

Unofficial translation of an op-ed by ambassador Ole Egberg Mikkelsen published in Danish Daily Jyllands-Posten, on 26 December 2022:

Ukraine believes in victory, security and EU membership - and has visions of Mykolaiv as "Denmark by the Black Sea"

If you ask Ukrainians about their expectations for 2023, there is no doubt. The vast majority of Ukrainians I meet on a daily basis answer "victory" without hesitation when asked what 2023 will bring for Ukraine. It is not because all Ukrainians necessarily are familiar with Churchill's words in May 1940 to the British House of Commons: "What is our goal? Victory at any cost, because without victory we cannot survive". It is however exactly the same attitude that characterizes the Ukrainians.

Seen from Denmark, it may seem surprising. Many thousands have lost their lives. Several hundreds of thousands serve in the armed forces, many at the front lines with fierce fighting, and every day brings new painful losses. Many millions have left Ukraine or are internally displaced because of the war. Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, are under attack by missiles and drones. And there are extensive interruptions of electricity, water and heat everywhere in the country.

Obviously the situation is worst in the communities close to the front line. I was in Kherson at the end of November, immediately after the city had been liberated. The shopping centers were closed and the entrances blocked with boards after Russian looting. The town was without electricity and water. The front line is close. On the other side of the Dnipro river are the Russian positions, and while we were in the city there was regular artillery fire. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was characterized by overflowing with joy at the Freedom Square in the city center. Young and old celebrated the liberation. As a couple of young guys said: We have neither electricity nor water, but on the other hand we have no Russians!

That statement illustrates better than long explanations why the Ukrainian will to fight and the resilience and belief in victory of Ukrainians are undiminished. Ukrainians know they have no choice: they have to fight and live with the hardship and deprivations that war brings. They have seen what happens under Russian occupation. Many Danes have seen the horrific images from the suburbs of Bucha and Irpin near Kyiv. In June, I attended the reopening of the Jysk store in Bucha and heard the horror stories that the employees could tell about the four weeks under Russian occupation.

For the Ukrainians, the struggle is thus existential. Victory is seen as the only option for a secure future. Then, in the meantime, you have to adapt to the conditions. To that extent, the Ukrainians have proven themselves capable of this. Schools and kindergartens have shelters. The capital echoes with whirring generators. Headlamps light up the darkness on the sidewalks of Kyiv, and the elevators in the high-rises are equipped with water canisters in case the elevator stops during a power outage. The advanced Ukrainian IT industry has launched advanced air alert apps on the market. The Ukrainian Eurovision Song Contest has just been held in a metro station deep underground. It worked fine, although the passing trains made a bit of noise. But the atmosphere was top notch, and for those of us who were there, it was a memorable evening. So the Ukrainians have been adept at adapting to the conditions of war. At the embassy, we try to do as the Ukrainians and have set up regular routines for air alarms and with emergency supplies and emergency power.

But what will 2023 bring? As mentioned already, the Ukrainians hope that a victory will bring safety and security. Most Ukrainians recognize that NATO membership is years into the future, but they hope that security can be created in other ways. One possibility, which many here point to, is a Ukraine that is battle-ready and armed to the teeth, following the Israeli example. Inspired by this, President Zelenskyy has just launched a proposal for a summit at the beginning of 2023, which aims to give Ukraine's partners a role in various areas that are important to Ukraine's security. It is definitely something to keep an eye on in 2023.

Ukraine's EU candidate status is also something to watch out for in 2023. On February 28, just four days after the Russian attack, Ukraine submitted an application for EU membership. A team of officials led by Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna sat for many weeks in a bomb shelter, filling out the myriad forms required while Russian forces stood in Kyiv's suburbs. After a rapid process, Ukraine was granted candidate status at the European Council summit in June.

There are, of course, many challenges before Ukraine fulfills the Copenhagen criteria, which by the way has its 30th anniversary in June 2023. The Ukrainians, if anyone, are aware that it will be a difficult process. But most people I talk to emphasize that Ukrainians will approach the accession process with the same fervor and will to fight as they approach the armed struggle on the battlefield. Most recently, a number of laws, which are prerequisites for the further admission process, have been adopted at a record pace. So my guess is that Ukraine's admission process in 2023 will go faster than many expect. Denmark also has an important role. Denmark implements the European anti-corruption program on behalf of the EU, and continued progress in the fight against corruption is of course a prerequisite for progress in the admission process.

But Ukrainians do not only dream of security, freedom and a future in the EU. In the port city of Mykolaiv, which until recently was under daily shelling, there are dreams of Denmark.

In his speech to the Danish parliament, the Folketing, in March, President Zelenskyy suggested that Denmark become a partner for the reconstruction of city of Mykolaiv - which is known in Ukraine as the city of shipbuilders. The partnership was sealed during the Danish Prime Minister's visit to Ukraine in April, and since then an active partnership has developed. Denmark has initially assisted in getting the city ready for winter. This has been done, among other things, by sending large quantities of chipboard to the city, which can be used to cover the thousands of broken windows. Spare parts for the destroyed water supply have also been supplied, and private and public donors in Denmark have supplied construction equipment.

The city's young and energetic mayor Oleksandr Senkyevych has a background as an IT entrepreneur. His vision is for Mykolaiv to become a "little Denmark by the Black Sea" - just as sustainable, prosperous, digitized and competitive as the model, and with a town plan that puts people at the center. And of course, Mykolaiv must be as uncorrupt as Denmark, so that foreign investment can be attracted. In the mayor's view, this is the most important thing that Denmark can contribute. We are in contact with Danish companies about this already.

Rebuilding Mykolaiv will not be an easy task. The city is badly damaged after the Russian bombardments, and half of the inhabitants have left the city. But as the mayor says: We need a positive vision so that the city can get back on its feet after the horrors of war. As a Dane, one can only be happy and proud to hear that. So keep an eye on the Denmark-Mykolaiv

partnership in 2023. It is already well underway, and there is great interest – both in Denmark and in Mykolaiv