

The BUCC December Monthly Meeting Held on 4 December 2025

The December Monthly Meeting was called to order by Simon Woodiwis, Member of BUCC Advisory Council and Co-Chair of the Defence and Security Committee, who introduced our speakers, beginning with:

(1) Halyna Yanchenko, People's Deputy of Ukraine. Expert on economic and anti-corruption policy. Member of the National Council on Anti-Corruption Policy (since 2019). Deputy Head of the Servant of the People fraction in the Verkhovna Rada of the 9th Convocation:

There is of course no one who is interested in peace more than Ukrainians and personally me, as a mother of two children. My children are eight and thirteen, and they both are refugees. So, you can imagine that there is no one else who wants peace more than Ukrainians like me. Whose families are separated because of the war. Likewise for Ukrainians who lost their homes or who lost their relatives. Therefore, for us, it is very important that these negotiations lead to real results, to a fair and lasting peace.

Why are these two words, “fair” and “lasting,” important? Basically, a lasting peace is so important for Ukraine because actually, previously, we have already seen attempts to have this kind of negotiation or find some kind of grounds to facilitate the end of the war. We have seen the Minsk Agreements, and the so-called Normandy format, and unfortunately, they did not result in fair or lasting peace. They resulted in Russia buying more time to come back to Ukraine with increased aggression. Why did this happen? In my opinion, because our Western colleagues - our friends or allies - now we can call them friends and allies and partners, but back then, they were just Western observers in the Minsk Agreements and Normandy format. They chose the wrong victim for the negotiations. They were pressing and pushing Ukraine to agree to basically Russian conditions. Therefore, it did not lead to Russia stopping the war; it only encouraged the aggressor, and that is why the full-scale invasion happened. It is very important that we all - Ukraine, France, Germany, Great Britain and the U.S., and the other stakeholders - understand these lessons and move along based on lessons learned.

What is my opinion about the current negotiations? I believe that there are points in the negotiations, and in the document presented, that should not even be discussed, and it is very important to clearly communicate this to the Russians.

First of all, we should not even discuss anything like so-called “land trading”. Why? Because it is absolutely unethical. When we are talking about so-called land trading, we are not talking about square meters or square kilometres. It is not that they are empty and abandoned, etc. We are actually talking about settlements, about towns with Ukrainian families living in their homes there. So, when the U.S., basically acting on behalf of Russia, wants us to voluntarily give away these lands, they should understand that they are asking us to give away people, to trade people, which is absolutely unacceptable and unethical, especially since we know what Russian occupants are doing to Ukrainian families. They torture people, they murder people, they kidnap their children, and this is absolutely unacceptable. This should not even be discussed.

Also, in my opinion, it is quite dangerous to talk about some kind of conditions regarding the foreign politics of Ukraine, such as blocking NATO membership or EU membership, etc. Because if we respect the sovereignty of countries, including Ukraine and all other countries, then countries like Russia, in our case, cannot be allowed to force sovereign countries to change their foreign or internal policies.

Thirdly, the most ridiculous point is when Russia wants the U.S., for example, to legally recognize four regions of Ukraine as Russian territory, including Crimea, Luhansk Region, Donetsk Region, and Zaporizhzhia Region, as if they were officially Russian territories, but by law, they are Ukrainian territories. These territories are not even all fully occupied by Russians, but they want the US to recognize these territories as being transferred to Russia. What does it mean? It means that Russia will have legal preconditions to come back with another full-scale invasion in a few years, or maybe even earlier.

And finally, what does it mean - not only for Ukraine, but also for Europe and for Britain - if this point is played in favour of Russia. It will send the message that Europe, Great Britain, and the other countries involved are very weak players. They cannot communicate and they cannot resist points that are absolutely unacceptable, absolutely ridiculous, and that will convey a very bad signal. I am afraid that if Russia receives this signal, it will be essentially encouraging an invitation to return to invade not only Ukraine, but also other European countries, with full-scale invasions or other types of oppression.

(2) Oleh Dunda, People's Deputy of Ukraine of the 9th Convocation from the Servant of the People Party:

To begin with, I would like to mention a statement from a discussion yesterday with Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. Six months ago, I had a discussion in Normandy with French political figures, and everyone asked me, could I describe why Putin disagreed with the conditions which they proposed in regard to peace. There were good agreements proposed about the land, about conditions for peace time. I told them, it is because you do not understand the causes of this war. Nobody in the West understands the root causes.

It is very strange because every time Putin speaks about causes, it is not about control; it is not about sanctions. Do you really believe Putin could not dream, like two years ago, that he wanted to have back what was lost to the Soviet Union? No. It is like a fairy tale. He wants to revise the results of the Cold War. That's all. It is not about Ukraine; it is about Europe. It is about returning to 1991, and dividing Europe. This war is about Europe, and for him, Ukraine is just an instrument to achieve this goal. So, one week ago, before Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff visited Moscow, we had a discussion with Brian Mefford and other friends, and I told them - this trip will never have any results. Putin only involves the United States in a world discussion to stop the United States from helping and supporting Ukraine. So, there will be every time talking, talking and talking. That is all. New requests, new demands and new conditions. He needs to push the United States out of Europe, and he needs to divide Europe. He needs to establish a new Warsaw Pact. This is why we will not have any negotiations over the next several months.

We need to understand this very quickly. Why? Because we need to understand what they can do, and what we can change in our country before facing this challenge. If this does not happen, Europe is in terrible. The conflict ultimately is not about Ukraine; it is about what Russia can do. When French military officials asked me about that, I answered: First of all, you need to change your minds, you are thinking, because you are all living in the past century. All military battlefields, all military operations, they are now totally different. You are not ready for the current battlefield; you are totally unprepared. Your high-ranking military commanders are not ready for this. The terrible situation that, most likely, Putin understands the current situation, and Russia will prolong their efforts to push Ukraine and Europe to achieve their goals. That is their only purpose in the current situation.

I believe their immediate purpose is to establish a new armed agreement, like it was in the 1980s, when Moscow controlled all military troops in Eastern Europe. This is why we will not have any peaceful agreements this winter and in the spring of 2026.

(3) Yevhenii Dobriak, Former People's Deputy of Ukraine and former Chair of the Subcommittee on Global Security, Member of the Batkivshchyna political party since 2003 and member of its Presidium:

I am very grateful for the invitation to speak from Mr. Bate Toms, your Co-Chair, my old friend whom I have known for over 20 years. I would like to thank my colleagues for their productive comments on the events that are taking place today, but I would like to dwell on the following factor. Let's put it this way. Does Ukraine want peace? Yes. Does Putin want peace? Of course not. Why?

Here arises a very serious geopolitical, geostrategic and conceptual motive for the behaviour of Putin and the Russian Federation. Unfortunately, Ukraine has found itself in the centre of the largest, bloodiest war since World War II.

This is a game of the big players. Where is the script for this war being written? Let's be frank and speak honestly. This script was written in Beijing. China today has very serious global ambitions. Not only in the Asian region.

China has very serious ambitions, which Xi Jinping announced as a result of the last Shanghai meeting, and the latest events that we saw during the celebration of the so-called 80th anniversary of the victory in World War II. These are very serious ambitions. Not only in the Asian region.

Why am I saying all this? The fact is that when Donald Trump was running for president during the election campaign, he very correctly noted one thing regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, how Beijing is using its own strategic interests. In this situation, I would like to note the following issue. Donald Trump said "peace through force", and there really is no other option to influence these events, to end this war.

China has two huge global projects – the "Silk Road" and the "Taiwan Accession". We must proceed from the realities that we see in the global geopolitical war today. The first thing we must insist on is that very serious publicity must really work today.

To restrain both China and Russia, to stop the war in the heart of Europe, to prevent the implementation of the strategic goals that Beijing has in the Pacific region, I believe that the most acceptable option for Ukraine today is to stop the war in Ukraine. We must insist on three things that everyone has been talking about for a long time.

The first is a ceasefire.

The second, and this is a serious diplomatic track that provides for a stable, just peace for Ukraine and for Europe.

And most importantly, there is the need for real security guarantees for Ukraine. Security guarantees can be in any form. Starting from the unrealized project of Ukraine joining NATO, because we see that NATO does not want to see Ukraine as part of it. At least, we should hope that the main locomotive for this security guarantee can be taken by the United States, with also at a minimum serious guarantee from the main partners of the United States outside of NATO. After that, I think that we can get real guarantees from European countries.

Global stability, global security, and the future of the world order depend on this. If such a scenario is not implemented, we may find ourselves, at least, in very serious chaos, which could lead to a real hot phase of a Third World War, which unfortunately, is taking place today in a hybrid form. We see a lot

of hot spots, the main one being Ukraine, of course, but there are many other hot spots around the world that can flare up at any moment.

These are unresolved issues in the Middle East, unresolved issues in the Indian and Pacific region, an unstable situation on the Korean Peninsula and an unstable situation in South America, any of which can also flare up at any time. Therefore, we need real unity in the Western world, to find a solution.

And back to Europe, if the Western world does not help to achieve a just peace in Ukraine and contain the current threat, then, unfortunately, we will be witnessing many more very unpredictable events.

Politicians need to take principled positions. If they do not unite, especially in terms of the military unions which have been created over the past three years, led by the United States, then for example, if there is no fair and lasting peace for Ukrainians, then this conflict will lead to a very bad situation for Europe.

Simon Woodiwis:

Thank you very much. Does anyone have a question?

Hello, my name is **Gary Ames**. I wonder whether the armed forces themselves are ready for a peace agreement, especially the more conservative right-wing military, such as the Territorial Defence and Azov. How much will they be willing to accept regarding a peace agreement?

Oleh Dunda:

It is a good question, and there is no simple or single answer to this question. The Ukrainian military, just like Ukrainian society, has different opinions. There are people who want to fight until, I do not know, until the last Ukrainian or until we have our borders of 1991. And there are those who understand the situation and are very, very tired. The situation on the frontline is really very difficult, and it has been difficult throughout the three and a half years of war, especially when our Western friends and allies have been reluctant to provide military assistance or other types of support. The current situation is also very serious regarding air defence.

Therefore, it is a good question, but there also is a good question regarding how much longer we will be able to continue this war. We can actually ask the Russians the same question: how long can they continue with this war? I believe this is a question that does not have a single or simple answer. Every time there is a discussion about the battlefield, do our Western partners consider it as they did in the 20th century. Do they understand that everyone now needs something new in military doctrine. This war is about innovating technologies.

We need to continue to establish new technologies on the battlefield, on land, on sea, and in the air. Several days ago, Russia launched new types of drones that are not just drones but advanced fighters. Everyone who will spend billions in their budget on fighters with pilots is wasting their money because everything on the battlefield in this war needs to be unmanned - everything: ships, jets, vehicles, everything. And after that, we will see that all this technology will be in civil life in the world. In ships, civil ships, in vehicles. Everything stands now on the verge of a technical revolution while this rapid military change is happening.

That is why Ukraine is so important for Western democracy. Thank you.

Simon Woodiwis:

Another question when you are talking to your friends outside of the country, do they give you any comments that do like or do not like, and how do you respond?

Halyna Yanchenko:

Well, in my opinion, I unfortunately think that people have very short memories. Therefore, one of the messages that I try to deliver in France or in Germany, when I recently travelled there, is to remind people about the Minsk agreements and the Normandy format and why they failed. The fact that they even existed and failed is forgotten by many influencers and even politicians; they do not analyse why they failed. They even forget that they actually failed, and that the previous deals did not lead anywhere. Therefore, my message has been that the previous negotiations failed because they encouraged Russia. They had for Russia pro-Russian conditions, and therefore they encouraged Russia. And it will happen again, and maybe not only Ukraine, but other European countries will become victims if we continue playing Putin's game.

Simon Woodiwis:

Thank you very much. Chris, do you have a question?

Chris:

The recent corruption of the head of the government here has had, whatever anybody else is saying, a devastating impact on the credibility of Ukraine, and possibly in Ukraine itself. As we think about the funding for rebuilding and restructuring your government, how do you propose to deal with the question that the money is going to evaporate rather than be used for the purposes for which it will be designated?

Halyna Yanchenko:

No one wants to answer this question, so I will volunteer. My first university degree is in sociology, and all my work, all my master's degrees and other types of research, focuses on anti-corruption. I can actually speak a lot about anti-corruption. The most important thing that I want to say is that we, as a society, have a perception about corruption that is in a totally contrary way to the reality. For example, when nobody talks about corruption because it is not uncovered, despite the scale of corruption, society considers that there is no corruption. But when the state starts fighting corruption very actively, including anti-corruption bodies and enforcement bodies, and all these investigations are circulating in the media, people tend to say that corruption is everywhere, even though we may be making positive dynamics to reduce corruption.

So, it is a bit of a psychological trick, basically. We all here are very intelligent and educated people, so we should understand this paradox. So, in my personal opinion, this so-called media situation about corruption is a very positive signal. It is a good thing that something like this is happening in Ukraine. Can you imagine something like that happening, or corruption of such a scale, being uncovered, during Yanukovich's time? No. But the scale of political corruption at that time was much, much bigger. Since that time, we have implemented many anti-corruption reforms, starting with developing anti-corruption bodies, which I appreciate, although I believe that they are not the most efficient tool.

I believe the most efficient tool in anti-corruption state policy is prevention, including in particular by digitalization, so that businesses and people do not have to engage with governments to receive their services or something else from the state; then the corruption risks do not even occur. I was actually the

person who drafted this digitalization into the presidential agenda six years ago, the mobile application and overall reform, named Diia, where a person can turn to his or her phone and not depend on talking to a state official. Corruption cannot even occur in that way. As an Estonian president has stated, “Your computer will never ask you for a bribe.” And this is something that we have been implementing in Ukraine over the past six years, and I am very proud to be one of the authors of this reform. I believe that digitalization can fight corruption and decrease the corruption risk much more efficiently than any kind of human involvement, including by law enforcement or even anti-corruption bodies.

Yevhen Dobriak:

I would like to say a few words about corruption, and begin by addressing the point on when it first began to be a major problem in the 1990s, when Ukraine was the Soviet republic with the lowest rates of corruption. The highest levels of corruption were in Moscow and in Central Asia. Where did we get the corruption from? When the very large and important state enterprises began to be privatised in Ukraine, corruption was then enhanced by former communist members of the Parliament. Unfortunately, corruption has become rooted in most systems of our society. And for all these scandals that we have witnessed over recent years, it is sad that the anti-corruption bodies that we have in Ukraine today did not exist during any previous presidents and their leadership. It was not here during Yanukovich's time, it was not available during Yushchenko or, Kuchma, which is indeed a shame.

My advice is for us to stay true to ourselves and to develop a new, clean business model in Ukraine. If we do that, then as my friend described, you will be able to utilize this process and distance yourselves from corrupt practices, leading to lower corruption levels.

Simon Woodiwis:

Thank you very much. I have a point to raise as a statement. When I was leading a team in the military during May 2022, it was very beneficial for the team. That it was exactly like we had been training to fight the Russians for about seven years. I actually also brought some tactical manuals issued to me when I was in the British army, and everything in this manual, despite being issued some time ago, was current for fighting the Russians.

So, we were helping local infantry regiments to make their training effective for the Ukrainian battlefield. I appreciate that many things have since changed a lot. However, I would add one bit of information, one bit of advice, because I do not believe that unmanned systems are anywhere near as good as they need to be to recapture and hold ground from the enemy. So, if you could give one bit of advice to your foreign partners and the people who are listening to you, what would that be in regard to the military.

Oleh Dunda:

To our partners in Europe or the United States, we need to pass on this advice. First of all, for the United States, they need to understand better their power and global influence at the moment. They exist in Europe. Without their interests in Europe, the United States will only be a regional power.

Without Europe, the United States will not be a reliable ally. They cannot face issues in the Pacific region against China without Europe. For Europe, they need to seriously establish their military manufacturers. They need to rethink their arms production, including based on recent conflicts. They need to revise their strategies, including for their higher commands. They need to establish new systems of military management.

For example, I had a discussion yesterday about what kind of modernised command structure we in Ukraine could establish. For example, by training to consider the battlefield in a new way, and to establish a Ukrainian service for military equipment. Eastern Europe could be a hub for large manufacturers of various kinds of weaponry, from drones to jets, etc. The best in Western European countries, such as France, Germany and Norway, could be the main locations for developing military innovations and equipment.

However, we need to consider these in discussions with generals, especially Western generals, because we need to change the mind of their high-ranking commanders. They do not comprehend the current situation adequately. This lack of understanding is related to the fact that they are accustomed to countering traditional Soviet military thinking. Now we have a new enemy developing in Russia.

So, I would say that the situation in Ukraine today has shown us all that there are different spheres for potential development, including for very powerful sectors. We have many commercial opportunities, especially in the international market, which we should not be afraid to explore, based on the current state of the industrial situation in Ukraine.

There are many favourable options for the best strategies, and we should not be afraid of such approaches, because they do guarantee change in Ukraine. As a result, we can transform ourselves to become a very strong part of Europe.

Simon Woodiwis:

One more very quick question, please. Alexander, do you have a question about security guarantees?

Alexander:

You mentioned a couple of times about security guarantees of a theoretical nature. My short question is do you see any feasible security without the involvement of the U.S., and if so, what are they?

Halyna Yanchenko:

The short answer is that I do not see any reliable security guarantees. Because for now, European troops - the European military - are underwhelming. If you cannot defend yourself, how can you provide any guarantees?

I would like to add a few points. First, I believe in collective defence. The number of soldiers in Europe collectively is still strong and they are equipped with modern military equipment. And second, regarding guarantees, they could be buttered by having more international companies enter the Ukrainian market, drawing in their foreign countries with commercial interests. These points should strengthen a future peace settlement for Ukraine.

One further small remark. I have been hearing a lot about multinational corporations doing business in Ukraine. This should benefit the defenders of Ukraine.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize how guarantees should be similar to Article 5. I am slightly critical of Article 5 as a part of NATO. Why? Because Article 5 has only been invoked once in history, and that was for the U.S. The countries that joined NATO did so to help the U.S. during 9/11. However, when the Russian military jets were constantly interfering in 2015 when the U.S. was engaged in Syria, NATO did not implement Article 5. Effectually, it was Turkey that enforced the article.

So, first in order to stop this war, I believe that there should be guarantees from the Western countries, which should at least be equal to Article 5, if Ukraine is not now to have NATO membership. This should be clearly stated. Second, in order to guarantee peace in Europe, we should all now invest much more in our defence industry.

Why? As we are used to saying the U.S. is the most powerful country in the world. The U.S. has served as a global policeman because of its investment in its defence industry, that is equal to 3.5% of its GDP. In the European Union, defence investment is less than 1.6% of GDP on average. So now to make sure that we will be safe again in Europe, investment in defence needs to be greatly increased, both to catch up for the past woeful underinvestment, and to continue to develop new weapons to deter Russia. By the way, you know how much Ukraine is investing in defence - 27% of GDP. So, if you want to make sure that this is lasting, we all need to invest heavily in the horizontal market, cooperation, and collaboration in defence production. Thank you.