova.

Poland has a very strong interest in the preservation of an independent Belarus. And that there should be no ... Because if an independent Belarus is not maintained, and if Russia absorbs Belarus, then we will have the issue of the Suwałki corridor,<sup>4</sup> which means that there will be a threat to – a direct threat to – the security of the country, and I think that Russia's strategy will then be to regain this corridor.

Russia thinks in very old-fashioned categories. Territorial connection. After all, we have now seen how important the territorial connection with Crimea was for it, even though it was unnecessary ... because there is the Crimean Bridge and so on. But the very fact that thinking in terms of a map, which is nineteenth-century thinking, is still there in Russia...

So, the formation of this neighbourhood in the East is crucial for Poland. It is very important to build the unity of the region on this issue so that the countries that we call the Brave Six – or the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, the ones that speak most with one voice on Ukraine – so that they keep that one voice.

The next thing is, of course, that it is always worth stressing that maintaining a NATO presence in the region is important. After all, no alliances and no military presence is given forever. A country's geographic position, on the other hand, is given once and for all. And what will take shape beyond our eastern border is much more important than how many American troops will be in Poland at the end of this year, at the end of next year. The most important thing is what configuration we leave behind in the East. I think the whole effort of the state will lean towards that.

**IGOR JANKE:** Do you agree with the thesis that was put forward here, I mean in his book, but also here in this programme by Marek Budzisz,<sup>5</sup> who said that we should think about our – about Poland's – strategy alone, that is, not that we want to separate ourselves from everyone, but we should think about our own interests, and we should treat all neighbours, all institutions, organizations with which we cooperate, of which we are members, as tools to achieve this goal. That is to say, we should have such courage and such clarity – that is how we should think about our strategy.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the Suwałki Gap. A narrow land connection between Poland and Lithuania near the town of Suwałki, squeezed between Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad region.

<sup>5</sup> Marek Budzisz (b. 1964), journalist, analyst, advisor to two ministers in the government of Jerzy Buzek.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I don't know the context in which this theory was put forward, so it's difficult for me to comment on something I haven't read myself, whereas what you've now said is obvious to me. For any person thinking about foreign policy, every country thinks alone. We understand that belonging to international organizations is a means, not an end. If this membership is unfavourable tomorrow, we will look at it completely differently, and this has to be said openly. That is why I said this about the American presence. The alliance with the United States is the basis of our security and this I think we all agree on. But the question of whether Poland will be the same ally of the United States in 50 years' time as it is today, well that's a question we have to ask ourselves – we really have to ask that question. However, the second question is: will Poland be in the same geographical position it is in today? We can assume that it will.

**IGOR JANKE:** It probably will.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well, yes, it will. That's it. At least, that is the purpose of this country. To stay where we are. So, well, to talk in terms of a few decades – that the goal is to maintain alliances, or affiliations, or influence, for example, the European Union – is in my opinion, looking too far into the future. I do not know what shape these organizations will take or what they will mean then. Even the word NATO meant something completely different 50 years ago than it does now.

**IGOR JANKE:** But I understand we have to build our strength in order to... Whatever we are going to be a part of, we need to...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I believe that what President Duda did last year was absolutely dictated by Poland's security. It is not the case that support for Ukraine stems from some kind of love – purely love for Ukraine. Of course we like Ukraine because it is a nation close to us: close in language, closely related to us. What has happened has happened: there were tragic things, true, but there are nations that had the same tragic things within themselves: take Spain for example, the civil war.

Apart from that, we are talking about centuries of history with Ukraine and the intermingling of these cultures. That's one thing, notwithstanding that our support for Ukraine was support for our own security. We thought of ourselves first and foremost, our equipment, fighting in Ukraine actually avoids fighting on the Bug river line. So that, yes, states are selfish as a rule, and if they are altruistic it is a kind of, well a kind of, I won't say a show, but there is a certain amount of selfishness in it nevertheless.

**IGOR JANKE:** As you've mentioned Ukraine – I wanted us to talk about that at the end – but as you've started, let me ask you about your personal experience, because that's probably your biggest experience, isn't it? This situation, since 24 February. Professional facing with, well... working for the President in a situation like that in an area like that.. well, because I understand that's what you were primarily concerned with.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Igor, I've been dealing with Ukraine since the mid-1990s; I speak Ukrainian – maybe not the best, but I've known the language pretty much since 94 or 95 – so this is not the first time I've seen Ukraine.

**IGOR JANKE:** But in a completely different situation.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** In a completely different situation. Of course, it's also not the first time I've seen Russia. It's not the first time I've seen Russians carrying out aggression or committing crimes, because, you know, I served in Russia, I worked in Russia for the PAP; you sent me there yourself, so you know what was going on at the time. Whereas the experience of a state being ... well, I won't say in a state of war, because Poland is not in a state of war, but also Poland is not – let's say it openly – Poland is not neutral in this war; it is not impartial, it is on the side of Ukraine. Poland has become Ukraine's hinterland, Poland is – well I don't know if I should say this because I once told the Americans that we are ready to be the Pakistan of this war, of course, in relation to the Afghan war, where Pakistan was – in particular, Peshawar was – such a symbol of supply for the Mujahideen. I thought that Poland should play a similar role.

**IGOR JANKE:** But it plays this role.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Yes, it does. Rzeszów, which is sometimes referred to as 'Rzeshawar' by military analysts – derived from Peshawar – is such a place; not for nothing was it honoured by President Zelensky. They realize that, without Rzeszów, Ukraine would simply not have been able to win this war. Well, it was a time of decisions, it was a time of decisions in which I participated, of course, but I am not the main decision-maker here. It was a time when the president, the prime minister and the then-deputy prime minister, Jarosław Kaczyński,<sup>6</sup> in fact the three of them decided on a significant part of the support for Ukraine. These were courageous decisions, and I must admit that I was proud to have been able to take part in this, or to be an

<sup>6</sup> Jarosław Kaczyński (b. 1949), Polish politician, currently serving as leader of the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) Party, prime minister of Poland from July 2006 to November 2007.

implementer, to be a witness, sometimes to be an advisor, and sometimes to play some small part on my own. And I think that if Poland had to take these decisions a second time – I think that not much would change.

**IGOR JANKE:** Do you remember that first day, those first days? What do you remember of it, on a personal level?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** You know, I remember. Well, it's difficult to talk about personal matters here at all, because one turns into a bit of a machine at such moments.

**IGOR JANKE:** Tell us what it was like from what you can recall.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** On the eve of the war, if you remember, on the 23rd of February, I was with the president in Kyiv and it was an amazing visit. We met on the evening of the 22nd [of February] with the president of Lithuania,<sup>7</sup> just near the border. There we stayed overnight for a few hours in a hotel, then we left at four or five in the morning.

Well, there were only us with the president: there was only me and the head of protocol, the SOP officers,<sup>8</sup> the doctor. Just not to expose anyone, because we didn't know what this war would look like. It was the most difficult visit, because when you are already in Kyiv – you go to Kyiv on a train – you know that the Russians have never succeeded to hit a train, so it is a completely different conversation about security. [But] it's a different thing if you know that war is about to break out and you don't know what it's going to be like. Is it going to be landings? Is it going to be...? Do the Russians have any weapons that we don't know about, etc.?

**IGOR JANKE:** And how then, can you say how then... Were planes still flying, or not anymore?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** The planes weren't flying. It was all by car. Of course, needless to say, not everyone was enthusiastic. Very many people advised against it, but President Duda said "no, I'm going". And he took only volunteers, those closest to himself. President Nausėda did the same. And this was an important thing, because we showed the Ukrainians that we are with them, that we are not afraid. Therefore, a Poland that is not afraid is in this...

<sup>7</sup> Gitanas Nausėda (b. 1964), Lithuanian economist and politician. President of Lithuania from 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Abbreviation of *Slużba Ochrony Państwa* (State Protection Service), a service providing VIP security for Polish government officials.

**IGOR JANKE:** How did Zelensky react at that time? What state was he in? How do you remember him from that day?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** There was a moment when I understood that it was inevitable and it really would be in a few hours. I mean our Ukrainian friends who were downplaying it before, in their conversations with us they calmly said they were ready; it was already nervous – I mean not so much nervousness, but there was resignation. We failed, there is no retreat, there is a war. It will break out in a few hours. Even when we were coming back, I was still in touch with our, let's call it, supporting organizations: Jakub, where are you? When will you reach the border? We arrived at two in the morning. At four o'clock, there was a war.

**IGOR JANKE:** Did you then ...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** At that time, I had already received a call from the Ukrainian ambassador saying that he wanted to contact President Zelensky. At that time, President Duda and President Zelensky had already been talking for the first time under wartime conditions.

**IGOR JANKE:** And when you spoke to them before the war started, did you sort of – with today's knowledge – feel that yes, this is a country that is going to defend itself and has a chance to defend itself? Well, because for the whole world the attitude of Ukraine – how they are conducting this war – is a huge surprise. Maybe not for the whole [world] – for the experts no – because when I talked to the Americans, when I talked to Andrew Michta,<sup>9</sup> he said he wasn't surprised at all. We knew, because we trained them [Ukrainians] for many years after all.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well, this is where I ... I hold Andrew Michta in high esteem, and I know that he knew, but whether the US administration knew, I would not be so forward here.

**IGOR JANKE:** Well, they offered him [Zelensky] a lift, he said.<sup>10</sup>

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Exactly, and now what is the difference? Our president was convinced that Ukraine would defend itself. Whether it would be effective, we didn't know, because we didn't know what weapons – what

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Michta (b. 1956), an American political scientist of Polish origin.

<sup>10</sup> Mentioned is the offer by the US to help in the evacuation of President Zelensky from Kyiv to Lviv or to Poland at the beginning of the war.

means – the Russians really had at their disposal; after all, they were flexing their muscles, they claimed to be the most – one of the most – modern armies in the world. But we believed that they would fight and that it would be an effective fight, that Zelensky must not be evacuated, that Ukraine might have territorial and human losses, but that it would defend its independence. If we had not believed, our policy would have been completely different.

Let's start with the first thing – the arms supply. I remember at the end of December Paweł Soloch<sup>11</sup> and I – Paweł Soloch was then the head of the National Security Bureau – had a conversation with Jake Sullivan, the security advisor to the President of the United States.<sup>12</sup> He asked us what our – what the Polish position on the war in general – was. We told him that Ukraine would defend itself, that this is a very convenient war for the United States in fact, because Ukraine does not expect any military aid, it does not expect support, it does not expect one American soldier to be sent; it only needs weapons.

**IGOR JANKE:** Was that in December?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** It was December, the end of December. It was at the end of December that Jake called. I remember at that time we were talking about the issue; it was already after the veto on the broadcasting law.<sup>13</sup> So he called to thank us, to pass on his thanks; well, of course we brushed it off with silence because I think it's not the competence of foreign countries to thank the president for exercising his constitutional powers, but we moved on very quickly to the subject of Ukraine and that's where the 'Give weapons to Ukraine' phrase came up, which later, by the way, came back to me a couple of times more because someone somewhere in Washington talked about it and American journalists came to see if it was true that Poland was the one who said it. But in February it was the same thing. First there was a conversation between the president and President Biden, when President Duda also said the same thing: 'give weapons, give weapons and threaten Russia that if it escalates you will give more and more effective weapons. One by one, we are always ready'. Then in mid-February, the president sent me to Washington; we said exactly the same thing to Jake as we said to several other representatives in the State Department, and so on. On the other hand, I pointed out at that time that the problem was that the Americans didn't believe that Ukraine would successfully defend itself. They admit it today; it's not, it's that they had this

<sup>11</sup> Paweł Soloch (b. 1962), Polish government official, Head of the National Security Bureau in the years 2015–2022.

<sup>12</sup> Jake Sullivan (b. 1976), United States National Security Advisor since 2021.

<sup>13</sup> President Andrzej Duda vetoed an amendment to a law regulating media in Poland that was unfavourable to broadcasters with capital from outside the EU (including US capital), on 27 December 2021.



belief, no? What's good about the Biden administration is that they acknowledged the facts – the fact that Ukraine is defending itself well. It took a while before they got the weapons, but still this line of ours, because there was still this right, this unfortunate 'lift' [offer of the evacuation], right? They were proposing to evacuate the President at a time when we had decided that our ambassador would not leave Kyiv. Well, and Ambassador Cichocki<sup>14</sup> stayed there; by the way, he stayed of his own free will. He also said that as long as the flag hangs there, he wouldn't leave the post; one should give credit to him too, right? But it was absolutely not... I thought, I think, many people thought that Poland could not afford to evacuate the ambassador.

**IGOR JANKE:** Psychologically and politically it was extremely important.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** No, no, this was crucial. Well, I can also reveal that to this day some Ukrainians, representatives of the elite, speak of Bartosz Cichocki as Bartosz 'Chrobry' [the brave] – *chrobry* meaning brave for those who do not know old Polish. That is how it was.

**IGOR JANKE:** Without going into details, we can still also say about the Polish ambassador that... there was a situation. Let's imagine being there in the middle in those days. Today it is Kyiv that is a normal city, but then it was not a normal city.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Absolutely, devoid of protection.

**IGOR JANKE:** And the Polish embassy could have been a target, a natural target for attack.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** It could. Bartek, after all, we were also already on a first-name basis with him, we have been colleagues with him for many years; let me put it this way, Bartosz then, mister ambassador then, knew perfectly well that our conversation could be, any conversation could be... could be...

On the other hand, there was another thing before the war that is often forgotten. There was an attempt to revive the Weimar Triangle in Berlin. Chancellor Scholz invited President Duda and President Macron. I was there at the time and Paweł Soloch and Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk<sup>15</sup> from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was still with us. We sat and listened to the conversation between these three leaders; this is no longer a secret

<sup>14</sup> Bartosz Cichocki (b. 1976), Polish state official, Poland's Ambassador to Ukraine since 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk (b. 1982), Polish politician, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the years 2018–2022, Minister for European Union Affairs since 2022.

today because it has been talked about, written about. The French and Germans very much wanted to revive the Minsk agreements once again. Well, let me remind you what the Minsk agreements are: they are, in short, agreements made after the aggression in 2014.

**IGOR JANKE:** Which petrified the *status quo* in fact.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Which actually, yes. On the other hand, if you were to read them literally, the way we wanted, well the first thing was to restore Ukraine's control over the borders and then discuss the status of Donbass. Russia did not understand this in the same way: Russia understood that first we would legalize the Donbas authorities – we are talking about, excuse me, the separatist authorities, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic – and then we would talk about borders. I had this impression, I had this impression that our president said that – first of all, he had diagnosed the situation very accurately – that talking today about the Minsk agreements is just giving Putin a gift because they serve him only to accuse Ukraine of not fulfilling them, nothing else.

It is such a common practice in Russia that we still remember – this being the years 1939 to 1940 – to accuse someone of violating an agreement and then violating it yourself on a regular basis. The President told them [Scholz and Macron – ŁA] this, and I got the impression that he was met with complete incomprehension. He said that, come what may, the Ukrainians would defend themselves... I don't know, I got the impression from the exchange of glances between the leaders of France and Germany that they didn't know what they [the Poles – ŁA] were talking about. What do you mean, the Ukrainians will defend themselves?

**IGOR JANKE:** That is, there was a belief that...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** They [Scholz and Macron] really believed that they were saving Ukraine, and we really believed that by doing what they were doing they were helping Russia to win the war. In fact, a war without firing a shot – they're just giving Ukraine back. And that was the difference between us. History has shown that Duda was right. Well he was right. And he was the only Western leader who believed that Ukraine would defend itself.

Well, and of course I say the work for him at that point was also very... completely different, easier, more edifying and so on. I also once said, I think publicly, that something tells me that I advised a good thing. I said, Ladies and gentlemen, it is not important who advises: it is important who listens. If I had advised Scholz, probably nothing would have come of it.

**IGOR JANKE:** Do you agree with those who say that, in fact, France and Germany would have preferred that this war had gone differently, that nothing had changed because it was in their long-term interest? Meaning they understood their interest that way, even if they didn't say it explicitly?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Remember, Igor, that we also have to look at how certain countries view processes in other parts of the world. I for one have the impression that France has not quite got used to the existence of Ukraine. And also Germany doesn't fully understand that Ukraine is not such a 'fallen' part of Russia – that it is a completely different story. Well, for obvious reasons, historical reasons, we know perfectly well that Ukraine is not Russia; you don't need to convince any Pole of this at all; even I think that Poles have often overestimated this 'Ukrainianness' [meaning the differences between Ukrainians and Russians – ŁA]; for example, the widespread amazement that Ukrainian refugees speak Russian, how can a Ukrainian speak Russian?

**IGOR JANKE:** By the way, you can see what an incredible toll the press of culture and the thought of the Parisian 'Kultura'<sup>16</sup> has taken.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Indeed.

**IGOR JANKE:** How they had a great influence; how they shaped the entire political class of Poland from Kwaśniewski<sup>17</sup> to Kaczyński.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I think that this is true, although I think even before that [Poles had considered Ukrainians as people close to Poles and different from Russians – ŁA]. I don't know of a time in history when a Pole would consider a Ukrainian to be a Russian. They just didn't. It is simply absurd for us.

**IGOR JANKE:** But this way, well, do we also mean that Ukraine [itself] thought in this way [about itself and its relationship to Russia – ŁA]?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** That it is not – that Ukraine – that the territorial issue is finished, therefore a relationship can be built. Without the most important thing that existed between these nations, well its territorial issue is *de facto* finished, no matter whether one likes it or not, whether it hurts

<sup>16</sup> *Kultura* was a Polish-émigré magazine with Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000) as Editor-in-Chief published from 1947 to 2000 by *Instytut Literacki* (the Literary Institute), initially in Rome and then in Paris. One of the main intellectual magazines for Polish emigrants.

<sup>17</sup> Aleksander Kwaśniewski (b. 1954), Polish politician, President of Poland from 1995 to 2005.

us or not, whether or not it hurts the Germans. Poland is here where it is; Poland has no territorial claims on any country; it respects the borders of other countries; it does not claim the smallest part of any other country's territory; at this point we are able to build policy. That has untied our hands. It has made us, in fact, a regional power. Otherwise we would have been... Well, the whole problem that had existed before – the unresolved ethnic question, the unresolved border question – actually complicated this policy for us. And we were held hostage. And this policy towards Ukraine... If our borders had looked the way they looked before the war, well there would be... We would have had our hands firmly tied. [Now] they're not.

**IGOR JANKE:** Tell me again, I'll go back, because I'm very curious, to that moment, that meeting just before the war and what Volodymyr Zelensky was like. Did you see in him then... did you [President Duda and people next to him...]? Well, I'm asking you, well because it's easier for you to talk. Otherwise, did it surprise you later that he became such a leader? Did he surprise the whole world, or was it already apparent then that this was a real leader?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Never did Zelensky surprise me with the fact that he is a courageous man. He is a brave man, he is and – if you get to know him more closely – he is not. This stature of his of such a small actor, and so on and so forth, completely disappears on closer acquaintance. He's a modest man – that has to be said for him – it can also in a way create a false image, but he's very down to earth and speaks very realistically.

**IGOR JANKE:** But at that time you already felt that it was so...?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** We met in Wisła,<sup>18</sup> after all, in Wisła we had already got to know each other very closely because we spent about 48 hours there, so that's how it was. It was January, January. The president invited Marcin Przydacz<sup>19</sup> and me – on the other side there was Andriy Yermak<sup>20</sup> and Andriy Sybiha:<sup>21</sup> the first one is head of administration, [the other is] deputy head of administration. Practical, decisive persons. The six of us

<sup>18</sup> Wisła is a town in the south of Poland where one of the official residences of the President of Poland is located.

<sup>19</sup> Marcin Przydacz (b. 1985), Polish state official, Undersecretary of State in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the years 2019–2023.

<sup>20</sup> Andriy Yermak (b. 1971), Ukrainian film producer and politician. Since February 2020, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine and a member of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine. Perceived as the main foreign policy advisor to President Volodymyr Zelensky.

<sup>21</sup> Andriy Sybiha (b. 1971), Ukrainian diplomat, Ukraine's Ambassador to Turkey 2016–2021, Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine since May 2021.

met precisely to actually establish relationships that would later be used during the war.

**IGOR JANKE:** As for Yermak, I understand you knew each other from Turkey, yes?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** And Sybiha. He was the Ukrainian ambassador; I was the Polish ambassador. Well, I must admit that we became friends at that time; we spent a lot of time together, we talked about many things, and somehow it happened; somehow it was the will of heaven that we both moved to the presidential administration at the same time, at almost exactly the same time. On the other hand ...

**IGOR JANKE:** It helps such relationships a lot?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well, of course it helps. Andriy Yermak, on the other hand, I met in Kyiv in 2021, but then in Wisła we had a chance to talk for real. And Wisła was planned in such a way: it was not a meeting in a bilateral format, with a delegation and so on; we sit, we eat, we go for a walk, we walk in the mountains, we talk, we sit by the fire. We'll spend time and tell it like it really is. And we'll talk to each other honestly, what you're about, what we're about.

Initially this Wisła was planned... Generally... it was such a project that I talked about with the president from the very beginning. It was quite planned; it was the summer of 2021, and it seemed that it would be a conversation about Polish-Ukrainian history, that we would say exactly what we want, what we expect from each other, and we would agree on some kind of a strategy to get out of this historical quagmire.<sup>22</sup> However, the war verified everything. But there, too, the issue of the railways blocking.<sup>23</sup> Our railways have been resolved and, in general, the transport issues have also quickly...

**IGOR JANKE:** The other way too... as I said in Kyiv recently with people from the Ministry of Administration, there is such a deputy minister of administration there, Mustafa Nayem,<sup>24</sup> who...

<sup>22</sup> Mentioned are Polish-Ukrainian disagreements on the memory politics of both countries in relation to the Second World War.

<sup>23</sup> It is about the ban imposed by Ukrainian Railways on accepting for transport all consignments from 15 selected countries (including China, Russia, Kazakhstan) to Poland in transit through Ukrainian territory. This happened because Poland did not agree to increase the number of permits for Ukrainian TIR drivers to operate in Poland.

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Nayem (b. 1981), Ukrainian journalist and state official. Since January 2023, Head of the State Agency for Restoration and Infrastructure Development in Ukraine. Prior to this he was Deputy Minister of Infrastructure, appointed in August 2021.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Known to me.

**IGOR JANKE:** A very interesting character who told me – how from their perspective – our approach to blocking their trucks had changed a lot. We were, of course, supposed to defend our interests.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Everyone always has an interest and ends up with a compromise; we reached that compromise in five minutes, probably a week after the Wisła meeting.

**IGOR JANKE:** It was from several people in Kyiv that I heard the same.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** They were talking down to us, yes?

**IGOR JANKE:** Yes, they groped around. They talked about the attitude from their point of view, the relationship with Poland after the war, how after the outbreak of war [the relationship] had changed dramatically. They said: yes, we were partners but there were a lot of difficult issues, and after the outbreak of war and this [Polish] government in particular changed its attitude towards us very much and became much more co-operative. That's what I've heard from a few people about their perspective.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** The most important thing in relations with Ukraine – in general in relations with all countries, especially with which you have a common history of some kind, no matter whether it's sad or not sad – is to show respect. If this respect is lacking from either side, it starts to get bad. And it is very easy to show disrespect because there are so many little things that you have to know how to deal with. It seems to me that President Duda has been greatly underestimated, especially by the publicists on the left or, let's say, on the opposition side. Duda enjoys enormous trust from Ukrainians. This can be seen from all the polls. Now why does he have this respect? Just because he is the president of Poland? This is what the president says, and I disagree here. I think, however, that his personal role in such a message of ours – of our position, of our position to the Ukrainians – is a big role. He has very deep thoughts about Polish-Ukrainian relations, about the history of Polish-Ukrainian relations, about putting events in a historical context, and I have also witnessed his meeting with a difficult partner, which is the World Ukrainian Congress; these are often circles which are more nationalistic than the government in Kyiv, and I have seen that they came away touched by what he told them – how he assesses things, at the same

time not giving up on our principled issues of history. So, he has done a tremendous job, and he himself has told me many times that Polish-Ukrainian understanding and reconciliation are some of the goals of his presidency.

**IGOR JANKE:** Going back to this war situation and your contacts with the Ukrainians, what were the most – some of the most – difficult, most dramatic situations since 24 February in your relations, contacts?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well I think Przewodów<sup>25</sup> was the most difficult moment. Well, because... well something happened that... How would you say it? We were, of course, prepared for the fact that we... were going to be hit by fragments of a missile or a projectile at some point, but... Well, that first reaction, where both sides said something different; we had to fix it and we immediately started to fix it. Both sides acknowledged that, yes, we sat down and talked.

**IGOR JANKE:** But then those days and the emotions on both sides were huge? Also on our side?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well, we all saw what happened, whereas, well, it has been fixed, I would say it has been corrected.

The problem is that precisely in a situation of media hype it is very easy to lose what I was telling you. Such a small thing which I just told you about respect. A little thing, two words too many, someone said. Somewhere, Ukrainians said to me: Well, why are you saying here, Jakub, in some interview you said that the president is driven by emotions? First of all, I didn't say he was guided by emotions, I said he was fighting a war. You drew from that that it was about emotion; no, I said something completely different than I meant. A hundred rockets fell on your territory, I understand that day and so on and so forth, the president is... You also have other issues. Also your people died. But this is the kind of thing I think we have behind us and it doesn't affect trust in any way, because it seems to me that both presidents and our teams were very keen to resolve this matter somehow. Well, differences of opinion about what happened can always happen.

**IGOR JANKE:** I remember afterwards when I was in Kyiv and I talked to a lot of people, with various experts mainly; well, there was such

<sup>25</sup> On 15 November, a missile fell on a grain drying facility in the Polish village of Przewodów, near the Ukrainian border, causing the deaths of two Poles. Immediately after the accident, Ukrainian officials, including President Zelensky, claimed that the missile was Russian, although according to initial Polish assessments, also confirmed by US assessments, the object was a Ukrainian air defence missile.

a conviction that it was a Muscovian [*ruska*] missile, and we said what the Americans told us to say.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I think they already know after talking to me that nobody forced Poland to do anything and that first of all it's not Ukraine that is accused of causing this situation: it's Russia. And I'm very sorry, but if a traffic pirate drives against the traffic on a highway and causes a series of accidents, unfortunately, the traffic pirate, even though he didn't hit anyone, is still responsible. And here Russia is a giant pirate that is destroying the whole safety configuration in our part of Europe – it would like to destroy, let's put it this way – and, by killing people in Ukraine, it is also responsible for what is happening right on its borders.

**IGOR JANKE:** I'm going to ask you another question about... which I probably wouldn't have asked you if you were still in your recent job. I don't know if you'll want to answer, but maybe you will. I'm very curious about what is, what is the reason for such and not other behaviours of President Zelensky towards his entourage, some of which is part of the old deal concerning the judiciary. There are, well, the Ukrainian judiciary looks dramatic and unless they make radical moves... It is very corrupt. I've heard masses of stories about corrupt judges, extremely rich judges, who clearly are, have made their wealth in non-obvious ways, let's put it that way. This is crucial for the new Ukraine and it is also crucial for its entry into the EU; if they don't do it today, then they will have the problems we have because we didn't do it; we didn't rebuild the judiciary in the early 1990s, and probably the problem is even bigger in their country. Do you think they can handle it?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** No, Igor here unfortunately... well you guessed it, well I'm going to have to refuse to comment on Ukrainian internal affairs because I've never done that and that's where my respect for our partners lies. All I can say is that we support the Zelensky administration in everything that concerns reform and the dismantling of oligarchic structures and corruption. And we absolutely understand that changes in the judiciary are extremely difficult and need to be made at the very beginning, not after the system has become entrenched. This was also said, and the President of Moldova, President Maia Sandu,<sup>26</sup> who was also reforming this judiciary, said how difficult and complicated it is; she said it at a press conference. Well, it is a complex problem.

<sup>26</sup> Maia Sandu (b. 1972), Moldovan economist and President of Moldova since 24 December 2020.



**IGOR JANKE:** I understand. I'm not going to push you at all on this issue because it's awkward.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I wouldn't want to get into Ukraine's internal affairs at all; we respect Ukraine; Ukraine doesn't get into our internal affairs either, it's also so...

**IGOR JANKE:** I am in a different role, I can ask.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** This you know, but it is such an achievement if two countries – I was saying this to our German partners – if two countries really build a strategic partnership, they don't care who is in power in the other country; they do it regardless of the political colour of the government. If they start to mix things up, then it is not a partnership that starts to happen but a mutual influence, which is a bit contradictory to such a classic notion of diplomacy.

**IGOR JANKE:** Let's go back to talking about the strategy and what role the Polish partnership with Ukraine can play in the future: what should be the outcome [of the partnership], what is our goal, what is the chance that this treaty, which I know you also worked on, will come into force? I mean, of course, it will come into force when the war is over. But is anything happening with it? What should be the effect? What role can this Polish-Ukrainian duo play in the future, also in Europe, assuming that Ukraine will sooner or later get closer to the European Union? Whether it will join the EU... This is a more difficult question.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** In turn, I think this is a very complex problem and I have to distinguish between two things. Firstly, what I think is the strategy of the Polish state; what is the strategy of Ukraine? Firstly, it is a geographical fact. Poland and Ukraine are not going anywhere; they are going to stay where they are. I hope very much for this, after Ukraine's victorious war of independence, they are going to stay where they are, which is probably obvious to all of us. Second, Russia is not going anywhere either, and Russia will be going in some direction after losing the war in Ukraine. I rather doubt that it will be reflection on its own past and the crimes it has committed; I rather fear that it will be a desire for revenge – a sense of humiliation. I rather expect such a turn of events. Let's hope I'm wrong, because this optimistic reflection on what has happened, well, it would cause Russia to have a chance to rejoin the ranks of civilized nations, of the world, but...

**IGOR JANKE:** So far, Russia is not giving any signals.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** So far, it is not giving any signals. We have Poland and Ukraine – countries with similar population potential, with a huge advantage in economic potential on our side, several times greater. We have two countries that will build strong armies. They will remain. The Ukrainian army is currently the strongest army in Europe, but after the war, too, under conditions of peace, the Ukrainians will have a professional strong army with combat experience, and so this state will continue.

**IGOR JANKE:** What's more, they are undertaking, or declaring, they are saying that they want to build, that they just have to build an army, just like Fortress Israel, just like they have to have Fortress Ukraine.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** We also need to be Fortress Poland. These two fortresses don't have conflicting security interests: they just have common interests, so they should cooperate. Volodymyr Zelensky said it; I think President Duda understands it very well and he said it himself; the fact that we will be a *de facto* ally of Ukraine is obvious to me. The big question is what will happen with Belarus. But it is also necessary to work towards a certain solution: our goal is a democratic, independent Belarus. Such a country immediately has pro-European and pro-Polish tendencies and in fact becomes this third lung of our area of the Commonwealth.<sup>27</sup> And I'm saying this because I don't know if you've seen the last declaration from the presidents of Lithuania, Ukraine and Poland, referring to the First Commonwealth as a common state and referring to the January Uprising<sup>28</sup> as a common uprising; so really, this feeling, feeling, feeling of belonging to a certain cultural circle and to the political community of the First Commonwealth is growing. In Belarus, in 2020, it was noticed that this feeling is really very strong among young Belarusians; while in Ukraine, of course, with all the differences, with the history of the Cossacks and so on and so forth, it takes a slightly different turn. But these three countries could form something very close in the future. I am not saying a federal state, because that is a pipe dream – it is such a utopia today – but Poland's objective should be the integration of our region. Of course, it should be on an equal footing, because together we have almost 100 million people. 90 million Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians, with the Baltic States, we come to 95 million.

<sup>27</sup> This refers to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a federal state created by the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania in 1569; it existed until it was conquered by Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795 (Third Partition).

<sup>28</sup> January Uprising, an uprising against Russia in the Russian-ruled territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years 1863–1864.

**IGOR JANKE:** Which will not arouse enthusiasm in our partners on the western border because you could say it will grow a fantastic market...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** If this were to happen.

**IGOR JANKE:** Well, say the Polish-Ukrainian partnership.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well no, that doesn't inspire any enthusiasm. And I am sorry. The first thing I noticed was the interest of diplomats from another of our close partner countries, this time within the European Union, our neighbour to the west, who were very interested in what this treaty was and what this treaty was for.<sup>29</sup> We reassured them. I reassured them that the treaty would be modelled on the Elysée Treaty: that it is about the same kind of cooperation as you have with France, which probably did not arouse much enthusiasm either because the principle is rather one of 'divide and rule'. A fractured Central Europe in which the West is really the only point of reference for each of these countries. This war is changing that in my opinion, and changing it permanently.

**IGOR JANKE:** But that [German interest in Polish-Ukrainian work on a treaty between two countries – ŁA] also should not make us indignant, well, because this is normal. Every country thinks about its strategy, its interests.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** No, nothing personal – it's business. It is business, there is nothing personal here, and we don't have to worry about it at all. Our goal is to bring about reconciliation with Ukraine, including, of course, the resolution of historical issues. Well, this reconciliation cannot be carried out without, for example, the issue of exhumations or without facing reality, not burying our heads in the sand when it comes to Volhynia.<sup>30</sup> A crime took place there, a genocide took place there – a serious one, the murder of many tens of thousands of Poles – and this must be clearly stated. We can and do talk about the classification of crimes, but no, Ukraine does not; Poland has the right to expect, to ask that the cult of those who are directly responsible for these crimes be abandoned. It is simply impossible without this. This will be triggered on a regular basis.

<sup>29</sup> This refers to the project of a new Polish-Ukrainian treaty which should regulate bilateral relations between Poland and Ukraine.

<sup>30</sup> Mass murders committed against Polish inhabitants of Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, and present-day Eastern Poland by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1943–1945. The ethnic cleansing instigated by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army claimed up to 100,000 victims, of which several thousand were Ukrainian victims of retaliatory actions by Polish partisan units.

**IGOR JANKE:** But it's going to be very difficult on the cult, in my opinion. That's why I also recorded an interview on the Bandera cult which has not been yet aired with Łukasz Adamski.<sup>31</sup>

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** This is an eminent expert and an eminent person with a sense of Ukraine who is regarded as a Polish nationalist by Ukrainians, while Poles and Polish nationalists often consider him as a Ukrainiano-ophile. But [he is] a figure of gigantic knowledge and has a sense of the [Polish-Ukrainian] problematics.

**IGOR JANKE:** Yes, I urge you to listen to this talk as soon as it comes out, but Łukasz talked about the fact that just during the war (surprisingly for me, I didn't have any such awareness) because this cult of Bandera – understood as not anti-Polish, fascist, something there, but as a hero of the fight against Russia – contrived a bit, grew unbelievably. War needs, builds myths. And now this popularity of his has also increased in eastern Ukraine, which was not there at all before, and it will be very difficult to know; in the end, President Zelensky and other politicians will fight to win the next democratic elections when the war is over, and they will not be able to go against the public mood.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Igor, I will openly say what I think on this subject. Well, I see the difference between Stepan Bandera, whom Soviet propaganda has somewhat elevated the importance of, his role. He was an enemy, our enemy, an enemy of Poland, a terrorist, the leader of a nationalist organization whose ideology, if you read, is, well... to... Even a Ukrainian looking at it through the prism of a Christian man, a European, would glue together these ten nationalist commandments – a prayer to Ukraine – and would rather not return to it. But a man who at the same time... Bandera was sitting in a concentration camp [having been] earlier [imprisoned] when the Volhynian crime happened, and I would absolutely not mix one thing – the cult of a fictional personality, a real character, but a cult which has been heavily coloured – with the perpetrators of the Volhynian massacre.

**IGOR JANKE:** That's true.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I would not mix that because here [in the case of the Volhynian massacre] we are absolutely talking about murder. We are talking

<sup>31</sup> Łukasz Adamski (b. 1981), Polish historian, publicist, expert on Eastern Europe, Deputy Director of the Mieroszewski Centre.

about the mass murder of people, so I would definitely make a distinction between the two here.

The fact is, what you said, that this cult of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and this cult of Bandera, because let's take it, no more... Let's leave the cult of Shukhevych aside, it is absolutely a *no-go zone* for us. On the other hand, the cult of Bandera and the cult of UPA... the paradox is that the stronger the cult of Bandera and UPA is in a given region, the greater the sympathy for Poland. Why? Well, because Ukrainians are convinced that the Ukrainian Insurgent Army is an organization which fought for Ukraine's independence primarily against the Soviets and, to some extent, against the Germans. The latter is, I would say, more incidental, but the UPA's fight after the war against the Soviets... This Polish part [of UPA's struggle] is considered to be rather episodic in Poland. [As to the Volhynian crime as such] there was little awareness of the Volhynian massacre in Ukraine.

**IGOR JANKE:** And it is still so.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** That they [the Ukrainians] went through Soviet schools; that they therefore told a certain story in their kitchens [the story] which was romanticized, coloured. Every nation does that; we should be aware of that too. Just yes, the very fact that Bandera was a terrorist. Does it really bother Britain and Ireland that Ireland was, in fact is, a creation created by the effective activities of the IRA and Michael Collins, and the fact that the potency of it was overestimated? Well, the assassination of someone, of a public servant in the 1920s or 1930s or before, was, unfortunately, the method of operation of many nationalist movements, and that is how Europe was. Here we also have to do ourselves some justice.

**IGOR JANKE:** But of course, so do I...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** And the fact that someone fought for their independence, I think we also have to take a fair look. Well, unfortunately, yes [we have to do it].

**IGOR JANKE:** Their awareness is that this is the man who fought for Ukraine's independence...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Because he undoubtedly fought.

**IGOR JANKE:** Like them. I don't know if you've encountered that, because you've met the elite, the conscious...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Whether or not I like the ideology and the fact that the UPA was – that the organization of Ukrainian nationalists had such un-Christian and un-European thinking about it [fight for independence] – that is another matter, that is philosophical.

**IGOR JANKE:** But I'm going to mention one more thing, though. For those of you who are listening or have listened to the interview with Łukasz Adamski, I talked about it there. When I was in Ukraine, bringing various things, helping them, it was somewhere in western Ukraine; the Ukrainians showing me around, ordinary Ukrainians, they weren't representatives of the elite, extremely pro-Polish, with great love, with gratitude to Poland; they told me, listen, look here there's a monument to Bandera. And me ... acid in my face [appeared], you know.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** In Lutsk I saw four flags on one of the state buildings. There was the flag of Volhynia, [i.e.] the flag of the region, the flag of Ukraine, the flag of the UPA and the flag of Poland. Not everything in the world is black and white – there are different shades of grey. Ukraine is also not the first nation or country I have dealt with, because I have travelled the world a bit. We all have a distorted perception of our own history. All the nations of the world have a certain legend that accompanies them, a certain perception of their past. I firmly believe that this should, after all, firstly be respected, spoken of with respect. Surely saying 'get down on your knees and express [sorrow for] your past' is a huge mistake – this mistake Israel has been making, has made towards us. What is the effect of this on Israel? Such that instead of being a friend of that country – of a country which is, let us say, not the most popular country today – Poland has joined the European mainstream on the issue of Israel, which stands out from our region, with which Israel has correct relations. Somehow these emotions got the better of them and they [the Israeli politicians] decided that Poland should simply apologize for everything and we should consider our whole history to be anti-Semitic.

**IGOR JANKE:** Let's talk about our role in the European Union at the end; well, as far as the relationship with the United States is concerned, it's pretty obvious.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well you talked about the fact that the West won't necessarily welcome a Polish-Ukrainian agreement, and I think that for the United States this is a huge asset.

**IGOR JANKE:** For the United States, of course. As they see... or otherwise: in your opinion, what should we play for? What role can we realistically play in the European Union? If we play wisely of course, which we don't always do, what potential do we have? And how do you see Germany's role? And to what extent – extending this question a little bit – to what extent do you think this whole '*Zeitenwende*'<sup>32</sup> can one day really come to fruition, and can it happen? Do you believe that it's easy [to change Germany's foreign policy], if it's going very slowly, very laboriously, maybe not so much laboriously, but it's going slowly, but it's going in that direction and we will definitely be on the same side and it will be our partner with whom we will continue to work well together, despite some tensions. I'm talking about Germany.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** It all depends on how Germany defines its own national interest. Such an interesting theory I heard at a conference that this is Germany's weakness. I will quote a speaker who said a very cool thing. He said: 'just as the German Empire was said to be an army that owns the state, the Federal Republic is said to be a business that owns the state.'

**IGOR JANKE:** Interesting. Very pertinent.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** And this business, this German economy, the mighty German economy, grew because of, among other things, two factors: cheap labour, i.e., Central and Eastern Europe, subcontractors and so on, and cheap raw materials, i.e., Russia.

**IGOR JANKE:** Plus China. A very important market.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Clear.

**IGOR JANKE:** Germany's two main trading partners.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Sure, sure. Whereas Germany's exports produce quite cheap goods all the time, so it's not... It's a country that produces cheaply, in which prices are reasonable, it's not... it's a very rich country which is still cheap all the time. The standard of living of the Germans is really very, very high. However! However! The price for this attitude is, among other things, that Germans have difficulty defining their own national interest. The national interest is something where you force a business

<sup>32</sup> German term for 'turning point'.

to participate in certain projects. It is much easier for France to ask big business to do something for the state. In Germany, it is rather business which has requests to those in power. And I am afraid that this is the case here. We've definitely had a historical breakthrough when it comes to the German public's perception of events in Ukraine. And here there has been a radical change. The Germans are a very educated, learned, smart people. It's as if you talk to Germans very well, they are rational, you can convince them of many things, ordinary Germans. I have met a lot of these people in my life. And, indeed, public opinion has changed. Quite a lot of the media have changed their stance.

**IGOR JANKE:** In those days, when we were recording [that conversation – ŁA] , Scholz was being hammered so strongly...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Today, if President Duda or President Zelensky criticize Scholz, the German media will not come to his defence. Some of them will say that yes, that indeed one has to admit that he is right. Leopards, for example, after all, it is not so clear that Poland is frivolous again, that Poland is dividing, that unity is breaking down. In the past it used to be like that, the whole media would be... there would be a series of articles simply sounding the same, mostly like that. Today – well it's not; it doesn't look like that at all. It is one thing. Public opinion, the media. The political class, some of them think that we should go with public opinion; some of them think, especially the Chancellor's entourage, as I understand it, that, well, you can't make radical changes overnight, which makes Germany lose its position, because for our part of Europe – and relations with Eastern Europe, Central-Eastern Europe, have built up Germany's position in the entire Union, no country has managed to establish such close relations with our region – but for our countries it is security that counts. That is to say, if someone is not a 'provider' of security but is uncertain in this matter, then, unfortunately, as a partner, he comes out very, very badly. And that is what it is all about. Now, the popularity of the US and the UK from Tallinn to... well, let's say, to the Danube, has increased dramatically.

**IGOR JANKE:** To the part. Not the whole Danube, unfortunately.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Well, the Danube, which divides Romania, let us say, is Romania's border increased radically, because these are the suppliers of security, and we need nothing more than security. But is continental Western Europe a security provider? Yes, it is helping Ukraine, but do we really believe that in the event of something happening, it is the one who will



defend us, the one who will stand by us fully, or have we been persuaded to do so by successive German chancellors? Well, I ask myself, because at the moment we are being watched by people who may not have the same political views as me or agree with the president, but have you been persuaded by your continental European partners that, if anything happens, they will defend us? Well, that is the question.

**IGOR JANKE:** Yes.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** That is the question. This is where the division comes from. And as you asked me about my role in the European Union.

**IGOR JANKE:** Is it? Do you believe it? Because I have this vision of our ambition in Polish politics for the next five or ten years, because of course it is not overnight... But we have finally gained the weight to fight higher, to make it so that in the end these main players in the European Union are... of course, Germany, because it is a powerful country, of course, France, because it is a powerful country, with influence in the north...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** And with nuclear weapons and a powerful army which is serious when it comes to security.

**IGOR JANKE:** And in terms of energy security indeed.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Its own, of course...

**IGOR JANKE:** And this third element – it seems to me, a serious third element – could be Poland, as a coordinator of this post-Soviet part, although already less and less post-Soviet. However, for those small countries originating from this part, well I mean not originating, but [simply] being in this part of Europe. In your opinion, is this a realistic plan? Or maybe such a Weimar Triangle in the future so that it would not be a meeting of Germans and French to which Poland is sometimes invited – actually to play some kind of theatre – but a real engine of the European Union.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** By the way, before I answer your question seriously, you know that in probably 2016 or 2017 you said ‘post-Soviet Europe’ and you corrected yourself immediately – [in 2016 or 2017] I did the calculation for myself. The governments of each country, what percentage of the members of those governments had been a member of the Communist Party in the past? And what came out, who had the highest percentage?

The European Commission. Not Estonia, not Poland, not the Czech Republic. The European Commission, and it was so that even there I remember it was still under... Or I did... I don't remember which year it was; either it was still under Barroso or it was already under Juncker, and it came out that in their youth even those from the West had some. You know... sometimes it was not mainstream Soviet parties of course, but all sorts of left-wing organizations referring to Marx and Lenin.

**IGOR JANKE:** But which were not part of the regimes.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** [It was a] joke, of course. The sins of youth, of course. In any case, there was such a moment. On the other hand, you have posed a very good question. And it [Poland's leading role in Central-Eastern Europe – ŁA] will be such a temptation for us. At some point, I think we will be brought to the table. Well, there was already this project of the Weimar Triangle; it was the Germans who came up with the slogan 'Let's renew the Weimar Triangle'; but I have this impression... I came out of it then with this feeling that this is not an instrument to solve our main problem, which is to provide support for Ukraine. You know, European integration solved a big thing, created a big thing: first of all it solved the Rhine question. It has solved the issue between Germany and France; it has led to the fact that the tragedy that is the trauma of the West, which is the First World War – the First World War, not the Second World War – will actually not happen in the West of Europe. It is the trauma of continental Europe, it is the trauma of Belgium, France, Germany... Well, Germany does have the trauma of the Second World War, but for others, other countries, they still think in terms of 1914. How could we do such a thing to ourselves? The Rhine question has been resolved. But European integration does not solve the Central European question; it does not resolve it, if only because this Iron Curtain runs through our region, it runs right across the Polish border. That is why Poland is fighting so hard to integrate Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova – all countries that wish to do so [acquire EU membership], right up to Russia's borders – into European integration. Then the Central European question will be resolved.

Here, something that I immediately think I can also be proud to have participated in. However, behind all this situation is the person of the president. On the third day of the war, President Duda said that Ukraine should be given the status of a candidate for the European Union. He was thinking in these categories: 'we have to show them [Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe, who want to become EU members – ŁA] on the table – the Russians and them: yes, are you attacking Ukraine? And we are not making any concessions,

we will accept Ukraine into the Union; besides, Ukraine must have prospects. And if you win the war, you will live happily ever after in the community of the West'. After all, they, the people who are outside the Union think about it [EU membership], just as you remember we thought about it, that we will become rich immediately and live happily ever after.

And there was a moment on the 26th [of February] a letter was from the president on that, on the 28th [of February] a letter from several Central European presidents.<sup>33</sup> I think we brought together nine people, nine leaders. And that's a kind of naivety of me, I remember, I have to confess. Among the advisers we talk, we say: well, all our presidents are confirmed; now, if we could only make each of them choose two Western leaders whom they know, like and value the most, and convince them to sign up – well, at least we will catch a few. So we went hunting, we split the roles, we went hunting. How many did we catch? Zero. Zero. It's just that the West at that moment was... [they were] like [thinking]: but why, how come, we in some initiative of yours, well you know how it's – coordinated, or not coordinated – including the fact that, and this was also said publicly by the president. One of the leaders of a smaller Western European country said: 'Mr. President, please withdraw your signature, my country will never agree to accept Ukraine, it's just breaking unity'. So it turned out that, after a few months, Ukraine got the status of a candidate for the European Union. We won it, it really was months of hard work, a president who was able to fly to Portugal, to Italy, still in Spain he wanted to be, still in the last straight of talks with the next last leaders.

So why am I bringing this up? There will be such a temptation now for us to be invited [to the club of leading Western European states that *de facto* manage the EU – ŁA], because, in my opinion, they will invite the Poles to come. Maybe the government will change, for example, it will be easier for them [for governments of leading Western European countries – ŁA]. And the temptation may be that we are already in this top league and we can now, in fact, sign up to what France and Germany will preach.

**IGOR JANKE:** Are we able to bring this situation [close prior coordination between France and Germany in European politics – ŁA] about...?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** They came to the Triangle already and agreed with each other.

<sup>33</sup> A letter signed on 28 February 2022 by the presidents of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Slovenia, supporting immediate EU accession for Ukraine; see *Support of Ukraine's swift candidacy to the EU*, 28 February 2022: <https://www.president.pl/news/open-letter-by-presidents-in-support-of-ukraines-swift-candidacy-to-the-european-union,49584>.

**IGOR JANKE:** Exactly, so my question is not that we will formally be in some kind of group. The Weimar Triangle will meet every month. Will we realistically play a role there? Can we?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** The biggest temptation is to abandon the Central European partners. They never go, they stay here. Slovakia stays here. The Balts stay here, the Czechs stay here. We all feel it... When you talk about the change, for example this *Zeitenwende*<sup>34</sup> in Germany? A [real] change has happened in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. [The real change was] what Slovakia did about Ukraine.

**IGOR JANKE:** This is not a foregone conclusion forever.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** It is not a foregone conclusion, but nevertheless President Čaputová<sup>35</sup>... well, there were different relations between President Čaputová and the team that is currently governing Poland, but she has completely sided with Ukraine – the Czech Republic the same. This is...

**IGOR JANKE:** And in the Czech Republic now, the presidential election is also moving in this direction...

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I am looking now; we have two more Baltic States [Czechia and Slovakia].

**IGOR JANKE:** But let us be honest with ourselves; when I look at our foreign policy over the last dozen years or so, without naming the governments, we have also started to cooperate differently with these small countries. We have not been able to cope with them for many years. Lithuania? 'They only bother us'. Slovakia? 'Who is that?'. 'We here have to be first of all in Berlin and so on'. To be in Berlin we have to be with them.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** True, true, true. And that's what I was advising as well. But, as I say, it's easy to advise someone who thinks this way – no need to correct anything here. A full understanding on the part of the president that our position in the West depends not on whether we get to the table but on what regional relations we have. And in order to have good regional relations with Lithuania, really, if President Duda was able to say a few sentences in Lithuanian in the Lithuanian parliament, well, probably the first

<sup>34</sup> Mentioned was an address delivered to the Bundestag by Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor of Germany, on 27 February 2022. The head of German government announced a huge change Germany's politics towards Russia.

<sup>35</sup> Zuzana Čaputová (b. 1973) is President of Slovakia since 15 June 2019.

president in history, well, I think that such a gesture does more than saying that Lithuania is a partner and a friend. Well, the President of Poland, who comes and says in Lithuanian: 'Dear Madam President, Members of Parliament, I am here as the President of Poland'. He says, he mentions the tower<sup>36</sup> in Vilnius, he says this, well you have to work a little bit on such a text, but the effect is that you are showing respect to a country which – as I think – believed that on the Polish side there is a deficit of respect [for Lithuania]. 'The Poles don't respect us, the Poles consider us provincial, the Poles would love to be here, the Poles only look at us through the prism of the former Poland.' No, Poland respects this Lithuania as it is and the Lithuanians. It is not just that Poland looks at Lithuania through the prism of our minority. No, Poland looks at Lithuania as a security partner which is not going anywhere, which is a brave nation and so on. The same is true of Latvia, Estonia, and the Belarusians and Ukrainians.

**IGOR JANKE:** And in all this we have been greatly helped by Vladimir Putin, without whom it would not have gone so easily.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** But I remind you that the President's speech to the Belarusians – partly in Belarusian, and to the Lithuanians – partly in Lithuanian language – took place even before the war, so it is not that this understanding here... [appeared only after the Russian-Ukrainian war had begun – ŁA.]

**IGOR JANKE:** Tell us, in one sentence at the end. Is this role of ours in the Union as one of the playmakers – from a realistic perspective, not a formal one – is that a realistic prospect? In other words, should we set ourselves... should Polish politics – the Polish state, regardless of who governs Poland after the elections – set itself such an ambitious goal and pursue it consistently? Do we have many more assets?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Whatever answer I give to this question, it will be neither complete nor entirely truthful, because of course I should say 'yes, indeed!' On the other hand, I am asking myself what the Union will be like in the coming years and what it will be aiming at; and at what point, in how many years, to what extent it will be conducive to our security, because I, like many, have repeated like a mantra that membership of the Union is one of the sources of our security.

<sup>36</sup> Wystąpienie Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej Andrzeja Dudy w Sejmie Republiki Litewskiej z okazji 500. rocznicy urodzin króla Zygmunta Augusta: <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/wystapienie-prezydenta-w-sejmie-republiki-litewskiej,4386>.

**IGOR JANKE:** And there it is! Nevertheless, it is the source of our wealth.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** Yes, this is true.

**IGOR JANKE:** It gives us strength. I will tell you something. It will be more of a source of our security when we have more influence there.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** However, when countries are in danger, they behave selfishly. Let us concentrate on relations with those countries that will be in danger with us; this is very important because of Russia. See, Russia tends to attack countries one by one. First Georgia, then Ukraine; when Georgia was attacked, in Ukraine [at that time] it was still Tymoshenko<sup>37</sup> who was Prime Minister at that time, and Yushchenko<sup>38</sup> was President; and Yushchenko flew with President Kaczyński to Tbilisi,<sup>39</sup> but the Ukrainian Government under Tymoshenko was, in fact, very moderate, whereas today Georgia is behaving towards Ukraine in a way that causes a certain amount of disappointment, if not embarrassment throughout. We are talking about the government of Georgia.

**IGOR JANKE:** Not about society.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** No, not society. Although, on the other hand, so many thousands of Russians have fled to Georgia and are walking freely in the streets, renting flats, doing business, investing money, and something little bothers them. Russia, you see, attacked one state. It attacked another country. When it attacked Moldova, it didn't attack Ukraine. When it attacked Georgia... Why is Russia doing this? After all, they also realize that we stand together as a bloc of states in solidarity, and this solidarity should be absolute in matters of security. We have the Courageous Six I mentioned: the Baltics, we, the Czechs, the Slovaks, we have in the future Ukraine, Moldova and a free, I hope, Belarus. We have Romania on board. If these countries cooperate, I am also talking about other countries in the region; just to be clear, these are the countries under direct threat. If they cooperate, Russia simply has a potential adversary that is not worth considering attacking at all. It is simply better to get along. And I think this is our basis: 'Stick to the region'. And the West looks at us first and foremost in terms of just being a regional leader, and as such we have more

<sup>37</sup> Yuliya Tymoshenko (b. 1960), Ukrainian politician, Prime Minister of Ukraine from February to September 2005 and from December 2007 to March 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Viktor Yushchenko (b. 1954), Ukrainian politician, President of Ukraine from 2005 to 2010.

<sup>39</sup> On 12 August 2008, together with the presidents of Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Polish President Lech Kaczyński visited Georgia during the Russian-Georgian War.

clout. Whereas just being invited to the table alone and simply agreeing to what is accepted at that table and in the name of some interests – in the name of unity – that are often contrary to our interests, can be wrong.

**IGOR JANKE:** Finally, one last sentence. What has this year of working in this place, under these conditions, taught you? What did you learn that you didn't know before?

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** You know what, of course I learned a lot about the workings of the state and the mechanisms of the state. It was my first experience of world politics, and let's be clear that it was a new experience for all of us because Poland was never such a centre, such a focal point, as it was this year.

I remember the day when there was both Kamala Harris<sup>40</sup> and Prime Minister Trudeau,<sup>41</sup> and right after that we were preparing for Joe Biden's visit,<sup>42</sup> when the president talked to someone practically every day, received someone: someone went to Kyiv, we went to Kyiv, these were amazing things. What did it teach me? I think that Poland can follow a courageous, assertive and ahead-of-the-facts policy. That we used to be such... I don't know if you see a paradigm of failure in us, which is for example in some publicists, in one well-known publicist of Onet<sup>43</sup> for example, that Poland when it does something, it surely does it wrong and it surely fails, and here we have shown, as you can see, that it succeeds.

Poland, however, was able to encourage the provision of weapons to Ukraine, and yet say 'we are giving Rzeszów', 'we are giving the hub'.<sup>44</sup> I was there, I saw it. The word 'hub' was spoken by President Duda before the word 'weapons'. That's the first thing. The second is Poland, which was able to make Ukraine a candidate for the European Union today.<sup>45</sup> If it were not for the determination of President Duda, it would not be, quite simply. This candidature was forced on the West by our countries acting together. Another thing is Poland, which did not allow itself to be framed in the matter of the planes and in the matter of responsibility for the alleged failure to deliver the planes. After all, that was the narrative they were trying to sew up for us. Another thing: Poland stood up for the Leopard coalition now.<sup>46</sup> After all, it was not a call from Berlin. And this coalition

<sup>40</sup> Kamala Harris (b. 1964), an American politician, vice-president of the US since 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Justin Trudeau (b. 1971), a Canadian politician, Prime Minister of Canada since 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Biden's visit to Poland took place on 20–21 February 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Popular Polish internet portal.

<sup>44</sup> Rzeszów Airport.

<sup>45</sup> At the European Council summit on 23 June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted the status of EU candidates.

<sup>46</sup> States which advocate delivery of Leopard tanks to Ukraine and exerted pressure on the German government for consent on the re-export of German weapons.

will arise; you will see that this coalition will arise, so the courage and the creation of facts [matter] and a big country just has to do it [act decisively and with courage].

**IGOR JANKE:** And you have to admit that this is a new quality in Polish politics. Such international activity, effectiveness.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** We go out, we do not walk in line. If something is in our interest, we will simply do it and even perhaps later our partners will, to some extent, resent why it was not agreed beforehand. It is difficult; that is how states work; that is how big states work.

**IGOR JANKE:** And may we pursue such a policy. Kuba, thank you very much. It was a very frank conversation.

**JAKUB KUMOCH:** I hope, as much as you know, as a diplomat is able to be honest.

**IGOR JANKE:** At times you stopped being [a diplomat]. Thank you very much; thank you very much. Thank you, that is all in this conversation. Be sure to write what you think of it. We have touched on a lot of important threads; I will continue the conversation on Poland's strategy in *Układ Otwarty*. Support *Układ Otwarty*, because it makes this programme independent and allows me to have such discussions. I invite you to my profile on Patronite.pl. Thank you very much, see you, hear you.

Edited by ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI