

INTERNATIONAL • WAR IN UKRAINE

Volodymyr Zelensky: Giving up Ukrainian territories is 'a very, very difficult' question

In an interview with Le Monde, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky discusses the possible outcome of the war and calls on China to put pressure on Russia to open the way to negotiations.

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Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukrainian president, in Rivne, Ukraine, July 30, 2024. SAMUEL GRATACAP FOR LE MONDE

Over two-and-a-half years since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of his country, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky spoke with *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *L'Equipe* and Agence France-Presse about the situation on the front line, which he describes as "difficult," and the possible outcome of the war, during a visit to Rivne in the northwest of the country.

Why didn't you attend the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics?

I would have gladly accepted Emmanuel Macron's invitation, but our country is going through a difficult period. The Russians are striking our territory. They don't care that the Olympic Games are taking place right now. They've been hitting our energy infrastructure for several months.

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The Olympics can probably be described as a political event, but for me, it's first and foremost a great celebration. For all the athletes, of course, and for France, most of all. For our team, taking part in the Olympic Games in wartime is already a victory. But for our country, it's no celebration.

Fifteen Russian and 18 Belarusian athletes have been authorized by the International Olympic Committee to compete under a neutral banner. Are you satisfied with this decision?

Sometimes, we are surprised to see that, even though sanctions have been imposed, Russia is making money from its energy resources, or that some of its banks are operating. These are not sanctions, they are half-sanctions. Hence the importance of prohibiting the official participation of its team in

the Olympic Games, and I thank all those who opposed it. But here too, we're talking about half-sanctions. Admittedly, there are far fewer Russian and Belarusian athletes, but no one is fooled.

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If we want to combat tyranny and authoritarianism, we need to take very concrete action. There's no point in imposing half-sanctions. No need to play the populist game. Excuse me, but the Russians killed 488 Ukrainian athletes and trainers during the war. Look at this neutral banner. Let's add some bloodstains. Then they can compete. Because that's what they deserve.

The Russians continue to advance in eastern Ukraine. Why are they gaining ground?

There are several reasons for this. We've prepared 14 brigades, it's no longer a secret. Brigades that we wanted to equip with weapons, to defend our territory and set up rotations, giving soldiers the chance to rest and be replaced. If out of 14 brigades only three are equipped, can we stop the Russians? We're very grateful for the aid that has been voted in [by Ukraine's allies], for all those billions. But how can we do a rotation, if the brigades are empty?

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