How the Balance of Power in the South Caucasus is Changing and What Is Ukraine's Interest?

Yuriy Oliynyk: Glory to Ukraine! Today, our think tank, "Ukrainian Studies of Strategic Disquisitions," is holding an event at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, whom we thank for their partnership. This event is about Ukraine's cooperation with Azerbaijan and the security situation in the South Caucasus. The issue is quite important because, geopolitically, our interests are tied very closely to Belarus, the Baltic states, and the South Caucasus states—tied by historical preconditions, as well as economic and political ones, and by common threats coming from Russia, from those forces trying to return Moscow's rule and domination over the former territories of the empire. Strictly speaking, we will attempt to begin, at the very least, a proper discussion on these various aspects today.

Let me introduce the speakers. I am **Yuriy Oliynyk**, PhD in Political Science, Director of the Non-Governmental Center "Ukrainian Studies of Strategic Disquisitions," and also an active serviceman. Strictly speaking, **Yuriy Syrotiuk**, the founder and honorary director of our center, was supposed to be here today, but he is currently in the Donbas. As he is currently a sergeant in the 5th Assault Brigade and due to various circumstances does not have a connection right now, he could not join us. However, he conveyed his gratitude to the participants, particularly to our foreign speakers who are interested in mutually beneficial cooperation with Ukraine.

I also express gratitude to all our partners. Present here with me in the hall are, first of all, **Andriy Rudyk**, PhD in Social and Behavioral Sciences and also a serviceman of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). Also **Oleksiy Tkachenko**, an expert of our center and also an active serviceman.

Joining us online are friends from Georgia: **Amiran Khevtsuriani**, Doctor of International Relations, Professor at the Georgian Technical University. And also **Farhad Mamedov**, head of the Center for Studies of the South Caucasus [from Azerbaijan].

And perhaps **Igor Semyvolos**, historian and political scientist, Director of the Association of Middle East Studies, will join us if he has a connection.

To begin, I would like to express solidarity and thank Azerbaijan for the fact that this country, despite the complex geopolitical situation and Russian pressure, provides real security, financial, and humanitarian aid. We see real, strong reactions to manifestations of Russian imperialism. In particular, we know the story of how the Azerbaijani embassy was damaged during strikes on Kyiv recently, and there was a sharp note from the Azerbaijani government to Russia regarding this. We know how integral Baku's strategy is in not compromising its national interests regarding demands from Russia. For instance, regarding the apology for the downing of the aircraft with Azerbaijani citizens—Putin was forced to do this literally a month ago. Since there is no real power in the Caucasus right now to back up threats, he was forced to demonstratively admit Russia's guilt.

Again, we offer our condolences to the Azerbaijani people regarding all these tragedies. Also, despite the existing problems, we understand that the fate of not only the South Caucasus and Ukraine but also Europe is being decided primarily in Ukraine on the fronts of the Russian-

Ukrainian war. Therefore, who wins here now will determine who will truly rule, if not the world, then at least in our regions. Both Azerbaijan and Georgia understand this.

Unfortunately, conditions do not always allow for clearly taking a side, but we see clear support for Ukraine, primarily at the level of civil society and the majority of politicians, as is evident in Azerbaijan first and foremost. We see a real change in the situation in the South Caucasus because, after the Karabakh War, after the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, and after Russia poured all its resources into the war with Ukraine, the influence of other states in the South Caucasus has significantly increased. It has become easier for Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia to choose alternatives, different alliances, and to maneuver to protect their national interests.

These breakthroughs that occurred even over the last year—the conclusion of a peace agreement [process] between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the strengthening of direct relations of Azerbaijan and Georgia with Turkey—all objectively weaken Russia. Russia does not forget this; Russia has plans to pivot back to the Caucasus if it allegedly defeats Ukraine, but right now there is a real weakening that needs to be consolidated and strengthened. And only through cooperation between our states can we make this process irreversible.

Moreover, Georgia also has problems with occupied territories. We know that a few weeks ago, the creeping negotiations between Russia and Georgia again ended in nothing, because [Moscow] demands guarantees of non-aggression against Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which are recognized by no one, not even annexed by Russia compared to the Ukrainian regions of Donbas or Zaporizhzhia. Yet Russia, supposedly from a position of peace, demands that Tbilisi does not interfere in their affairs, rather than demanding Abkhazia or itself to stop interfering in Georgian affairs.

Russia works the same way regarding Ukraine, demanding from the US and Trump that Ukraine surrender its territories and renounce their return by force. This is Russia's goal: first to seize, then to fix this state of affairs, and if anyone violates it, to accuse them of all sins of violating the peace.

The situation is complex, but there is a prospect to work with. I would like to give the floor to our guest from Baku, **Farhad Mamedov**. What is your opinion on the relevance and main points of Ukrainian-Azerbaijani relations?

Farhad Mamedov: Thank you very much. Excuse me for speaking in Russian, but I think with time we will learn the Ukrainian language to be more understandable to the Ukrainian audience. Today our topic covers mainly relations with Azerbaijan in the modern period, but it is impossible to do so without mentioning the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine and the attempts to occupy Ukrainian territory. In most cases, both in Russian media and in Ukraine and the West, many people focus on the fact that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, visited the Russian Federation the day before the full-scale invasion began and signed a declaration on allied cooperation with Russia. But many people forget that on January 14 of that same year, i.e., almost a month before the visit to Moscow, the President of Azerbaijan visited Ukraine and signed a declaration on deepening strategic partnership with Ukraine, involving a large number of investments and the start of investment projects on the territory of Ukraine.

I remember that was the period when embassies of various countries were leaving Kyiv because there was information about a possible Russian attack on Ukraine. Traditionally, Azerbaijan

and Ukraine support each other, especially on the issue of territorial integrity, and Azerbaijan's position on this is consistent. Whether regarding our already concluded conflict with Armenia, or in relations to Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, we have always adhered to the traditional position of supporting territorial integrity.

The 44-day war of 2020 and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in general—what can be drawn from it for the current situation in Ukraine? The President of Azerbaijan noted that territory can be occupied, but one cannot renounce the rights to this territory. This lesson, which Azerbaijan formed over 25 years and at a certain moment exercised its right to restore territorial integrity, I think is an important element that can be gleaned from the 44-day war of 2020.

External sanctions. In scale, of course, what we had regarding the occupying country is incomparable to what Ukraine has. This is the most important element that cannot be abandoned.

The occupying country must feel that it made a mistake, and sanctions are the element that is important now and will be important in the future. Azerbaijan had such a sanction—the closed Armenian-Turkish border and Turkey's refusal to restore diplomatic relations with Armenia. We had only one country that used sanctions against Armenia.

In Ukraine's case, it is dozens of countries. And it is important that all these sanctions be conditioned upon the return of Ukraine's territory. This is the most important element of diplomacy that Ukraine will need.

In principle, it is needed now and will be needed in the future. As you know, today, although we have de facto peace with Armenia, a peace treaty has not been fully signed or ratified. And Turkey still has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, and the Armenian-Turkish border is still closed.

The next element, which was already noted by the moderator, is Azerbaijan's position regarding Ukraine in Russian-Azerbaijani relations. The Russian Federation expected from Azerbaijan, in one form or another, not only support for its policy but also understanding. But this did not happen either, because the Azerbaijani position is consistent on the issue of territorial integrity. Azerbaijan did not refuse contacts with Ukraine—that is, contacts at the highest level, at the level of foreign ministers, and at the people's level. Azerbaijan ranks first in terms of the scale of humanitarian aid given to Ukraine. Currently, these figures exceed 40 million dollars.

Ukrainian children visit Azerbaijan and undergo rehabilitation under the Heydar Aliyev Foundation program. Azerbaijan's SOCAR is patronizing the restoration of the city of Irpin. Azerbaijan might even be the only one among various countries in the world that invested in Ukraine's economy during the war.

This year, two large mining and processing plants in Ukraine were purchased by Azerbaijani companies. Along with this, when our relations with the Russian Federation deteriorated, we had several levels of crisis in relations. And when the crisis reached its peak, Russia struck SOCAR's energy infrastructure in Ukraine. Exactly when Azerbaijan began supplying its gas—its own gas, this is a very important point—to Ukraine via Eastern European states.

This is not a large volume, absolutely, but it was an example that it can be done. There is a supplier for this, there is gas for this, and there is appropriate infrastructure in the Eastern European region. Why do we in Azerbaijan believe this was done on purpose? Because the territory of the Azerbaijani embassy in Kyiv, the territory of the honorary consulate of

Azerbaijan in Kharkiv, and SOCAR's energy infrastructure were not subjected to bomb strikes until the crisis in Azerbaijan's ties with Russia began in December of last year.

And the fact that this happened exactly after the Azerbaijani aircraft [Russian peacekeepers incident] was down, is an indicator that these actions are implemented on purpose. Regarding the aircraft, for, one might say, 10 months, the Russian side acknowledged behind the scenes that it was shot down by Russian air defense. But they expected the Azerbaijani side to mention Ukrainian drones alongside Russian servicemen as the culprits.

Azerbaijan did not do this and did not respond to these unfair expectations of the Russian side. That is why this process dragged on for a long 9-10 months until the Russian side admitted the strike on the civilian aircraft at the highest level. What can happen in the future? Of course, a lot depends on the trends of the war.

In what form will the war end? What Azerbaijan will do depends on this. As you know, 20% of Azerbaijan's territory was occupied. And now, after liberation, Azerbaijan is implementing a large program of reconstruction and the return of the population to the liberated territory.

This is significant experience. Yes, we have explosions, sometimes we rush, sometimes we overlook things. And this experience will be very important for the Ukrainian side during the period of returning liberated territories.

Currently, Azerbaijani companies will participate in the return process, as they have experience in this activity at home in Azerbaijan. The humanitarian problem is the mine problem. Azerbaijan faced this, as more than 1.5 million mines are buried in the liberated territories.

And now Azerbaijan uses, one might say, the most advanced technologies for demining territory and has extensive operational experience in demining. I think Azerbaijan will also be able to implement cooperation with Ukraine in this area. And the last thing I would like to say regarding the entire Caucasus region, so that it is understood by Ukrainian experts and our colleagues.

The region's problems were laid down in the 90s. They were formed through conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the closing of borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Armenia and Turkey, and the lack of communications. There was only communication through Georgia. Today these factors are transforming. A new reality of the region as a whole is being formed for the next period. This is peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border, and the restoration of communications.

I will note that while in 2020 the Russian Federation participated in all these tracks, cases, and directions, today the Russian Federation is nowhere in all these tracks—neither between Azerbaijan and Armenia, nor between Armenia and Turkey, nor in the process of opening communications. This is one of the most important markers of what is happening with Russia's influence in the regions it traditionally considered its zone. And here we note the role and place of Ukraine.

Where there is a critical dependence of countries in the region on Russia for certain elements, perhaps in the future, there will be a substitution by Ukraine. This includes the topic of wheat, as logistically it is very close. This includes the topic of selling agricultural products produced in other countries.

And these are logistical chains. Because Azerbaijan is currently forming logistical chains with the countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Turkey with the participation of the USA. Especially important is the "Trump Roads" project [likely referring to a major

infrastructure/transport corridor initiative], which is due to begin implementation at the end of next year.

The approach and connection of Ukraine to these chains will be one of the most important elements of Ukraine effectively becoming the entry point to Eastern Europe. That is, for today, it is support for Ukraine and its territorial integrity, the possibility of investing in Ukraine's economy, economic cooperation, and humanitarian aid. And in the future, it is the exchange of experience, investments, and, again, increased cooperation.

Yuriy Oliynyk: Thank you, Mr. Farhad, thank you for your deep analysis, because really, only together, only by coordinating our activities, can we bear real fruit. And we are already seeing these real fruits now, as you correctly said, that Russia has been pushed out, in essence, from all negotiating tracks and is increasingly being pushed out of economic and security processes in the South Caucasus. But how long-term is this process and generally, how can this be assessed from Ukraine now—what can be seen from Kyiv? I would like to hear from **Andriy Rudyk**.

Andriy Rudyk: Good health to everyone, greetings. Look, I agree with my colleagues that there are indeed many similarities in the context of, let's say, countering Russian influence and generally ensuring the security of one's own borders between Ukraine and Azerbaijan. However, there are, obviously, a number of differences.

Obviously, before the Second Karabakh War and the Third so-called Karabakh War, or that short-term military operation of September '23, Azerbaijan's problem was completely, let's say, the reintegration and restoration of control over the territories of the former NKAO [Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast] of the Azerbaijan SSR, and, accordingly, the surrounding districts of the so-called lowland Karabakh and other districts. So, accordingly, the interests of Ukraine and Azerbaijan coincided due to the fact that, at that moment, full-scale aggression by the Russian Federation was already ongoing in Ukraine, as was the resistance to this aggression, and the moment of, let's say, the lack of demarcated borders. However, the only thing currently uniting us in this matter with Azerbaijan—well, if we don't take the issue I will return to later if there is time—is that if we are scientifically nitpicking, the occupied exclaves that the Republic of Armenia still controls remain, referring to Barkhudarli, Sofulu, Yukhari Askipara, Karki—populated areas, small ones belonging to other administrative-territorial units of the Azerbaijan Republic.

So, essentially, they can also play their role in the process of border demarcation. What I am leading to now is that we have a common interest with Azerbaijan in terms of ensuring the security of our own borders. Obviously, for us, first comes the restoration of territorial integrity, and then, accordingly, the conduct of demarcation and delimitation processes. That is, despite the fact that the colleague noted that the conflict with Armenia was finished—well, first of all, I would like to draw attention to the fact that this is specifically about the hot stage of this conflict, because combat operations are not being conducted, there are not many mutual shellings as there were even before the operation of September '23, and so on. And, at a minimum, just the fact that there are no longer Russian so-called peacekeepers on this territory is also a big bonus, which was worth mentioning. However, essentially, as you know, demarcation and delimitation processes are ongoing between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I truly agree that despite the loud title that a peace agreement was supposedly reached, it is not yet such, because it has not really been implemented into the political practice of both states.

Accordingly, currently, the only important achievement is the process of border demarcation itself. It is quite difficult; it is easier to do it there in the north, due to the specifics of the local terrain, let's say, and the absence of the issue of road infrastructure provision. It is much more difficult to do this precisely along the territory of districts adjacent to the former NKAO. Because, as you know, motor transport routes pass there, which were used in their time—including by the Islamic Republic of Iran for contraband routes into this whole territory and so on.

That is, indeed, this is a big problem specifically for Azerbaijan, including for ensuring the security of its own borders. For example, one can recall the problem of the still ongoing demarcation even of the border between Azerbaijan and Georgia, because there is a temple complex there which both states claim, and who, accordingly, do not want to share it with one another. And regarding this, by the way, one can also make a joke.

You know, when Trump spoke about achieving peace between, excuse me, Azerbaijan and Albania, perhaps he really meant Caucasian Albania. Well, the name of this state itself is unknown to this day, but perhaps, also, most likely, Trump might have known something...

Yuriy Oliynyk: The Armenian tradition calls the state Aluank.

Andriy Rudyk: Well, Armenian tradition is Armenian tradition, but still, one needs to proceed historically from, let's say, the ethnonym of this state.

However, such sources have not been preserved, at least they are unknown to us to this day. And when Trump mentioned Cambodia and his regulation between Cambodia and Thailand, I remind you, the problem of demarcation and delimitation of borders there is also problematic due to a temple complex claimed by both states. So perhaps, after all, Trump thinks in much broader matters than it seems to us.

Just, you know, as they are used to saying in Ukraine, in "common peasant logic." But let's return to more serious things. That is, indeed, Azerbaijan's problem will consist of, I repeat, ensuring the security of its own borders.

Because despite even delimited, demarcated borders with the Islamic Republic of Iran, let's be honest, Iran is obviously not satisfied with the current situation. Not satisfied not so much due to the weakening of the Russian Federation's influence, but due to the weakening of its own influence. Because you understand perfectly well that the organization of any transport, infrastructure solutions bypassing the Islamic Republic of Iran itself obviously reduces its geopolitical significance and the need for presence in this region.

A problem is also the fact that the majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis live specifically in the neighboring Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran traditionally fears, let's say, the rise of ethnic self-awareness of ethnic Azerbaijanis and is forced to react by supporting Armenia. In general, a unique political situation has developed now, in my opinion, because Armenia, obviously, after, let's say, Russia did not support it in a number of mentioned conflicts, and generally, when relations deteriorated, specifically personal ones, between Pashinyan and Putin, and so on. So Armenia began to look for ways generally, perhaps, to break the economic and political blockade.

Iran began to help it in this, which for us is, obviously, not exactly a pleasant state, not a partner, not an ally, even openly hostile in many ways, because Iran continues to provide weapons and components to the Russian Federation for waging its full-scale aggression against us. So, India is also joining this process, because it is important for Armenia to replenish its weapons stocks,

which it actually lost after the Second Karabakh War, and in fact after Azerbaijan's military operation in September '23. So, and accordingly, Iran in this way—no matter how much we tried, or rather no matter how much the parties demanded to remove Russia—it will somehow still remain present economically, well at least having quite a substantial trade turnover with Azerbaijan. I am silent about Georgia entirely; the colleague whom I will be glad to see online, I mean *Batoni* [Mr.] Amiran, will tell about this better.

So, regarding Armenia, the same story remains, because Armenia is, well really, out of the three South Caucasus states, the poorest. So accordingly, it will still orient itself either towards Russia economically—meaning Russia will continue to use it to bypass sanctions, for example, to increase the supply of gold, diamonds to third countries, for example to the UAE. Or Iran—just recently certain agreements were reached again regarding energy supplies and so on. And plus, this is the problem of restructuring the energy system. That is, generally, one needs to look at this whole situation much more broadly. For Ukraine, presence is important not only in Azerbaijan but also in the Republic of Armenia and Georgia. But the situation is changeable. Such partnership relations as existed with Azerbaijan before its restoration of control over sovereign territory will not be the same now. At least both economic figures and the political situation speak to this. And unfortunately, or fortunately, the nature of relations between Baku and Kyiv has always been more political than economic—due to the remoteness of both states, being tied to other processes, and so on. Summing up, I repeat. Azerbaijan still has a problem with ensuring the security of its own borders; this is its main task, similar to ours. And the second question is whether Azerbaijan will continue to reconcile with Armenia and other Caucasus states regarding the desire of Iran—not only Iran but also Russia—to preserve its influence on the region. Thank you for your attention.

Yuriy Oliynyk: Thank you, Andriy. Strictly speaking, summarizing this thought about Iran's influence, we must look deeper, that the South Caucasus is indeed a crossroads of different directions. It is, on one hand, the Russian sphere of influence which it wants to spread from the north; on the other hand, it is the Greater Middle East, it is Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. We know that Azerbaijan is the main country for Turkey's connection with Central Asian states. And this involves the Turkic belt, various prospects for security organizations, and the export of oil and gas carriers. But the most interesting direction is the Middle East.

We constantly forget that the Iran factor is not just some ally of Russia that supports it, pressing from the south. Iran has a problem with a 20% Azerbaijani population, and part of the elite, by the way, are also Azerbaijanis—Southerners in Iran. There is the problem of Israel, of course, which causes enhanced cooperation, particularly in security. Ali Khamenei has Azerbaijani origins, as do other leaders of Iran. But still, for them, it is a problem; for Azerbaijan, it is a threat from the south, and for Iran, it is a threat, as it feels that "insubordinate" Azerbaijanis live there.

We see in recent years enhanced security cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan because Iranian media try to spread the opinion in the Muslim world—both Shiite and Sunni—that Azerbaijan is a traitor, supports Israel, is against Palestine; this is used very strongly in the media war in the world against Baku. And Azerbaijanis understand everything. I noticed during the tension that existed in the summer-spring between the USA, Israel, and Iran, that there was constant attention in Azerbaijani social networks to what is happening in Iran, what the reaction is, what is happening across the border. That is, it is not something distant, but a neighboring

state, across the Aras River, and this is a real influence. And we also need to understand, when we talk about cooperation with South Caucasus countries, the Iran factor and the factor of the balance of Arab states and Israel, and Middle Eastern states in general.

Actually, I wanted to pass the floor on this topic to the representative of the main country thanks to which we are talking about cooperation with Azerbaijan, since we connect with it primarily in transit through Georgia. Present online here is **Amiran Khevtsuriani**, I ask him to connect. And, strictly speaking, another paradoxical question, perhaps not only to you but also to Farhad. Literally a week ago, there was a plane crash on the territory of Georgia; a plane with Turkish military personnel was flying from Azerbaijan to Turkey. Again, a great tragedy; there is investigation data that it was some kind of technical malfunction, but we understand that all sorts of technical malfunctions can have some external conscious hands as a cause. Could some external players have actually done this?

Amiran Khevtsuriani: I apologize, like my colleague, that I have to speak in Russian. I would clarify one point: if we are discussing all this through a historical prism, then I will tell you that if Imam Shamil had been well informed about Russia in his time, knew the Russian language, I hope that the Russians would not have been able to conquer the North Caucasus.

This is a bit humorous, but still, there is a grain of truth here: we must know our enemy very closely, we must understand what they are saying, and this will always be useful. Regarding our topic, I would say in two words about the role of Azerbaijan today in the regional context. Azerbaijan, as you know, is the largest state in the region, both in land area and population size.

Unfortunately, Georgia and Armenia have decreased in population size over the last 30 years, while Azerbaijan, conversely, increased its population, and this was all reflected in the strength of the state as well. Today Azerbaijan is indeed a key regional player, both economically and politically, and conducts a very smart policy, both foreign and internal. Of course, I would pay more attention to foreign policy.

After the victory in 2020 in the Second Karabakh War, a new era begins in the life of Azerbaijan, and this was logical, since any victory makes a state both more ambitious and absolutely proud, and this is palpable. And today Azerbaijan's policy, as I see and analyze it, is built on strengthening its positions in the regional context and protecting its national interests. A very important moment here, of course, is Azerbaijan's relations with the current Armenia.

Thank God, and as was expected, the relationship between these two hostile countries is already beginning to stabilize, and one should only rejoice at this. We repeatedly, especially Mr. Rudyk and I, discussed many times how heavily all this reflects on the entire South Caucasus, since the Karabakh conflict was one of the main obstacles to the development of the entire region. Of course, Georgian conflicts are included here too—the war in Abkhazia and the problem of so-called South Ossetia, which were inspired and imposed on us by the northern neighbor. But the Karabakh conflict was still a key factor of Moscow's influence on the entire South Caucasus.

And after the Kremlin lost this mechanism, it is already palpable that the Kremlin's influence on the region is constantly decreasing. This makes our life more peaceful, and our plans for development and expansion of our interests also become more promising. Proof of this is the already open pro-Western orientation of the Armenian government, which we in Georgia welcome, since it is much better than a pro-Russian Armenia. Because, in principle, Armenia

after the collapse of the Soviet Union was practically Moscow's only outpost in the region on a regional scale.

And this influenced the entire region since it was a center from where Russia realized its interests. But today, thank God, the Armenian authorities are no longer puppets of Russia. I would advise the Azerbaijani authorities as well that this factor needs to be treated very loyally and supported. At the very least, one should not hinder this process, since a pro-Russian Armenia is not only a problem for the Armenian people but also for Georgia and Azerbaijan.

It is very important that today the situation in the European Caucasus is more promising than it was a few years ago. And this, of course, will benefit not only Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia but our entire region.

Yuriy Oliynyk: Thank you for the thought that in Georgia, the majority of public figures and experts support the importance of our constructive work.

And even the government of Georgia, despite all influences in your very difficult situation and external pressure, is not fully pro-Russian and preserves support for Ukraine specifically on such key strategic points. And I also thank the Georgian people for the fact that Georgia is such a platform, and a springboard, and a mediator, and still a significant link for our relations. Because this is the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Armenia military corridor between large regions—the lands enslaved by Russia in the north and the Middle East in the south.

And for us here, we need to speak specifically about every element. And realizing we are at the end, I would like to give the floor also to an envoy of the Armed Forces, an expert of Ukrainian Studies of Strategic Disquisitions, **Oleksiy Tkachenko**.

Oleksiy Tkachenko: Thank you, Yura.

I thank the USSD and the Ukraine Crisis Media Center for the opportunity to use my time, a part of my leave, for such a constructive cause. As a man in uniform right now, I would like to start with positive moments of cooperation between people in uniform of Ukraine and Azerbaijan. The first moment is that at the beginning of my path of defending Ukraine, I was a volunteer in the "Carpathian Sich" battalion.

And, firstly, in this battalion back then—I hope everything is well with him now—there was a volunteer with the call sign "Azer," who was Azerbaijani and who went to defend Ukraine. He lived in Ukraine for some time and he joined, was with us. We were with him, I send him greetings.

And the second moment is that "Carpathian Sich" cooperated with the SOCAR gas station network. They helped the battalion with fuel, and the battalion helped them with protection. Therefore, our cooperation is strong in this matter.

The second moment concerns length of service. Servicemen receive seniority (length of service) during their service. There are international agreements regarding the recognition of this service.

Previously, Ukraine had these agreements with most post-Soviet states that were part of the CIS. Now Ukraine, firstly, recognized that from February 19, 2014, this service is not counted for those who served in the army of Russia, the aggressor state, and are now in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. And secondly, on January 4, 2024, Ukraine completely withdrew from the agreement signed by most CIS states, including Armenia and Belarus.

So, regarding who our friends are: there are separate agreements on length of service with Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia, and they are in force. The agreement with Azerbaijan is

from 2000, it is still valid; our service of military personnel in the Armed Forces is still mutually recognized. Therefore, we cooperate here as well for common benefit.

The second moment, I would like to continue the words of our colleague from Azerbaijan about the hand of Moscow. I was very interested in the collapse of the USSR, the prison of nations, and its supposed leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In reality, this is another, in my opinion, Russian cadre who simply wanted to renovate this prison of nations to preserve it, but the process, fortunately, got out of control of his entourage, and we destroyed it.

There is also a lot of data that the Russian hand from Moscow, including Gorbachev's, when they saw that the Union was heading for collapse and they couldn't contain the people's outrage, primarily of the enslaved nations locally against the center—they began to fan conflicts locally in order to shift responsibility. And, for example, Gorbachev had an advisor, an Armenian, Abel Aganbegyan, and from 1987 he constantly fanned the topic that Nagorno-Karabakh should be transferred to Armenia. Then there was data about the tragedy of Black January in 1990, that Moscow was preparing a military provocation and suppression of protests in Baku in advance; that is, they wanted to drown all dissenters in blood, and, unfortunately, they succeeded then.

And these are not only topics concentrated on Azerbaijan, because there are general facts of this; for example, representatives of Kyrgyzstan also confirmed that conflicts between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh were provoked by the KGB because it was done purposefully. And I am very happy that, as our colleague from Azerbaijan said, the hand of Moscow is not there now, it has been eradicated, and it is very happy that we can do this together, and Azerbaijan has common far-sighted interests with us here. When unlawful detentions of Azerbaijani citizens began in August of this year on the territory of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan reacted very quickly. Baku far-sightedly named, for example, the Russian city of Orenburg, where an Azerbaijani citizen was also detained, by its historical Kazakh name "Orynbor." And it looks very promising now that the Organization of Turkic States, which includes Azerbaijan—and the period has now come when Baku will head it for several years—is also assessing the situation strategically.

There are already projects to create armed forces of the Organization of Turkic States, and I will say that at least 10 large enslaved Turkic ethnic groups live on the territory of the Russian Federation, and it seems to me that they would be glad to join the Organization of Turkic States with their own states, and Ukraine would only welcome this. Therefore, thank you for the cooperation, for supporting us, Azerbaijan, since 2022, and indeed many rejoiced and said that we should take as an example how Azerbaijan managed to solve the painful territorial issue—provoked, including by the RF—and restore peace on its land, which was never supported by Russia. And back in 2020, Russia de facto intervened there and did not let this conflict finish. Fortunately, it is now finished, and there is an example of how Ukraine can also defend its interests and cut off Russian hands that fan conflicts around themselves, all the time, and in a new form since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Glory to Ukraine, glory to Azerbaijan, thank you.

Yuriy Oliynyk: Glory to the heroes, thank you to the participants. Let's move to questions, comments, additions. **Mykola Volgov**, also our Ukrainian expert.

Mykola Volgov: Good day, dear colleagues. First of all, I want to congratulate our Azerbaijani friends. Yesterday was a holiday, National Unity Day [likely referring to National Revival Day

or similar], so I wish you unity and strength. Secondly, I want to thank you, indeed, for your contribution. We remember how SOCAR fueled both fire trucks and ambulances, and we remember and value the contribution that Azerbaijani warriors, ethnic Azerbaijanis, are making right now.

That is, they are fighting for Ukraine as for their own homeland. We thank them for this. And I want to congratulate you again on the fact that Azerbaijan recently joined the consultative group as a full member alongside the five Central Asian states. Effectively, the Caspian has become not a watery wall, but a bridge.

And this is an increase in influence, and the creation of such a quite powerful geopolitical force on Russia's southern borders. And that is why I want to ask primarily the Azerbaijani and Georgian experts, colleagues: We, representatives of the USSD, are engaged in researching and monitoring regional conflictogenic processes in Russia. And therefore our strategic thought is that Russia will essentially fall sooner or later, and this will lead to certain regional conflicts, and as Oleksiy already emphasized, the creation of states.

So I want to ask our Caucasian colleagues, is there a vision of this process among Azerbaijani and Georgian experts, do you consider such a possibility, and if you do, do you have at least some hypothetical strategies regarding this situation? Because you border a number of regions—Azerbaijan with Dagestan, Georgia generally with almost the entire North Caucasus, and we consider this specific region as one of the most explosive. Thank you.

Farhad Mamedov: As far as I understood, the question concerns Azerbaijan's border with Russia and the use of the ethnic factor. This issue is used by the Russian Federation, but you know what is most interesting? When there was a peak crisis in cooperation with Russia, certain statements sounded from Russia that they could start a military operation. But going through the Caucasus is very difficult in the current situation, especially through Dagestan, because Azerbaijanis live on the border with Azerbaijan on the territory of Russia, in the Derbent area and so on. Plus, the Caucasian peoples—I don't think they will share the position that military actions need to be conducted against Azerbaijan.

Therefore, in this regard, it was very interesting to see how all this happens. Other than that, of course, I am impressed by the level of understanding of the situation that exists among us; I am very grateful to your experts for their speeches and especially for such very important points that the majority of foreign experts do not notice. But today I heard sufficiently detailed information that everything about Azerbaijan and the European Caucasus region is perceived correctly in Ukraine.