

The peacemaker

Kyiv

Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, has become the face of diplomacy against a country seemingly hell-bent on ignoring common sense.

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When MONOCLE last visited Kyiv, in summer, the sun was shining, Ukraine had just been granted EU candidate status and the air-raided sirens only sounded sporadically. Things feel very different as I alight three months later at Kyiv-Pasazhyrskiy, the city's main railway hub, on a chilly mid-October morning. The first thing I notice are the crowds. Back in the summer there had been an even ebb and flow of people coming in and out of the country. Now the majority of people in the station are heading in one direction: west.

I am here to meet Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister and a man who has become one of many icons of the country's defiance. Catapulted into the international spotlight, Kuleba has traversed the globe since Russia's invasion began in February, relaying his peoples' plight and keeping the focus on their struggle. But before I met him, I, along with many across the country, spent the night in a bomb shelter. A few days before, Russia resumed targeting Ukrainian cities with missiles and kamikaze drones, claiming retaliation for an attack on the Crimean bridge. I am in my hotel for just 30 minutes before the first siren sounds.

In Kyiv the darkness of winter rings differently. Scheduled and unscheduled power cuts are frequent; the latest Russian shelling has heavily damaged about 40 per cent of Ukraine's energy infrastructure and electricity, water and heat have become rationed commodities. But after 10 months of war, Ukrainians know how to adapt. About 1,000 heating points have been set up around the city – schools, office buildings and train stations doubling up as “warm locations” with generators for citizens to charge their phones and laptops, and people serving hot food and drinks. Survival kits are left in elevators should you get stuck during a power outage and

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people have begun collecting firewood to fuel long-neglected stoves. Despite being the country's lead diplomat, Kuleba is also a resident of Kyiv and has had to adjust to life during wartime. “I've also become an expert in energy,” he says while sitting in an armchair at his office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) building. “I'm learning everything about generators, transformers, grids and how to repair them.”

It's somewhat paradoxical that Ukraine's war effort is being directed from within these walls. Located in Mykhailivska Square in Kyiv's historic upper town, the MFA building is one of the best-preserved examples of Stalinist architecture in Ukraine (it was originally the headquarters of the Communist Party). It's a not-so-gentle nod to the USSR's ambitions for uniformity. The doorways of this grand columned edifice are stuffed with sandbags and there are armed guards at every corner.

On the ministerial floor, sunlight reflects off the nearby domes of St Michael's Monastery and pours through the windows. “Hi, I'm Dmytro, thanks for coming to Kyiv,” says Ukraine's foreign minister, extending a hand. The 41-year-old Kuleba, the youngest-ever person to hold this position in Ukraine, is dressed in a fluorescent puffer jacket and grey cardigan. At the beginning of the war, commentators were surprised by the baby-faced, bespectacled diplomat. “One of the frequent things I kept hearing about myself was, ‘He's too young for the job,’” he says. What a difference 10 months of war makes. “Two weeks ago a colleague of mine noticed that I changed my haircut and glasses and told me, ‘You look so much younger now.’ And I thought, ‘Yes, I have finally reached the age where I actively have to do something to look younger.’”

The war has propelled Kuleba onto the world stage. He has met many of his international counterparts, something that can take several tenures to achieve, and at global gatherings he's the one who people seek out in the room. Yet, despite his apparent ubiquity, he insists that he is particular when choosing trips abroad. “I hate travelling for business purposes,” he says. “So I only travel when there is a necessity to be there in person. If you see me travelling, that is a clear message that this is a must and not just another trip on the schedule.” One such example was his journey to The Hague in May, where he was drumming up support for Ukraine's EU accession



bid. Another was a visit to neighbouring Poland in March, after which Warsaw pledged at least €1.7bn of military assistance to Kyiv. “I spent almost a week there, talking to everyone possible,” he says. “And in the end the deliveries of heavy military hardware, tanks and armoured vehicles were unlocked.”

Shortly before our encounter, Kuleba had been in Africa visiting Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Kenya, following the UN General Assembly in New York, where he took part in a ministerial meeting of the UN Security Council. His first official trip to the African continent was, he says, “to give birth to a renaissance of Ukraine-Africa relations”. But the tour was cut short due to drone attacks on Kyiv – telling, considering that the meetings with his African counterparts were part of a strategic move to influence a continent that has seemed cool in its support for Ukraine.

“African countries are making the same mistake that European countries had been making up until this war began. They are putting Russia and the USSR on an equal footing,” referring to the wrongful assumption that Ukraine is still one with Russia. “I told them to look back at the 1980s, it was we who were fighting against apartheid and discrimination in Africa, not the USSR. Most of the engineers who came there in Soviet times to build dams and factories were Ukrainian. They need to start thinking rationally about Russia and base it on facts, not on historical perceptions.” He adds that the same can be applied to perceptions of investment.

African nations are keen to appease Russia because they believe that it is a large benefactor, when in fact Moscow is nowhere near the top of the list of investors in Africa – the biggest being China, with more than \$70bn (£67.3bn) of annual investment, followed by the US and UAE, according to the 2021 EY Africa Attractiveness report. “The biggest investment that Russia has made in Africa in recent years is importing Wagner Group mercenaries to sow conflict, destabilise the situation and pose a threat to their countries,” says Kuleba.

Even though Kyiv is once more under threat, Ukrainian forces are making considerable gains – at the time of writing, Russia has hastily retreated from Kherson, the only regional capital it had captured during the war, and the government has begun planning the future of a free, territorially independent Ukraine. The groundwork to become an EU



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member state has already been laid out; could Nato membership follow? “After this war we will be full members of both the EU and Nato, and guarantors of global food security,” says Kuleba. “We will be an integral and indispensable part of the West. The West is not a geographical notion; it’s a political one. And if you share the same principles and values, irrespective of your geography, you belong to the West.”

Kuleba feels that his country has paid its dues to be welcomed into the club. The trail of destruction, trauma and loss of life in Ukraine is unprecedented in postwar Europe; in November, General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, estimated that there have been 100,000 military casualties on each side, with about 40,000 Ukrainian civilians losing their lives. Yet if there is to be a silver lining, Kuleba insists, it’s of a significant world power rising from the ashes. “Because of the experience we are getting from this war, we will become the second-most important military force in Nato after the US,” he says. “With the stamina and military power we are gaining now, we will be absolutely exceptional. So the security of the

Euro-Atlantic area will, to a large extent, depend on Ukraine. We will no longer be a country on the periphery of the eastern flank, we will be a crucial pillar for the security of the entire European continent.”

This thinking underscores the maxim echoed by every Ukrainian official: that this is not just Ukraine’s war. “When I speak to foreign ministers or leaders, I always want them to understand just one thing: on 24 February, Vladimir Putin attacked not only Ukraine, but Europe. And, more broadly speaking, the entire world order too.”

When we meet, the city has just spent another night with blackouts and air-raid sirens. In the morning, Volodymyr Zelensky is quick to appear on the government’s social media channels, which have been so integral to Kyiv’s war effort. Despite a night of terror, Zelensky insists that Ukraine will be triumphant. “He has one very special feature: he’s always thinking about victory,” says Kuleba of his boss. He describes Zelensky as “cool” and recalls the time he offered him the job of foreign minister in 2020. “I’m deeply grateful to him,” he says. “He entrusted the system to me. I really have a feeling that it’s time that chooses us – me, Zelensky and the people in his team. We’re here because there’s a certain mission we have to complete and it’s a big responsibility.”

The foreign minister describes himself as an optimist but admits that his sunny outlook pales in comparison to Zelensky’s. “Here’s an example,” he says. “A few weeks ago I was feeling particularly blue. It was after the Iranian-made drones attacked several cities and our energy infrastructure, and I went to Zelensky’s office for a meeting and was quietly waiting for our conversation to begin. All of a sudden he looks at me and says, ‘Dmytro, I’ve found the location for our museum of victory.’” Kuleba left the room, he says, with a renewed spring in his step.

But a foreign minister can only rely so much on the inspiring words of his president. In extremis, it’s important to have a routine that keeps you grounded. For Kuleba, there are three crucial steps. “My best method of relaxation is my dogs,” he says, referring to his pack: the oldest, Gustav, a Jack Russell; Benjamin, a toy poodle; and Marik, a French bulldog rescued from Mariupol back in February (his name is the nickname of the

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city). “When I come home and I see them, it’s a real reset.” Step two is to meditate. “My meditation is to smoke a cigar in the evening – a Davidoff Winston Churchill. It takes me about 45 minutes and it’s the only time in my day that I can just relax and concentrate on something else.” And the third rule is to sleep, “no matter what happens, otherwise you won’t be able to make reasonable decisions”. There’s one additional thing that trumps them all, which is to appreciate the rare moments when he is able to spend time with his children, who live with his former wife outside Kyiv and cannot see their father very regularly due to security issues. “That is the biggest inspiration and motivation to me.”

The Cambridge Dictionary defines diplomacy as, “skill in dealing with people without offending or upsetting them”. But is it possible to be courteous when sitting across the table from an unprovoked aggressor? “The basic feeling I have towards them is disgust – not hate,” says Kuleba of his Kremlin counterparts. “They’re miserable people trying to find, through diplomacy, excuses for the atrocities and crimes they have committed.”

The grain deal that Kuleba helped to strike between Moscow and Kyiv, via the mediation of Turkey, in July 2022, has been the closest to any rapprochement that the two sides have achieved since the start of the conflict. It was an important step towards a potential diplomatic solution to the war. Ukraine produces 10 per cent of the world’s wheat, 15 per cent of its corn and 13 per cent of its barley, and the effect of the fighting is being felt far beyond the shores of the Black Sea. While Zelensky maintains that the prospect of peace negotiations with Russia is “impossible”, this is a sign that there is room to compromise on other, non-military aspects of the conflict.

But how realistic is it that the war will end through compromise? “The moment for negotiations will come because every war ends with diplomacy,” says Kuleba. “My job right now is to ensure that Ukraine can approach that moment in the strongest position possible and Russia in the weakest position possible. They won’t be able to speak in the language of ultimatums.” Though he adds one final comment. “As I told you at the start, we cannot allow emotions to overwhelm,” he says. “When the time comes, I’m ready to sit down with them. But I will never shake their hands.” — (M)