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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky photographed in Kyiv on April 19

Alexander Chekmenev for TIME

BY **SIMON SHUSTER/KYIV**

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TIME senior correspondent Simon Shuster spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 19, 2022 at the Presidential compound in Kyiv. Following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

TIME: Last night, in your address to the nation, you announced the start of the battle for the Donbas, for eastern Ukraine. What led you to do that?

They have long been gathering this force of theirs. ...Now we see that it's complete, in terms of their readiness, in terms of their plans, in terms of the way we understand their military intentions.

Do you think this battle will be decisive?

I think that, in many respects, yes. I would characterize this period of the war as follows. We are dealing with a difficult threat along many vectors. A large part of our army is concentrated in the east of our country, today in the east and the south.

This will be a full-scale battle, bigger than any we have seen on the territory of Ukraine. They can push forward to the maximum occupation of our territory, to the encirclement of our most significant group of forces, the one in the east. They have the desire to do this.

In any case they will certainly be preoccupied with **inflicting the maximum destruction** from their side. Because they understand that this is our core. It will influence our dialogue. It will influence the way the figures are placed on the board in this game. It will influence, I think, the cohesion of our army, as well as the cohesion of their army. If we hold out – as I honestly believe we will, as a citizen, a patriot and the President of this country – it will be a decisive moment for us. The tipping point.

As for the next steps, including diplomacy. A serious part of our army is there, and many victims. That always has an impact. It does not seem to have much of an impact on the military leaders of the Russian Federation. But it sure has an impact on us, because I take seriously the number of people who might die from this full-scale battle.

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Let me ask you about one part of this battle. Hundreds of your troops are [besieged in Mariupol](#), inside the Azovstal steel factory, along with many civilians. Have you spoken to them?

We're in pretty much daily contact. One of us speaks to them on the phone. I talked to them yesterday or the day before. Sometimes it's on the phone, sometimes they write messages.

Messages directly to you?

Yes, directly to me. I get their texts. Sometimes they have questions. In some places the questions are truly difficult. They have it very hard. They are strong people. Many of those boys have died. They also have hundreds of wounded people to carry.

There are many issues we talk about. First of all, it's about them holding out and really knowing what they are holding. It's not just about some piece of this factory, Azovstal, or even Mariupol. It's the symbolism of this situation. It's the [enemy's] desire to break one of the bones in our back.

For the Russians – it's a symbol. That's why they keep playing these little games, these bloody little games, in which they say they're ready to make a trade, but don't end up trading anyone.

As I see it, their actions are meant to degrade a person as much as possible, to make them starve... Yes, we wanted to make a trade for our wounded. We're working on that and, I think, it could even work out. There are civilians there, civilian residents who are [besieged, wounded and killed](#).

Could you say more about your communications with the people who are there?

The 36th [Separate Marine] Brigade had it really tough. It was all a catastrophe. No food, no water, no weapons. Nothing. They ran out of everything. We tried to support each other. [Their commander] explained the situation to me. The guys could not retreat. They could not attack or defend themselves, because they could not leave their friends behind. So that was the situation. It was a matter of humanity. It was emotional. It was a situation where people just need some support.

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Let's talk about the start of the invasion. That first night, Feb. 24, I understand from your staff that there were attempts to storm this compound. There were gunfights in the street. Could you remember that night for me?

Well, I remember some things in a fragmented way. Each day at some point began to resemble the others. The first days were hard for all of us. I think we were all more or less in the same condition. Everyone in Ukraine, only with different responsibilities. And your responsibility puts pressure on the way you focus, on your priorities, and throws everything else to the side. You understand that this is war, and you don't think about its symptoms. You recognize it all. You understand that they are watching. You are a symbol. You have to act the way [*a head of state must act*](#). So of course I remember moments from that night. The explosions. The children.

What children?

Mine. We woke them up. It was loud. There were explosions over there, and so on. You understand. I came to the office. Pretty much all of us gathered, and we began to act very fast.

Your family was here with you at that moment?

Yes. We all have families. We're human beings. And we had to make some fast decisions. As of this moment, I think the decisions we made, some on purpose and others by accident, were right.

Yes, we're still sitting here.

Have you ever driven at high speed?

It happens.

I also went through that age at the wheel. And at that moment, at high speed, in the dark – it's a question of focus. If you get distracted with someone running in front of the windshield, flashing lights, screaming, waving their hands...if you let any of that distract you, your chances of reaching your destination are low. Not quite zero, but very low.

Here it was roughly the same. It was necessary to focus on the main things. What do we need to do right now, how to organize, and most of all, to stay united? I think that, before the invasion, our society was in some ways divided. We were not a clenched fist. And then we were. I think that's very important. They outnumber us by a lot. So we just needed to be a unified whole. That is our only chance.

During the invasion, when did you first leave the presidential compound?

We went out in the first days. In those first days we went out without any photos or any kind of news stories. The guards told me: Look, if you want to drive out, then we can't make it public anywhere. We did not involve the press service. We drove out to look at the checkpoints, our soldiers and how they are doing. It was not a bad ride.

Your bodyguards must have been losing their minds.

Yes, they were losing their minds. We couldn't go any further, because beyond that is already the blown-up bridge, the big crater, and going further is impossible. That would already be beyond the checkpoints.

Why did you go there?

I wanted to have a look, see what it's like. Then I wanted to talk to the people there, to see how they're feeling at the checkpoints.

And then there was the borsch trip?

The borsch was really super! I still remember it.

You went to the checkpoint and they were making borsch?

At the checkpoint there was this great guy. It was the irony of fate. Every day this guy comes to the defenders, to our guys. He lives somewhere in a village nearby. He just makes borsch without asking any questions. He talked about how much he hates the Russians. And then he says he served in the USSR. He showed us these medals he had in his trunk. Yes, he drives around with his medals. A wonderful man, because that man definitely knows what he's doing. I love people who know the purpose of living every day. ... This man wakes up every day, makes borsch and comes to the guys at the checkpoint just to feed them. He gave me some. So we had a good bowl of borsch with bread. We all had an extremely good time. And we all remember that moment.

We saw each other here on April 8, right after the Russian missile attack on the [train station in Kramatorsk](#). Please tell me about that day. How did you learn about that attack?

I learned about it from one terrible photograph. I was sent a photograph of a woman who had been beheaded. It was not among the photographs we showed to inform people about the tragedy. I asked who had been nearby, whether there were children, and who died. She was wearing these bright, memorable clothes. And I said, it's not possible. If children see this... if they see this from official sources. If anyone sees this.

Right after that, you had to go to a meeting with Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, and I could see you were trying to hold back your emotions. How did you manage to do that?

Yes. It was one of those times when your arms and legs are doing one thing, but your head does not listen. Because your head is there at the station, and you need to be present here. But I think you just don't have a choice. In those circumstances you have to be there and find an answer to this.

How have you changed since the invasion?

I've gotten older.

Have you lost your sense of humor?

Of course not! That's impossible. It's impossible to let that happen. It is a means of survival. Otherwise, everyone around would feel depressed. And feeling depressed is not a good way to win. You have to be in a victorious mood. No matter how hard it is, that's the goal. The goal is definitely not to lose. So you can't be in a mood of weakness or panic. You have to keep it together, and that togetherness has to be in everything – in your mood, your method, your words.

So in what sense have you aged?

Mentally, morally. Well, in a moral sense I'm absolutely firm. But I've aged from all this wisdom that I never wanted. It's the wisdom tied to the number of people who have died, and the torture the Russian soldiers perpetrated. That kind of wisdom... To be honest, I never had the goal of attaining knowledge like that.

That reminds me of our first conversation, three years ago, at the premier of your comedy show here in Kyiv. Your life looked pretty good. Your whole troupe was there, all your friends. And I asked you: why would want to go into politics?

I remember that conversation.

Of course we didn't know that there would be a full-scale war. But looking back, do you wonder about that decision? Do you regret it?

Of course I don't regret it. I don't regret it at all. Not for a second. I don't even think about it. On the contrary I sometimes think that it was right. It was very right.

Since the invasion, what has been the hardest time of day for you?

Of course it's when I lay down to sleep.

Why?

Well, because I don't fully understand whether it's time or not. Whether I have the right. Was there something else I needed to do? I look at my schedule. It's pointless to look at it. It's the same agenda. I see it's over for today. But I look at it several times and sense that something is wrong. It's my conscience bothering me. I've allowed myself to sleep. But now what? Something is happening right now.

To be honest, in the first days I woke everybody up. It was between 4:50 and 5:20. Those were the first days. That was the difficult period I told you about, when I didn't have the right to go to sleep before I knew how many [bombs] landed where.

During your last meeting with your generals, what did they tell you about the battle for the east?

We understand that this process has commenced. The question now is whether it commenced with full force. ... At certain points in the east, it's just insane. A full-scale war of the harshest kind is happening there every day. It's horrible. Really horrible in terms of the frequency of the strikes, the heavy artillery fire, and the losses. In those places it's already begun.

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