

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“Poland and the War in Ukraine: A Conversation with
Zbigniew Rau, Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs”**

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FEATURING

Zbigniew Rau

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland

CSIS EXPERTS

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Max Bergmann: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I am Max Bergmann. I am the director of the Europe program and the Stuart Center in Euro-Atlantic and Northern European Studies here at CSIS.

Thank you so much for joining us today for this very special event. We are honored to host His Excellency Zbigniew Rau, the minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Poland, and I was told just before this that this is the first time we've hosted a minister of foreign affairs from Poland for more than a decade. So it's a real honor to have you, sir, and we hope that this becomes a more frequent stomping ground for Polish foreign ministers and other Polish leaders as they come through Washington.

The topic of today's discussion could not be more timely. It is Poland and the war in Ukraine, and Poland has been unwavering in its commitment to supporting Ukraine in its fight to defend itself from Russian aggression.

Since Russia launched its illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, Poland has accepted millions of Ukrainian refugees into their countries, some estimates of more than 3.5 million. Poland has worked relentlessly to provide adequate resources, including education, to the new arrivals.

Poland has also allowed its territory to serve as a staging ground for one of the largest military assistance efforts since World War II, and in terms of bilateral aid, Poland has led the way, providing nearly \$3 billion worth of aid in total with 1.8 billion (dollars) of that coming in direct military assistance to Ukraine. And Poland has also, we shouldn't forget, demonstrated its commitment to NATO and European security in announcing it will increase its defense spending to 3 percent. So when it comes to defense and foreign policy and the future of European security in the wake of this war, I could not think of anyone better to have the minister of foreign affairs from Poland.

Let me say a brief word about his background. In 1980, Minister Rau joined the Solidarity trade union that played the leading role in Poland's transition to democracy at the end of the Cold War. He became a lawyer and a professor of law, serving as the head of the Department of Political and Legal Doctrines and the Alexis de Tocqueville Center for Political and Legal Thought at the Lodz University. He formerly served as a senator, governor, and member of parliament representing Poland's Lodz province.

And so this is a tremendous honor to have him here. And will you please join me in welcoming Minister Rau to the podium? Thank you, sir. (Applause.)

Zbigniew Rau: Thank you. Good afternoon, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much, Mr. Bergmann, for your introduction and kind words of welcome.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude for your gracious invitation to speak here at the Center of Strategic and International Studies to speak about the strategic crossroads at which we, Poland, and the free world find ourselves.

I sincerely believe that you more than anyone else will understand my message that imperialism continues to be the ultimate threat to freedom and the core values of a free world. You understand this because you know it. This nation, the United States of America, has risen, developed, and become the sole global power through its rejection of all forms of imperialism and its continuing struggle for freedom against empire builders.

Many great American leaders – from George Washington to Woodrow Wilson, from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton – believed that victory over imperialism was ultimate. In that same vein, many Poles believed that their struggle against foreign empires led to the lasting victory.

It was exactly this belief that brought Tadeusz Kościuszko and Casimir Pulaski to revolutionary America. For the same reason many other Poles took part in endless European wars and uprisings against empires simply following the motto, for your freedom and ours.

All of them knew that they found themselves in the middle of a battle between good and evil, right and wrong – between individual freedom, self-determination, national independence, on the one side; and enslavement, domination and spheres of influence on the other. Thirty years ago, with the fall of communism, we all hoped that the age of empires and imperialism was finally over and that from – and that from then on, Europe would be one whole and at peace. Today, we know that we were wholly wrong and that once again we must rise up and unite against an ever-reviving imperial hydra – Russian imperialism and its attempts to subordinate Ukraine.

Ladies and gentlemen, America became great when it succeeded in stopping imperialism – first British, then Nazi Germany, and finally, Soviet. You free Americans are the anti-thesis of imperialism that built this country for your freedom and ours. This is exactly the same foundation upon which Poland is built. Our common mission of fighting imperialism has not been accomplished yet.

For my generation, it was President Ronald Reagan, who helped Americans rediscover their core identity, leading the free world by stopping

imperialism. He was convinced that the United States would never succeed unless it stayed true to its origins – a shining city upon freedom hill.

I fondly recall watching his farewell address on January 11, 1989. He recognized as his greatest achievement the restoration of American authority in the free world. The foreign policy pursued by Reagan during his time – his time in office produced a monumental dividend for America and the free world, including my country.

This crusader for democracy was not afraid to openly declare the ultimate objective in the West showdown that he led against Soviet imperialism – restoring freedom, which, as he believed, I quote, “is not the sole prerogative of lack of view, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings seeking self-determination.”

When Reagan delivered these words, Poland was the European linchpin upon which the success of his strategy rested. Today, that measure of success rests on Ukraine. Reagan’s words and vision were supported not by promises, but by his will to act and not just in the Hollywood sense.

It’s my firm conviction that if he were with us today, he would not question the idea of supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes to restore freedom and secure basic rights. He would commit to this course just as he invested in Central Europe’s push for sovereignty and democracy. His words spoken about Poland are all the more true today in the context of the war in Ukraine, which is now the one being – I use his words again – “magnificently unreconciled to oppression.”

Ladies and gentlemen, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine mark the end of an era in European history dominated by the conviction that another great war on the continent cannot happen given the traumatic experience of the 20th century while all European nations share a desire for peace. Faced with a tragic turn of events, we have come to realize that imperialism is not just a historic category, but the life blood of the modern world affecting each and every one of us, however differently, with its destructive power. Moreover, it has also become clear that imperialism cannot be integrated with the free world on a permanent basis, let alone in a harmonious way.

So, we cannot build a stable peace by turning a blind eye to imperial ambitions, inclinations, and mere habits; and by assessing to reasoning and acting in terms of spheres of influence; or by acknowledging historical entitlements or particular economic interests of the most powerful states. Freedom and democracy cannot be defended by entering into a compromise

or compact with imperial authoritarianism because it will not stop striving for its ultimate triumph over freedom and democracy.

Imperialism must be stopped and defeated. Otherwise, it will be a constant threat to the free world.

Ladies and gentleman, Russian aggression against Ukraine triggered a tectonic shift in the transatlantic area. It initiated unprecedented solidarity among the nations of a free world to defend sovereignty and democracy in Ukraine.

In the face of this war Poland was the first to help Ukraine. We became her closest frontline partner, humanitarian supplier, and logistical hub. Not only are we the first among the European allies to send military donations to Ukraine, but we are second behind the United States in all military support.

My country also became a refuge and safe haven for over 3 million Ukrainian women and children. Even though Ukraine's military situation has improved since February 24th, we continue to house about 2 million Ukrainians. We are also building temporary homes in Ukraine for 20,000 people made homeless by the Russian invasion.

I want to emphasize that Poland's reason for providing this unparalleled aid stems from a synthesis of two approaches – top down and bottom up.

The first approach deals with how Poland incorporated these refugees into its social care network – enrolling children in schools, providing state health care and identification numbers, enabling access to all services and to work legally.

The second approach refers to the unprecedented compassion of everyday Poles, who opened their hearts and homes to refugees, taking them in and providing them with much-needed compassion, comfort, and solidarity.

Ladies and gentlemen, every Pole is an expert on understanding what fighting for freedom, democracy, and existential survival means. This is the case since, in our part of the world, the notion of independence means freedom from Russia. All too often this very unique Central European experience including that of my Polish compatriots fell on deaf ears, including in this town and in our Western capitals.

I recall the reaction to a piece that I published not so long ago with my close friend, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in "Politico" in which we warned about the threats posed to peace in Europe by the Nord Stream project. Both Berlin and Washington did not want to hear it.

Shortly thereafter, Russia waged its war in Ukraine and now we, in Europe, are in the midst of an energy crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen, speaking here at CSIS it is impossible not to mention Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the founding fathers of this institute. He was aware, like no one else, that Russia was a dormant volcano. He knew that unless democracy and respect for the freedom of our nations took root, it would erupt anew, flooding Europe with its imperial lava.

What this tells me is how much we miss the wisdom, experience, and foresight of Zbig Brzezinski, one of America's leading strategists and an astute student of Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps he was the one in Washington who best understood what lay behind Russia's imperial drive both from the historic aspect and in the modern geopolitical context.

For him, the bellwether was always Moscow's designs towards Ukraine, as he assumed without Ukraine there would be no Russian empire. More importantly, the very existence of an independent Ukraine leaning heavily towards the West would also transform Russia. But a Ukraine suborned and subordinated automatically would change Russia's status to an empire.

Regaining control over Ukraine, its people, resources, and its access to the Black Sea would mean that Moscow once again became a threat to Europe, transatlantic security, and, ultimately, to the United States.

By the way, I found this same argument – the same argument – in the mode of thinking of my personal friend, the late President Lech Kaczyński, who on many occasions warned us that the bouts of Russian imperialism would not stop in Tbilisi or Kyiv but would reach the Baltic states and, finally, Poland.

I would also like to add here that Russia wouldn't even stop there but it would threaten the life, wellbeing, and core values of all Europeans and Americans. Russian imperialism would not stop on its own but must be stopped by a joint effort of the free world.

Only by stopping imperialism together can Ukraine, Poland, and the United States flourish. Most importantly, they will guarantee that future generation(s) will not experience the threat of authoritarian imperialism. Let's do this together. Thank you. (Applause.)

Mr. Bergmann: Thank you, Minister Rau, for those comments. And thank you also for joining me in what should be a free and frank discussion. Let's just pretend the cameras aren't here and people – and there's no audience.

And with that, I want to maybe start with a question that hits on the topic of the day that is, I think, rattling much of Europe. It's a lot of active social media speculation, and that's pipelines – pipelines in the Baltic Sea. Of course, today was sort of a monumental day where Poland completed a pipeline that will allow Norwegian gas to now come into Poland. Yet, we've

also seen over the last two days three explosions in the Nord Stream 2 pipelines – Nord Stream 2 first; now Nord Stream 1 has been fully taken offline, with speculation that this had to be caused deliberately by an explosion. So I want to ask you: What caused these explosions? Do you have anything – information to reveal? What do you think is going on here?

Min. Rau: Well, I was about to say crucial for the explanation of this event is the context in which it's taking place. So we are in the middle of energy crisis caused by Russia. Poland, unlike many other European states – at least in the last 10 years – has been trying to do its best in order to make the country independent from Russia's gas deliveries, and the opening of a Baltic Pipe that took place earlier this morning is the best indication of that.

Now, you're asking me what caused the three explosions. Well, certainly an international investigation has to be launched. But if I – well, if you're asking me about my more personal opinion, I can tell you that the timing of these three explosions are very meaningful, so to speak. Russia has lost operational initiative on the ground in Ukraine. At the same time, the Baltic Pipe has started working. The explosions took place very close to the Danish territorial waters, but not within the Danish territorial waters, because if this were the case this would be an intrusion into the NATO territory, right?

So what's the conclusion of all of that? Intellectual honesty requires us not to exclude sabotage. And if this were the case, this would mean that someone wanted to perhaps intimidate Baltic Sea states. With the exception of Russia, right now all of them are already NATO member states or aspiring NATO member states. The other thing – the other element that has to be taken into account is that these explosion(s) certainly as you are saying about the reactions of the social media, and so it drove attention of the international public opinion from the events in Ukraine. So, when we put all of these things together, we can – we are not in a position to reject the notion that this could be an element of Russian hybrid war against NATO.

Mr. Bergmann: And so just to follow up on that, I mean, does that raise any concerns that you might have about the security of your energy infrastructure or the energy infrastructure of Europe?

Min. Rau: Oh, certainly. You know, we in Poland happen to believe – and so far we are right – that Russia is ready and capable of weaponizing any aspect of bilateral relations with each and every NATO state or with NATO as a whole or the European Union as a whole. If you bear in mind that these four lines of Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 cross somewhere under the surface of the water Baltic Pipe, this would be a clear indication that the same could happen to the newly-opened pipeline.

- Mr. Bergmann: I want to stick with energy for a minute before turning to Ukraine because you had a call recently with Secretary of State Antony Blinken where U.S.- Polish energy cooperation was discussed. Poland is pursuing nuclear. I'm curious, maybe you could talk about the steps that Poland is taking to confront the energy crisis in Europe.
- Min. Rau: There is a consensus in Poland that if we are looking for clear energy, if you want to give up our energy system primarily – which was primarily based on coal, the nuclear power plants constitutes the only reasonable alternative. Of course, in our energy mix in the future the renewables are going to play a considerable role, but it would be – and this is our strong conviction – it would be too hazardous to base our newly-created energy system on the foundation that is so much dependable upon the weather. So we share the position of those in Europe, especially that of France, that nuclear energy is the best solution in this case.
- Mr. Bergmann: And just an extension of this to maybe tie this back to Russia. There's been a lot of speculation that – or, informed speculation/analysis that part of what Vladimir Putin is hoping with cutting off gas through Nord Stream 1 to Russia – or, to Europe, that Europe will buckle; that the increase in energy prices will lead to protests and a recession in Europe, which will prompt European leaders to push to get rid of sanctions and push Ukraine to give in and negotiate. Do you think Europe has the political will? Do you think Vladimir Putin will be proven correct here? What does the spine of Europe look like to you?
- Min. Rau: Well, so far it's difficult to assume that President Putin was correct in his – in his expectations and in his estimations. As I said in my introductory remarks, the transatlantic community showed unprecedented unity here. Of course, there are some expectations, I believe, perhaps too pessimistic expectations, that given the energy crisis, given the difficult situation in the wintertime, that so-called war fatigue can bring some of our European partners and allies to start thinking and acting in the direction of putting pressure on Ukraine to negotiate and to in fact bring Russia to the negotiating table. But so far, so far, I don't see any signs that would cause me to believe that this is a likely development. It's possible. But so far, we have been together in unity in our reaction to the Russian aggression. And I believe we have a good chance to stay this way.
- Mr. Bergmann: You mentioned in your remarks Zbigniew Brzezinski, formerly of CSIS, who – and his comment that Russia without Ukraine ceases to be a great power. And your remarks –
- Min. Rau: Imperial power.

Mr. Bergmann: Imperial power. In your remarks, pointing to the need to stop Russian imperialism, do you think that part of Putin's mobilization in Ukraine is purely driven by the need to reclaim Ukraine as – Russia as an imperial power? Is that what is motivating him right now in Ukraine, to call this mobilization?

Min. Rau: That's a pertinent, but very difficult question. Because, well, let me put this this way. The only reasonable reason for launching this mobilization would be the will to prevail in Ukraine on the ground. Because so far, the Ukrainian armed forces managed to regain operational initiative vis-à-vis Russian – the best-trained and the best-equipped troops. And they proved to be victorious in this effort. So the only way to change the course of events was, you know, mobilization.

Whether it's a very promising move from the military point of view, I'm not a military analyst, but following common sense, it doesn't seem a very good solution because if the Ukrainians manage to defeat well-trained and well-equipped Russian soldiers, what do they think what's the chance that those who are worse trained, obviously – and so far we see it, certainly at least for some time – worse equipped, are going to prevail?

But you're asking difficult questions because I suppose that – so, it's rather unreasonable to expect a breakthrough at the battlefields in Ukraine as a result of the mobilization. But I would expect a true breakthrough, if at all, on the domestic front in Russia. Because it's more than obvious that Russian society, which so far has been supporting the idea of war in Ukraine, between 70 and 80 percent of them they were identifying themselves with the Russian leaders in supporting the war.

But they didn't consider that their own personal – the war was taking place somewhere relatively far away from Russian borders. But now, as a result of a – of a mobilization, each and every Russian family would be forced to think and to discuss the reasonable – or, I mean, discuss the reason for this war, because their loved ones are going to be sent there to be killed or wounded, but rather not be victorious there. And this is something that, obviously we see the first signs of it, will start first private social debate, social discourse, which sooner or later will certainly become public.

Mr. Bergmann: So, yes, let's talk a bit about the internal situation within Russia, and the situation Putin finds himself in. I completely agree with you that mobilizing – and, you know, we have our own experience with the social discord that having a draft and calling people up. But in our experience of Vietnam, that happened over time. It was sort of slowly introduced, also at recruiting ages of younger people. Not men in their thirties and forties that have families and are the breadwinners of their family unit, then suddenly being pulled to the battlefield with having children to care for.

It strikes me as extremely – creating tremendous upheaval in Russia and doing so without mobilizing for war before a special military operation. Do you think that this could lead to real trouble for Vladimir Putin in his internal situation? How do you assess the internal stability of that regime?

Min. Rau:

Well, before I try to answer your question, I have to disagree with you. Of course, you are referring to your – the American experience in the late '60s and the early '70s. So I was around at that time. So first of all, I wouldn't compare the – OK, there was a common draft at that time in the United States. That's true. But this is – the only element of this common denominator you are talking about. Because when you think how at that time – how the mobilization was conducted.

Which means, following what kinds of procedures. Of course, some of the young people who disagreed as citizens with idea that it made sense to fight over in Vietnam for the cause that was not clear to everyone. It was clear to people in my country, I assure you. But the reaction was that small numbers, small percentage of young people were driving to Canada, for example, right? But you cannot compare that with the sudden exodus at the Russian borders with Kazakhstan, with Georgia, with Finland. On the other hand, at that time in your country mass demonstrations were taking place and they were protected by the police force rather than contained or dispersed, right? And the other thing: In today's Russia, if you compare the number of young people who are leaving Russia at any price to those who are demonstrating publicly – so – (laughs) – there is no comparison here in terms of numbers.

Now, going back – going back to your – to your main question, well, I don't want to speculate, quite frankly, because you can assume that polls are not very objective on such issues as predicting the internal social developments in Russia. But one thing is more than obvious already now: the way Russian authorities, Russian state agendas, Russian institutions – which means the part of the Russian state – are handling the mobilization issue and the protests indicates something that we already know about Russian military forces. It's not a well-ordered, functional state machinery, not to mention that it doesn't seem to be very trustworthy state agendas or institutions.

So if you bear in mind this fact and you add to this popular discontent, what can we expect? Certainly not social harmony and political stability.

Mr. Bergmann:

A lot was made of Putin's speech announcing the mobilization, where he made a nuclear threat then made a point of saying this was not a bluff. Poland, being – bordering Ukraine, how concerned are you by the nuclear threat from Russia and Putin's comments?

Min. Rau: You see, we in Poland – or better to say all our friends, neighbors, and allies on the NATO eastern flank take everything that President Putin is saying very seriously. It's necessary to take him seriously. The question is whether this is an element of a Russian hybrid war, this kind of threat, or is it something more important? And responsible politicians have to be prepared on these two scenarios; that's for sure.

But I suppose the issue has a broader character. You see, so far no country out of these five permanent members of the Security Council – all of them are nuclear powers – tried to break this nuclear taboo, which means to say, OK, I'm going to use nuclear weapons. None of these countries indicated anything like that. So the question is, what does it mean if it, God beware, was to happen in Ukraine? Because as I understand it, it's a threat to use nuclear weapons on Ukraine soil, tactical nuclear weapons.

So we know that in human history, nuclear weapons was used once, at the end of the war. It was used by a victorious power to shorten the war, because the victory was already determined.

If President Putin is threatening to use his nuclear – tactical nuclear weapons, we have to realize that this would be completely different situation, because it would be the use of nuclear weapons by the side which is losing rather than winning the war, and not at the very end of the war but, in fact, in the middle of the war or, God beware, at the beginning of the war.

So it's a completely new situation. And the question, the fundamental question, is what would this bring for Russia?

Mr. Bergmann: I think the answer is –

Min. Rau: The answer is, following the emerging consensus of the NATO member states, a conventional response in Ukraine.

Mr. Bergmann: And, of course, over the last few days Russia has been forcing Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied territory to vote in referenda about Russian annexation. Do you feel that this will change anything in terms of how Ukraine pursues the war or how the West will approach supporting Ukraine?

Min. Rau: From the Ukrainian perspective, it's not going to change anything, because they are fighting for the recovery of temporarily occupied territories. They're just fighting to restore their territorial integrity.

From the perspective of the international community, it's not going to change anything, because not many countries are going to recognize these changes, right?

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah.

Min. Rau: From the perspective of Russia itself, I suppose the calculation behind this move would be that in this way Russia wanted to indicate that it's ready to defend the conquered territories on which they launched their referenda, in the same way they are ready to defend the other territories within the internationally recognized borders of the Russian Federation, right.

But we have already witnessed precedence that confirm that it was – that this would be a miscalculation on the Russian side. Take the Crimea, right, which was attacked by the Ukrainians after being – after what, six years of declarations of Crimea as an integral part of the Russian Federation.

Mr. Bergmann: You're in close contact with your Ukrainian colleagues. You mentioned Foreign Minister Kuleba. What do the Ukrainians need militarily, especially in the wake of the mobilization? Has that led to the need to expedite certain equipment deliveries? Are there certain types of equipment that they are now desperate for? How – has that shifted the landscape? What do they need in terms of Western support going forward?

Min. Rau: OK. I suppose our Ukrainian friends have made it clear so many times. So I don't want to go into details, for obvious reasons. But I would just say that certainly numerous modern heavy equipment. This goes without saying. Also they need ammunition. They need support in training their soldiers outside the Ukrainian borders.

Obviously, they need financial aid and humanitarian help. And they need it as much – I mean, in a size as big as possible, much bigger than so far, much sooner than before. And they always need our moral support, especially in the deep south, where regrettably the Russian misinformation campaign has taken its toll – or, better to say it used to take its toll after the Russian invasion and so on. Because the more we talk about it, the more it's open to all these atrocities that the Russians are being committed – committing there; the more it becomes clear that this is – that the energy crisis and the food crisis are manmade crisis. It's not a result of coincidence of economic phenomenon; certainly not. It's manmade crisis, because Russia is, as I said,

capable of weaponizing everything that it has at its disposal: food, including Ukraine's food, their own food; and their own energy sources.

Mr. Bergmann: There have been concerns in Washington that the amount of European equipment flowing to Ukraine has begun to slow. We put out a proposal here at CSIS to push the European Union, which, for the first time in its history, provided \$2.5 billion through the European Peace Facility to support countries providing equipment to Ukraine, essentially to help pay them to backfill. But this is running out of money, this fund.

Would you support additional funding for the European Peace Facility?

Min. Rau: Well, yes, but how should I put it? OK, I would support it because Poland is waiting for – (laughs) – reimbursement, certainly – (laughs) – from European Peace Facility. And this is particularly important for us, because in terms of the heavy equipment that we shipped to Ukraine, our own heavy equipment, I must tell you that we have – we delivered more than France, Germany, and Italy put together. And as you certainly note, we are doing pretty well economically, but we are still far away from being the richest country in Europe.

Mr. Bergmann: When it comes to Ukraine's future reconstruction, over the summer the EU made a decision to allow Ukraine – to invite Ukraine to become a candidate member of the European Union. How important do you think EU membership will be for Ukraine and Ukraine's future reconstruction?

Min. Rau: Well, certainly, certainly to be European Union member state, it's very important for Ukraine psychologically, morally, because this would be an indication that the European community is considered Ukraine a part of it. But as you know, the road to the European Union, the route of accession, so far – just look at the Western Balkan states. It's a very long and bumpy road. So my impression is of course Poland will do everything that we can in order to support the speedy accession of Ukraine to the European Union, but to be realistic it's going to last long. I don't know how long. Hopefully, not as long as it took Poland, about 10 years; not as long as it's taking the Western Balkan states, sometimes more than 20 years. Hopefully not. But I do hope that, of course, being a member of the EU should help Ukraine to rebuild itself after the war. But I suppose, and I wish it – I wish that the war would end much sooner, much sooner than Ukraine is member state of European Union.

Mr. Bergmann: In past EU enlargements, there is usually – that has usually been preceded by treaty reform, or that European countries get together and reform the rules of the European Union. Poland signed a letter with many other European countries rejecting calls from France and Italy to open up a new treaty conversation. I know European president – President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in her state of the union speech recently called for opening up a convention on treaty reform. Do you think that the EU will need a new treaty before enlargement becomes possible?

Min. Rau: Well, I don't see – quite frankly, I don't see any connection between these two future events, OK? The only suggestion that I would have as far as European Union is concerned is to obey the treaties that we now have and speed up the European accession as much as we can.

Mr. Bergmann: Mmm hmm. I want to ask you about democracy and the rule of law. President Biden has called the war in Ukraine a contest between democracy and autocracy. But the U.S. and EU have also had concerns about rule of law in Poland. Has this been a topic of conversation in your engagement here in Washington?

Min. Rau: No. No, we concentrate on other issues, especially on the security issues, on the NATO eastern flank. But we don't shy away from this kind of – from this kind of conversation. Not at all. And we have made our American friends and our European partners very clear that we are ready to discuss such issues at a – at a legal seminars, just to compare the way in which, for example, judges have been appointed in Germany, or Spain, or in Poland.

Because so far we are talking about certain media facts or interpretations by non-lawyers. Or if by lawyers, with no comparative content of this – of this discourse. So, as you introduced me, I am a lawyer. I am ready to discuss the issue with fellow lawyers or with fellow politicians. But the issue has to boil down to the norms that constitute this system of Polish, German, Dutch, or Spanish law.

As far as Ukraine is concerned here, Ukraine, there's no doubt in my mind, is making a considerable progress in terms of rebuilding its state institutions. And quite frankly, what is most important, I must say, it's a very, very democratic society. It's a very democratic society. Of course, perhaps there are issues that we can talk about this or that element of business, the business culture, and so on and so on. But Ukraine has proven many times on many occasions that as a society that value human rights and democracy, not less, than any other country of the free world.

Mr. Bergmann: Just on Ukraine's reconstruction again, I mean, I am quite optimistic about Ukraine's potential, particularly, if the war concludes, if it's on a path toward European membership that would have sort of the virtuous cycle of investment and growth.

Poland has been particularly involved in helping to build and rebuild Ukraine as it's still fighting. What experiences have you taken from Ukraine's efforts to both rebuild its society while fighting a war?

Min. Rau: Well, my impression is that the war will take its toll on the reform process, on the understanding of democracy in Ukraine, on its social structure, which I believe will become more egalitarian because the war experience brings people together and it makes clear for them how important a well-functioning state is.

So from our Polish perspective, I can tell you that the Ukrainians are very much interested in our self-government structure that we established in 1990 where the first free election in Poland was the election to the local government legislators. So and I must say it's working pretty well, and our neighbors took some elements of our constitutional structure and implemented it into various systems.

One thing, I suppose, has to be added here, there were some voices before the world that so many, they claimed, elements of the Ukrainian state did not work or did not work properly. There were even such exaggerated judgments and opinions claiming that to some extent it's a fallen state. No. Look at Ukraine today. Under enormous pressure, the state is working exceptionally, exceptionally well.

Of course, it's a matter also of the unity and solidarity of Ukrainian society. That's true. But the state agendas are working exceptionally well under the pressure of this aggression.

Mr. Bergmann: Couldn't agree more.

We'll have time for a couple questions. I want to ask one last question.

Your relationship with Hungary – you've long had a very good relationship with Hungary, with Viktor Orbán, his government. But given Hungary's reluctance to support sanctions, its potential opposition to many Russian sanctions, its unwillingness to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine, what is the current state of your relationship now with Budapest?

Min. Rau: Well, first of all, historically, our relations have been close. Our societies are close to each other. But also, historically, we found ourselves on two sides of various political constellations, including the military ones.

Now, we – Hungary is our partner not only in the European Union but also in the Visegrád Group and so on. But these days, on this very fundamental issue, which is the Russian aggression against Ukraine, we do not agree. So, in this forum – it's like the European Union or Visegrád Group or B-9 and so on – we cooperate on the issues which bring us together. And we are certainly not going to be persuaded by the Hungarians that we should change our position towards Russia, Belarus, or Ukraine itself.

Mr. Bergmann: Thank you.

So we can take a few questions from the audience. There are two rules. One, please identify yourself and raise your hand. And the second is ask a question, please; let's avoid comments.

Yes, please.

Eva Hockstram
Fossel: Do I need the microphone?

Mr. Bergmann: Yes. The microphone is coming. I think I caught – I caught our audiovisual team off-guard, but –

Ms. Fossel: Hello. Thank you for an interesting speech/discussion. I'm Eva Hockstram Fossel (ph) from the Swedish Defense Research Agency, visiting Washington, D.C., and I have a question.

How will Poland sort of capitalize on the goodwill it has received during the handling of Russia's war on Ukraine? Is it interested in strengthening its role within the EU and NATO? And what issues would you like to drive in those organizations?

Min. Rau: And what issues –

Ms. Fossel: – would you like to promote within the EU and NATO?

Min. Rau: OK. Thank you. Should I –

Mr. Bergmann: Go ahead.

Min. Rau: – answer right now?

Well, if we have managed to uncover some goodwill, we would like to use it to persuade our friends, allies, and partners to help Ukraine even more. This is the first thing, because the Ukrainians are fighting for our common values and they are also fighting in our interests – and not only the Polish interests, but in the interests of the transatlantic community – because imperialism – Russian imperialism, supported by the ideology of Russkiy Mir, would not stop in Ukraine. That's obvious.

As far as our position in the European Union is concerned, well, I would say I believe that what is very important in the European Union in Poland – and for Poland is to stick to the letter and spirit of treaties, not to build a federal state without the consent of its citizens. Believe me, Europe is not like the United States. Spain is not Arizona and Poland is not Nebraska. (Laughter.) We have much less in common than these two magnificent states. We have different culture, different language, different historical experience, difference of practices, and also different level of – different standards of living, and so on and so on. But European Union is our natural habitat – pluralistic and it's our natural family – because we are Europeans. This means that right now this is the European Union and we have – and this is

the institution that is common to all of us. It brings us together. And this is the natural expression of a pluralistic European identity – pluralistic European identity.

As far as NATO is concerned, we would like to use this – our position to persuade everyone around – our allies in the North Atlantic Treaty – that this is a historic time for the Free World. We have a unique chance to contain – and I would say right now push back Russian imperialism. But in order to do it, verbal unity, unity in our declarations is not enough.

What is really absolutely necessary is to take responsibility by each and every NATO member states for its own defense, which means to spend at least – at least 2 percent of GDP for defense. Poland is going to spend 3.2 percent next year from the budget. But if you include extra budget remains, it's going to raise up to 4.2 percent.

We are in a special situation because we are in the middle of the eastern flank, but nevertheless, solidarity and above all NATO member states' responsibility requires to join forces, but above all to take this threat – believe me, existential threat – not even only for the transatlantic community, but for the Free World as a whole to take this threat seriously and to do everything possible to defend ourselves.

How shall I put it? Defense is very, very important in this respect. So, deterrence is not less important. If strong deterrence was there, Putin would not attack Ukraine. Correct? And deterrence right now is the best investment. Deterrence of NATO as a whole – the best investment in peace and prosperity for the future generations in the Free World.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.

Mr. Bergmann: I'll take one more question, and then, we'll be off the hook.

Yes, please.

Fay Dwan: Hi, Mr. Minister. My name is Fay Dwan. I'm a student at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies just down the street.

I have a question. You mentioned in your speech that solidarity of NATO nations, or European Union, is extremely important in this moment. But four or five weeks ago, I think, I'd read some news that Poland was demanding a war reparation of 1.3 trillion euros from German government. Why would the Polish government do something at this time to, you know, at least superficially speaking, might undermine the solidarity –

Min. Rau: Superficially speaking?

Mr. Dwan: Yeah, yeah, like on the surface, right? Like, it looks like something would have undermined the solidarity within Europe by asking German that 1.3 trillion euros.

Min. Rau: OK. The answer to that is very simple. We didn't have any treaty with Germany after World War II. So, there are so many issues that have not been regulated since the war. The problem is – the true problem is that under the German occupation we lost more than 5 million citizens. So many people lost their lives, not to mention their estate, their chances to educate. More than a million got diseases that affected the rest of their life, and so on. And I must tell you that no – there are not many people with us who were directly affected by the war, because such people now are in their 90s. So in my country, there are not many of them. But nevertheless, the trauma of the war is still very, very much present in every Polish family.

And there is enormous sense injustice that the – statistically – the majority – considerable majority, more than 65 percent of the people, including the young people like yourself, feel that this is a business that has not been taken seriously, despite the fact that we have good relations with our German neighbors. We are allies in NATO, and partners in the European Union. Our trade relations are very close and intense. But nevertheless, after 30 years of regaining – after fall of the Berlin Wall, after Poland regained independence and sovereignty, after the reunification of Germany, there's no clear sign, at least on the German part, that this issue should be brought to a satisfactory end.

And you realize that usually the war is being ended with a peace treaty that regulates all spheres of mutual interest. And that's what we – what we want to do, because this is the social expectations of the considerable majority of our population. So I don't think that this would undermine our solidarity with any European state, including Germany, in order to improve our

bilateral relations. We think very seriously. We are determined to pursue this issue.

Mr. Bergmann: Well, Minister Rau, thank you so much for being here. Thank you, on behalf of CSIS. It's been a real privilege and honor. I know you've had an incredibly busy not just day but week here in the United States. So please join me in thanking the foreign minister. (Applause.)

Min. Rau: Thank you for having me. Thank you.