

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
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“Russia’s Infrastructure Terrorists”

Committee Staff Present:

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Cooperation in Europe**

Participants:

**The Honorable Oleksandra Azarkhina, Deputy Minister of Infrastructure of
Ukraine**

**The Briefing Was Held From 3:33 p.m. To 4:22 p.m. via videoconference,
Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and
Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

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NISHANOV: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Bakhti Nishanov. I'm a senior policy advisor at the Helsinki Commission, and today I welcome you to our briefing on "Russia's Infrastructure Terrorists."

Now, before we talk about it, let me address the elephant in the room because we've got some questions: Why do we call this terrorism? Why is this something that needs to be addressed as such?

Because according to international humanitarian law, attacks on infrastructure are sometimes permissible. But in the case of Russia's attack on Ukraine – the context of the attacks, and the context of this war matters tremendously – Russia has been – has started this war 288 days ago now. It has been bombing, killing, kidnapping, and committing other atrocities against Ukrainians. What was supposed to be a three-day blitzkrieg really turned in what Putin himself yesterday said was a long-term engagement for Russia.

Ukraine has been able to stand this long thanks to the heroic efforts of all Ukrainians unified and determined as never before. Global solidarity and assistance has helped, but Ukrainians are the ones who are shouldering the burden of fighting and dying in defense of their sovereignty, but also freedom of every single person in this world.

In the face of this resistance and pushback, the murderous regime in Moscow has adopted a new strategy of bombing Ukraine critical civilian infrastructure. Russia has been mercilessly and methodically targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure and other civilian objects plunging millions of Ukrainians into darkness and cold.

Schools, hospitals, maternity wards, and kindergartens have not been able to function. The direct strikes killed thousands. The secretary of state talked about it today, put out a statement, and he said thousands have died.

And while there are no reliable numbers on the number of civilian deaths that may have attributed to this infrastructure terrorism, it's clear Russia's targeting infrastructure to maximize pain to civilians and damage their property. Russia's goal is to demoralize and terrorize Ukrainians for political goals, and that is very much a definition of terrorism.

Ukrainians have responded to this with heroic efforts, but Russia's attacks continue, and the Ukrainian grid teeters on a brink of failure – I want to stress this – no civilian power has ever designed to withstand.

So today we'll have a conversation with the deputy minister of infrastructure of Ukraine, the Honorable Oleksandra Azarkhina, to examine the extent of damage to critical infrastructure and the toll in human suffering, and importantly, what is it the United States can do to help Ukraine withstand this cruel winter.

So welcome, Deputy Minister. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I have to say, we were a couple of minutes late because you just came back from your meeting with the

secretary of energy. So maybe you could start there. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what is happening in Ukraine, and why is this such an important topic?

Because this is a war, but these infrastructure attacks are clearly something that are hurting Ukrainians to an extent that we have not seen before. Can you talk about what is happening, and what we can do about it?

AZARKHINA: So first of all, thank you for having me. It's a very important opportunity for all of us to be here, and really, we are very grateful to all American citizens, to the government, and to the nation for supporting us.

We understand that without your support we couldn't sustain, and actually, the losses would be enormous. But yes, we are resilient, and we keep fighting.

And just to, you know, to picture what it is to live now in Ukraine – I've traveled a journey. When I come back to Kyiv, in the evening I would drive from my office to my parents' house in Kyiv suburbs – literal warzone, just close to the Bucha – and the journey to my parents' house, it's, practically speaking, a catalogue of Russian war crimes.

To my left, I see an office building just recently destroyed by shell heads that were targeting the energy facility. Right to it, destroyed main office of Ukrainian national electricity company. Then I'm driving further, there's my favorite supermarket – 13,000 square meters – totally destroyed in March when they were still trying to capture Kyiv.

Right after that, it's, you know, garden shop. I love garden flowers, but now it's not flowers, but Russian tanks buried under the snow. I can't take a short route because the bridge is destroyed, so I'm circling around, and I see more destruction – like a gas station, like storages.

And happily, my parents' house is fine. They bought it after they left Crimea because we are from Crimea, and after Russia occupied Crimea in 2014, we left the peninsula. And then left a second time in February.

Happily, thanks to the Ukrainian Armed Forces our house is fine, and we can keep working and going there. But that's just one personal story. The overall estimations made by World Bank now with the damage of Russian aggression is nearly \$100 billion.

Since the first days of the full-scale invasion, Russia has systematically attacked civilian infrastructure. Since fall, in response to Ukrainian successes on the frontline, they chose a new target – Ukrainian energy infrastructure, and they say – even claiming publicly – that the goal is to make us negotiate.

First of all, we understand that they already achieved more than 50 percent of the energy infrastructure destroyed, and we understand that the goal they achieved it's darkness in our apartments. And the worst may happen if in the cold days the heating systems will be stopped.

I just would ask our viewers to think about, do you have opportunity to control the temperature in your apartment or house during the winter? The normal answer is, yes. Here we can see interesting example when there are not only two nations are fighting, but two different approaches of fighting.

Russia, thanks to the Soviet Union, are building a centralized system, where you can't choose the temperature in your apartment, and Russians they're still opening windows to make their apartment a bit cooler – not talking about the environmental, you know, effects of this. But frankly speaking, it's about subjectivity of the people and about the way how we can make inference, even in such simple things.

So for sure at the moment we understand the worse things could happen if they continue their attacks, if we won't have enough air defense to protect our critical national infrastructure, and really our citizens start to freeze. For sure, the most vulnerable are elderly people because it's not so easy to heat your apartment when you can't properly do your job, and for sure that's the most critical question for us to make their life sustainable.

The second threat is actually nuclear security. Because of the Russian attacks, we need to shut down our nuclear plants because they are targeting their infrastructure and energy objects which are providing the transportation.

And one nuclear plant is working. They need to give the electricity back to the network, and it need to work. But, well, it's never to go because the transformers are destroyed. The energy is still at the nuclear plant and at serious threat.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: My father was a firefighter in Chernobyl.

NISHANOV: Oh wow.

AZARKHINA: He knows a lot about it.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: And even though it's like kitchen small talks –

NISHANOV: About nuclear energy, and –

AZARKHINA: Yeah.

NISHANOV: Yeah. Yeah.

AZARKHINA: And those threats. So Ukraine knows what is it, and we know that nuclear plants need to be well protected.

NISHANOV: Yeah.

AZARKHINA: And for sure the best protection for nuclear plants is Russian soldiers out of Ukrainian territory. But at the moment we understand their goal, and their goal is actually to make sure that the life of civilians is impossible.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: And our resilience is impossible as well. Heating systems are one of the most crucial things, but the nuclear threat is, unfortunately, one of the most real and actually dangerous.

And probably we need to understand that Ukraine is resilient. Ukraine is very creative, and of course, we keep fighting for every substation, for every, you know, nuclear plant, hydro station. And we understand that we will keep doing that, and especially with the support of the partners.

That's actually – I see the partner, and I see that we're going to win this fight as well, but as a really practical ask, it's a game of air defense.

NISHANOV: Air defense.

AZARKHINA: Because it's impossible to protect those facilities just with bear hands.

NISHANOV: Yeah.

AZARKHINA: Some fighting jets would be nice as well. I would never imagine myself, you know, speaking about such things, but it seems that nothing else is working to protect our lives.

And we understand that now in the moment when, of course, Ukraine need the support, but the time have come and Ukraine will stand with you as well protecting Western skies as well. And it's actually our joint task to leave no chance for the terrorists to win.

NISHANOV: I think in many ways Ukraine – you said Ukraine will stand with the United States and the West in defending freedom and defending – but I do think Ukrainians are already doing it.

And again, what we are supporting – our support is material and financial. Your support is what truly matters. It's the lives of people. It's the lives of soldiers – Ukrainian soldiers and regular people – and watching this horror is just – I cannot believe this is happening in this century, and it's being done.

But we are in awe of your resilience, and we are in awe of your ability to come together as one nation. And you know Ukrainians; sometimes (back ?) and they squabble, this and that, did not agree on anything. But now it's one nation, and it's truly amazing to see that.

Let me ask you this, so you've – the picture that you painted – it's cold; it's dark. It's not just, you know, apartments, but it's also hospitals.

I mean I saw a photo today of a maternity ward, and there was a little baby in there. And you know, they had, you know, bomb proofing and everything, but every second of this baby's life depends on electricity, on water, on heat, and this is what Ukrainians are facing.

You said that 50 percent of Ukrainians – of Ukraine's grid is out of function right now, but we also see Ukrainians are coming together and fixing it. Can you tell me about the strategy? What happens? So Russians bomb something, and you immediately go and try to fix it?

Because it's just incredible to see Ukrainians just do that. I mean, I don't even know how – where you find the strength. But can you tell me a little bit about strategy? And do Russians come back and bomb it again and again? Is that what is going on?

AZARKHINA: So basically, I'm trying to avoid all sensitive issues, not to let additional information to –

NISHANOV: Yes. Of course. Of course. Of course.

AZARKHINA: But basically, first of all, yes, our air defense capabilities are better now because of the additional aid we recently received. The speed that some of aid came only after their new strikes – I mean, I wish we could have avoided those things because we all know the threats from the beginning.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: But still, we're very grateful. And really, we know the speed – we know the dedication of the people who are dealing with that, and we're very grateful. But that's where it starts, air defense.

The air defense capability we have now there on the ground – we will again, again talk about them – fighting jets, again, because they're in the sky, and that's actually about the protection of the civilians again. Because when you can destroy this rocket from the sky, it makes more chances that it's, you know, less casualties on the ground.

The second thing we are doing, it's actually we are creatively looking for the protections on the ground. I will not tell you details, but –

NISHANOV: I understand. Yeah, yeah, I understand that, yes.

AZARKHINA: – you can believe in our creativity, in our best ways, and we're really looking for interesting options.

It's important to understand that Russians know our energy system very well –

NISHANOV: Yes.

AZARKHINA: – because, yes, it was constructed together with them. They know there – you know, the narrow places. And frankly speaking, the thing which is shocking us a lot is that when this – it's not only military people sitting and, you know – and drafting those plans how to destroy first grid of the high voltage, second grid of the lower voltage. It's civilian engineers who are telling Russian army where to hit.

And that's actually another shocking thing in our understanding who we are fighting now. So yes, we are working in the crowd to protect it as much as possible, but also, it's important that now we are looking for the solutions how to make our system more decentralized and how quickly substitute our, like, transformers, actually.

Allies are helping us. We have efforts from all over the world, and we understand that a system is coming. And our job, for example, of our ministry is to make sure that this new equipment that will be better protected.

NISHANOV: OK.

AZARKHINA: So that's basic things that we are doing. Of course, you know, every time when someone is asking me, when do you think you will reestablish, you know, the grid? I think tell me when Russia will stop. Then I can plan. Without that there is some difficulties, but still that's the plan.

Basically, it's also, you know – yeah, I describe, you know, the cold, the darkness, but still, you know, we're all fighting for the normality's. And now Kyiv, there are still lights on and restaurants are working, but the sound of generator –

NISHANOV: Oh, it's the generators, yeah. Yeah.

AZARKHINA: So all over the country now we have generators – very environmentally unfriendly – but it's a working thing, and yes, we are doing that.

Of course it's important to have those alternatives. Of course it's important to find, you know, alternative ways, for example, to connect to Starlink, et cetera. And outlook is actually bad for the resilience in terms of our, you know, way to communicate plans, et cetera.

But we're creative, and I think we managed to build a new model of the delegation – for example, of the government – like in a week, and we understand now where, what, who, you know, in our regions has generators and Starlink, you know, et cetera, so yeah.

NISHANOV: That's amazing. I think, frankly, on the battlefield and off the battlefield, more importantly, Ukrainians creativity and sense of humor, to be perfectly honest, is something

I think is – you know, you have – you possess that. I think that's your secret weapon; that's your secret superpower. I mean, not so secret anymore, but I think that's what truly makes Ukrainians stand out, also, in so many ways.

I have a couple more questions, but I also wanted to invite our audience to ask any questions. To be able to do that, there's a – so I do apologize. I'm going to be looking at a screen.

There are three little dots to your right, far right corner. So you click on it, and there's a Q&A option. So you click on the Q&A, and you're going to be able to ask any question that you would like. But in the meantime – so please feel free to ask those questions, and I can see them.

But in the meantime, let me ask you this question. Tell me about the role of Iran and their drones in this. Because it's – again, they deny it, obviously, but we know. We've seen them. You possess them. You have them, right, in your possession.

So tell me about the role of Iran and what is that needs to happen to stop that, in your estimation?

AZARKHINA: The main important fact the world need to know that inside Iranian drones we found equipment made in Europe and U.S. Very good quality.

All equipment – not even of the double use, but to civilian usage. So it's actually very hard now to track how Iran got this equipment, but I know the investigations are going on to cut those supplying chains.

But what really frightened us, it's the quality of the product.

NISHANOV: Interesting. OK.

AZARKHINA: Yes, so our air forces and our engineers they checked inside, and actually, the product is simple but a good quality. Actually, it frightening us a lot when we received the first messages that Iran could deliver also ballistic missiles to Russia. Because if the ballistic missiles from Iran will be the same quality as their kamikaze drones, it's really bad news not only for Ukraine, but for all of the world.

We understand that now we are facing the fact that it's not only Ukraine hasn't enough air defense capabilities, but world as well.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: Yes, no one was expecting that such a war would even happen, but the fact is that we have now on the world map countries which develop very serious military capabilities, and we just can't rely on the international law anymore.

And every time, you know, people ask me, what are going to be with Russia when you defeat –

NISHANOV: Yes.

AZARKHINA: – my answer is, let's figure out what are going to be with other autocratic countries, with our other plutocrats, with other oligarchic countries. Because the worst – and just so you understand what we are fighting, it's not only two nations fighting. But, yeah, they just want – you know, just they want to destroy our nation as well; it's obvious.

But that's also part of different systems and the connection Russia has all over the world, as in the Western world. Those oligarch connections, those corruption connections – those are the worst. Because I understand that our fight against Russia, it's also a fight against global corruption.

NISHANOV: That's, I think – this is a spirit of – frankly, our thinking on many of this, and I think we – I think within this commission you'll find a lot of people would agree with you fully, 100 percent.

Let me ask you this question, I've been reading – as I was preparing for this, I read that there are some issues with spare parts to – for – to be able to restore. Can you talk a little bit about that, and whether, you know, there's any supplies that you know of that some countries that could – again, you know, certain countries might not be comfortable – again, I don't know why – with sending, say, military systems, right, equipment, but spare parts for civilian infrastructure nobody should have any problems with – one would think so.

So can you talk a little bit about that, and who – what are you looking at? Who you're looking at? What countries can help? And what exactly are we looking at?

AZARKHINA: Priority number one is the transformers sort of thing, which transform the different voltage to make it possible to use electricity generated. And that's like –

NISHANOV: Is it specific to, like, former Soviet space, or is it more generic? Or how does it work?

AZARKHINA: Frankly speaking, it's – most of the time it's more Soviet-type because it's very high voltage.

NISHANOV: I see. OK.

AZARKHINA: So 750-class voltage is the most rare – (off mic) – which were destroyed in the first throw. Interesting fact that Ukraine was producing them as well.

NISHANOV: Interesting. Uh-huh.

AZARKHINA: Yeah. And Russia targeted the plant as well, so they, you know –

NISHANOV: See, that's the problem with them knowing everything about, you know – yes. Yeah.

AZARKHINA: Yes. Yeah, this – but, yeah, we are looking for them.

NISHANOV: Yeah. OK.

AZARKHINA: So 750, 330, and 110. That's three classes of voltage transformers. We are looking everywhere.

We have a very detailed list, which I don't know if we're – you know, like, I'll need to find it here – about the spare parts, but we do have this list.

NISHANOV: Yeah, yeah, of course. Yeah. OK.

AZARKHINA: We share it with all partners. We're willing to share it through you because it's not secret information. And for sure it's just, you know, the thing we are scouting out all over the world.

And we are grateful to – for the U.S. Because the job they're already doing, you know, looking all over the world for those things, it's very impressive. Of course our neighbors are frustrated as well, and they understand how our system is working. And they do have some, you know, things in storages.

And basically, important message: generators are important, but they are not the solution of the problem.

NISHANOV: Right. They're just – yeah.

AZARKHINA: We are asking allies to focus on the, you know, core of the problem, and the core of the problem is really the air defense. And then, like, transformer; then we can go to the generators.

But still, we're trying to think ahead. Still we're trying to make sure that, you know, we will be sustained even if such devastation will continue. But the pattern I see – even with, you know, picture as I describe as whole destruction on my way home – the pattern is on our side because we find a way how to repair fast.

NISHANOV: Excellent.

AZARKHINA: We have support of our allies to actually repair it better, and we understand that allies are – we hope will help us even better with air defense. Those three things, that's the key for success.

And again, yes, we understand what we need to do and the next step to be less vulnerable in the future.

NISHANOV: Can I ask you this question? To the extent that you can share this information – because I understand some of this could be classified – but is there – have you noticed, is there any sort of reason, cadence – I understand there is no rational reason why Russia is doing – I mean, we all know that.

But is there any specific triggers? Are there any specific triggers when Russia intensifies its attacks? Or is it just systematic constant cadence of these attacks on the grid to be – to just, you know, demoralize people?

Or are certain – you know, when they do not too well, say, on the frontline, do they increase – intensify their attacks on the grid? I mean, is there anything to that extent that you can share?

AZARKHINA: For sure we see the pattern when they have no chances in the battlefield. I think when, you know, they hit civilians – that we've seen. It's true.

But again, it's more of that. I mean, when they saying publicly – Peskov said that we are doing that to make them negotiate. I mean, that's more clear. But the good thing that Russians they create propaganda about Ukraine and started to believe in it.

In one of the myths which they created, that Ukrainians, as Russians, are totally interested only in gas prices, and you know, those energy issues. That's why they always investing in such riots or something to make look like Ukrainians will stand up against Zelensky because the lights are off.

NISHANOV: Right. Right.

AZARKHINA: So I'm quite happy that they're wrong, but that's actually one of the myths which was – (inaudible). But there is also another piece which I would like to underline – Europe.

Now they're targeting not only us, but Europe as well because Ukraine was exporting electricity to Europe, and our part in this process was important because we were a player which could make influence to the prices in Europe electricity market. But now, of course we can't. We can generate, but we cannot export it.

And that's why it's another attack on Europe as well, and we know Russia know how to use famines, starvation as a weapon, and now they're using energy crisis as a weapon. And we're seeing the same pattern, and they're even publicly – they're underlining that, you know, they keep doing that to make us act differently, and –

NISHANOV: And frankly, that was one of the reasons why we absolutely believe that this is terrorism. I mean, they want to compel you – they want to compel civilians of Ukraine to do a certain political – take up a certain political position.

That's what they do, and they are killing people to achieve that political objective. And therefore, this is – I mean, that's the definition of terrorism, so not going to apologize for that.

But can I ask you something? This is December. This is, you know, sort of mid to early December. It's going to get worse. It's going to get colder. It's going to get worse.

And you know, whatever resources you may have, they're going to – again, to an extent that you can speak to. They're going to – you're probably going to start running out of those resources. What does this winter look like for Ukraine and Ukrainians?

AZARKHINA: Let's see. I mean, so for sure let me picture the war situation. Fact number one, nuclear plant damaged because of the switch on/switch off, because of their attacks. That's catastrophic not only for Ukraine, but for the world.

NISHANOV: Yeah.

AZARKHINA: Second, apocalyptic picture if the heating systems will be damaged entering the frozen days – (inaudible) – can be inhabitant houses and lots of people dying. It may happen.

I do hope that the climate change is working well and the winter wouldn't be so bad for us, but it may happen because we still have cold winters. So those are the worst situations.

NISHANOV: Right.

AZARKHINA: Of course from what I see now, we have some, you know, resources to sustain and keep our fight, but for sure it's difficult. My five years old son is in Kyiv. So again, he's at my parents' house from time to time because they're warm in there.

I mean, they just have very old-fashioned way to heat the house and generator to pick the water from underground. But you know, when we're in the city, we are more vulnerable, and again, when there are lights off, more or less fine. It's been romantic.

NISHANOV: (Laughs.) I appreciate your optimism, yes.

AZARKHINA: Especially –

NISHANOV: The bright side.

AZARKHINA: Yeah. I mean, food industry isn't so bright about that because, again, you understand the place of Ukraine in world starvation prevention, and we all see how the

blockage of seaports in Ukraine actually affected whole countries and especially the most vulnerable countries.

And so the food production, Agri sector and industry in general is in way worse situation than the civilians themselves because of their electricity shortage. But when there are no water, even I start to panic.

NISHANOV: Yeah.

AZARKHINA: I mean of course we are all in the office already, you know, look for the options for the Bio-Toilets, but you know, that's not what we would like to have in the 21st century, and especially, again, elderly and children.

Every day when I manage to organize a normal day for my son with, you know, kindergarten and like even swimming pool – I'm so proud of myself, that's like another victory. But every time there are, you know, some obstacles – morning attacks, like, afternoon outages – you know, the present wave.

NISHANOV: No.

AZARKHINA: But I think we're all growing up very fast, and sometimes it's not just about alternatives, but about the reason to do that. And the reason is we – more than ourselves. It's just really about the future.

NISHANOV: That's incredible. One of the more, sort of, ultimate solutions, obviously, you said would be air defense.

AZARKHINA: Yeah.

NISHANOV: Do you feel like you have – I mean, about the capacity, the capability has increased, but what are we talking about here? I mean, more is always better, but what are, sort of, bare minimum that you think that the United States' allies, whoever, should be supplying to Ukraine to be able to – again, at least through this winter, right, because, you know, let's get to the other side, and we'll just take it from there?

AZARKHINA: One of the things where we can receive fast result is around the possibility to bring to Ukraine the capabilities with now less vulnerable countries. So the production cycle for the modern air defense capabilities is very long, and we don't have such time.

And – but we understand there are capacities in the countries which are not under attack. And what we are asking for allies, it's really to bring the systems to Ukraine now. We'll come back. We'll repair. And just really help us at this moment because for sure when – you know, in the majority of countries now they're just, you know, with beauty. (Laughs.) For us, it's to save millions. And actually, it's just a very urgent thing. So basically, yeah. And for numbers, we

understand that it's rather – sorry – so for us not to go in for very detail in numbers, but it's 10 times at least more than we're receiving now, at least.

NISHANOV: OK, understood. OK.

AZARKHINA: So for what we've received now, it's not even enough to protect Kyiv properly. So it's just to understand. But again, we're in an interesting situation. Israel made possible the protection of the sky mostly because they are small. We are a huge country. And it's impossible to cover all country with, you know, air defense, even if we already – I mean, we would be just covered in air defense capabilities. But still, the numbers – the need and the supply is like that, really a lot to do. But again, what we found out, the world wasn't ready for such war.

NISHANOV: Yes. Right. Yeah.

AZARKHINA: That's not (only people ?) of Ukraine. And it's something – you know, I used to work in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Protection. I was dreaming about different, you know, capabilities development in 21st century. But no. Now we need to study the missiles, you know, different ways how to track the drones, et cetera. That's one of the worst, you know, crimes Russia did. They turn us from the progress again to times when we are competing with weapons. And just, you know, relying on the human lives. That's one of the worst things they did.

NISHANOV: I think – I think that's a – I think that's a good way to – I mean, good way is probably – that's not right. But, you know, this is exactly – I think when you look at it, if we went back to – again, instead of progress – instead of working on new types of energy, whatever, we've gone back to burning wood, and coal, and everything. And this is – it's all on Russia, to be very clear. Yeah.

AZARKHINA: There's starving in Somalia, in Yemen. I mean, why? I wish, you know, all world wouldn't, you know, invest now in new air defense capabilities, but go and have them. But where, you know –

NISHANOV: But that's what's going to happen. I would like to, just once again, invite our audience. If you have any questions, feel free to. Again, there's a three-button – three dots. Click on it, a Q&A box pops up. And you'll be able to ask any question. But let me – one thing that I wanted to – and this is something that our chief of staff, Kyle, actually shared with me. And it's just – it's really, kind of like it's seared in my head.

One of the Kremlin propaganda channels said: Well, you know, you cannot really talk about victory, you cannot be thinking about winning, when you have to go to the bathroom in a bucket, right? I mean, that you don't have proper running water and toilet. And, you know, that's what you use for your toilet. And it seems like this is their thinking. This is what Russians want, right? They want to break the Ukrainian spirit. But it's just not going to happen.

Do you think – I mean, again, this is – it's hard to, you know, speak for these people and to understand their motivation. But do you think their – based on what you've seen – is their gameplan just to continue bombing, and just assume that Ukraine – I mean, don't they understand that Ukrainians are not going to give up? Is this their long-term plan, do you think, based on what you've seen?

AZARKHINA: Actually, it's really too hard to judge them. It's really – I can't understand how – I don't know what the person who is pushing the button or choosing the corridor for the Cheetah missile is thinking about. I mean, I really don't understand that. That's just incredible to accept this motivation. And one of the worst pictures I saw recently in the media, it was the way they're using actually the prisoners in the battlefield. So from what we know from the partners investigation, there are at least 50,000 prisoners who took to the battlefield. And what kind of motivation might be if they just, you know, risking their lives. They're acting like under some, I don't know, narcotics or something. And, I mean, it just really – that's the most difficult question for me.

But from what I see, we just need to bring them to justice and somehow make – remove the whole system. Because from what we see, it's not only because of current president of Russia. It had deeper roots in their crimes, such as Holodomor, such as gulag, and everything. They never said properly sorry. They never really thought about the crimes they did. And the same culture pattern is still there.

NISHANOV: Holodomor, the German parliament last week voted this. I mean, they said it was genocide. No question about that, that it was a deliberate genocide.

We have a couple questions. What sort of Ukrainian infrastructure is needed to permit Russian transit to Europe? For example, is electricity needed? So for Russians to be able to sell, to continue selling more gas to Europe, do they – do they need certain Ukrainian infrastructure to be operational? That's the question. And then we've also – there were reports about Turkish mobile power stations. It's the giant ships. And what's the status on those?

AZARKHINA: Well, the second, unfortunately, I need to check with my colleagues. I'm not sure. But hopefully it will work out.

Regarding the transit, basically they do not really need us in this format now. But from what I feel from their actions now, they are not, you know, doing things rationally. That's why even if it will be the question, they wouldn't go against it. So I think that they're already not on a pragmatic thing.

NISHANOV: It's not even pragmatic, right? It's just –

AZARKHINA: Yeah. Yeah. But what they're doing actually – so they started to hit the construction sites as well in Ukrainian territory.

NISHANOV: OK, interesting.

AZARKHINA: Yeah. And that means a lot, because they – again, they're targeting whole cycle to make us disabled. For sure, there are a lot of risks. But again, we understand. And I do think that everyone in Ukraine clearly understand that that's because of their failure on the frontline.

NISHANOV: Yeah. Yeah. Deputy minister, there's a broader question, and I think we don't have to just limit it to the infrastructure or energy grid. But so we're going to have – we just had elections. We're going to have a new Congress. And what would you like to see in terms of United States support. I mean, you've already identified air defense, but anything else that we might not be – I'll be honest, for example, we had a meeting yesterday where something that, I think, were a little bit, you know, unaware of, like medical needs. Needs for, you know, medical supplies, and that sort of stuff. Obviously, you're an expert in your field. You could, you know, stick to that. But if you think that there are some other priorities that we need to be thinking about. So I think that's the question.

AZARKHINA: So basically, first of all, just keep supporting us.

NISHANOV: Keep supporting? Yeah.

AZARKHINA: I mean, U.S. is a champion for supporting Ukraine, both for the defense and direct micro-financial support that help us a lot to operate as a state. That's important from our point of view. And, you know, we all proved that we are 100 percent opposite to the failure state, as the Russians hope us to be. So just really keep focusing, keep supporting. And we understand that U.S. did for us more than to other countries in these terms. And we really appreciate that.

But what I really would like to raise, and that's something related not only to the state sector but also to the private sector, I want us to move from the donor-recipient relationship to more partner-to-partner relationship. Of course, we're still very dependent. Of course, we are in a position when we need help and we are grateful for help. But it's a good time to start building cooperation, industrial cooperation, and to plan future together. How can it work? We are very innovative now. We're resilient. But we don't have access to the finances and we don't have proper access to the technologies.

If we will start together with private business in U.S. to build those cooperation, that will give us much better results. For example, the grain initiative launched by the president, when Ukraine actually buys the grain from the farmers and send it to Africa. Some may think that it's – why they're sending our donation, and sending grain, to Africa? No, it's a clever way to support both our farmers and ag sector, and to support really those who are on the edge of starvation. So that's one of the examples.

But we can move more. If our farmers would have better access to the credit money – of course, it's all close now. So if we would have opportunities to support them indirectly with really innovative loans, insurances, again, technologies – share technologies with our farmers, they will show you, you know, miracles. That's the way I would like to see our cooperation.

NISHANOV: I love that, yeah.

AZARKHINA: We understand that land lease in a format which was recently proved, that's not the last lease we saw in the Second World War. But the good idea is to start cooperation not only on the level of donation. But we will never say no to the donations. (Laughter.) But –

NISHANOV: I'm glad that you clarified that, yeah. I love that idea. I think what I appreciate about it is just how forward-looking it is. I mean, this war is going to end. Ukraine's going to be victorious. Ukraine is going to win. There's no question about it. It's what is it that comes next. And I think – I love that you're thinking about it. I think what your pitch is, you know, start thinking about Ukraine as an investment destination. Start thinking about Ukraine as a place where – you know, where it clearly showed, demonstrated that it can innovate, that it can deliver, and it can be super creative, like no one else. I think this is a very important message.

We have one more question. What's the best thing that Americans can do to help Ukrainians through this winter? Should they be writing their representatives in Congress, donating to relief organizations, preparing care packages, or something else? I think this is a really, you know, kind of very American question, in a way. Very sort of tangibly, what is it we can do? I mean, air defenses is important but, you know, in my little town in Virginia, you know, a local government is just gathering just warm clothes to send to Ukraine.

And the thing is, everybody's donating. I mean, they've done it a couple times in the past for other kinds, but this is what's happening. So what – in terms of these smaller things, if you will, what is it that regular Americans can do? If you were speaking to all Americans, what would you say?

AZARKHINA: (Laughs.) So, frankly speaking, the question is the best answer here. Yes, keep supporting us publicly, please. Make influence on the Congress. Of course, a lot of talks were around what will change if the balance wouldn't be, like, Democrats, Republicans. So for sure, to make sure that you up bring Ukraine, it's important. From what I feel here, the support is really from the bottom up. I feel it from whole society, whole institutions. So it's totally, like, you can feel that. So I have no doubts that it will continue. But still, just to make us be consistent in our cooperation and support, that's the main thing.

Regarding the different relief organizations, et cetera, a lot of very operational, very, you know, just, like, I can't say any of them, just not to make, you know, how to say, jealous to others.

NISHANOV: Yeah, there's – OK, fair enough. (Laughs.)

AZARKHINA: But, frankly speaking, all which are already working in Ukraine are worth your attention. I do love a project we have together with the Ministry of Digital Transformation called United 24. So it's actually very good way to show how your donations are becoming the part of something bigger. And there are also the parts – you can choose how you're donating for the defense capabilities, or for the reconstruction, and everything. And that's

really good. But also, again, I repeat my, like, suggestion to start and think about partnership with the Ukrainians. And education as well.

NISHANOV: Education? Yeah. Yeah. I mean, excellent. I mean, speaking of grassroots, I think this is one my absolutely favorite examples. I mean, I live out of Virginia. And, you know, everywhere there are Ukrainian flags. I mean, second only to U.S. flags everywhere in my neighborhood. But I think one of my absolutely favorite was when it was a little bit warmer and I was walking down a street, I took my kids to their class. And there was a lady sitting in a car. And she had little tiny Ukrainian flag. And I just automatically, without even thinking, I said, slava Ukraini. And she automatically went, heroyam slava, right? Which is, like – with a very kind of American accent. But, you know, I was, like, oh my God, it's becoming a thing.

And it was – so I think you're right. Grassroots support, it's 100 percent there. And I think we had a hearing yesterday. And we had – it was – you know, our Commission is bipartisan. And one thing that Congressman Wilson, who chaired over a portion of it, said: This is one thing where Republicans and Democrats agree. I mean, he said, you know, he has not seen anything on any other topic where you can see this bipartisanship and bipartisan support. And Ukrainians in many ways have captured our imaginations and our hearts. And I think that support will continue. So you can definitely count on that.

AZARKHINA: My message to the Republicans is, again, again, about industrial cooperation. I visited a lot of industries here during this visit. And I was joking, like, you are our best advocates. (Laughs.) I mean, no joke, but I understand that there are place for more cooperation on the ground in that partnership.

NISHANOV: I appreciate that. It's not – I think what your message is, it's not just – we're not just recipients of donations. Or, you know, we're not out there just looking for handouts. But really, we want to work together. And I think – I think in many ways that the spirit of the revolution of dignity, frankly. And I think it's what Ukrainians do. They show dignity, they show up. And this is – they don't want any handouts. They don't want any favors from anyone. They just want to be able to live their lives according to rules. And what's what they want to do. And I think in many ways what you're saying is 100 percent true.

I think we're almost at a one-hour mark. I don't – I think we've answered all the questions. I just wanted to give you an opportunity to just again address the people who are watching it. And maybe you could – what's the message? You know, you're going to be heading back to Kyiv –

AZARKHINA: Yep, tomorrow.

NISHANOV: Tomorrow. OK. OK. We'll be thinking of you. And we want to make sure that you are there, and we're obviously going to stay in touch. But as you're departing the United States, what's the one message – I mean, I think you said, you know, keep supporting us, which we will.

AZARKHINA: I'm a Star Wars fan.

NISHANOV: OK. OK. I mean, you're a deputy minister for infrastructure, so I mean, that would not be – yeah.

AZARKHINA: (Laughs.) I mean, and as a Star Wars fan, it's really – it's obvious who is the empire here and who is the resistance. And what I love about Hollywood is actually to putting very clearly where is the good and where is the evil. Russia somehow make our life easier with such atrocities, what they're doing in Ukraine, because it's, you know, absolutely evil here. Because before they were trying to play in this, you know, propaganda, false – like false truth things, et cetera. And it was way more difficult to pursue it, what they were doing – or the things they were doing. Now they start, of course, in 2014.

So the only thing I wish is everyone would listen to us, would keep thinking about the good, about the values, about the real reasons which make us humans and not animals. So Slava Ukraini.

NISHANOV: Heroyam slava. And I think one important note on that is you're 100 percent right. This is not Ukraine – and I think – I mean, I've said it before. Ukrainians are not doing it just for themselves. I mean, you are doing it for your country and for your people. For that little kid, you know, in a hospital that I saw today, just absolutely breaks your heart. But I think you're doing it for everyone else. And, you know, somebody at the hearing that we had yesterday said: You know, if Ukrainians don't stop this evil, it's going to come next to you, right? It's going to be – you know, NATO is right there.

So, you know, Ukrainians are the ones who are stopping this. So on behalf of everyone who is reasonable, rational, kind, and not evil, thank you so much for everything that you do. TIME named President Zelensky, but importantly, spirit of Ukrainian people, as the person of the year. And I think the spirit of Ukrainian people is truly the person of the year, and of this decade, maybe of this century. So on behalf of everyone one else, thank you so much. And thank you for joining us and taking the time to join us today. I know we had a very busy schedule. So thank you so much. Really appreciate it. Thank you.

AZARKIHINA: Thank you very much. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 4:22 p.m., the briefing ended.]