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By Guy Taylor

Vitali Klitschko, former heavyweight champ, says Ukraine can't take on Russia alone

Віталій Кличко, колишній чемпіон у суперважкій категорії, говорить, що Україна сама не впорається з Росією

Про конфлікт на сході України, що триває вже більше року, мер Києва Віталій Кличко говорить як про конфлікт між Заходом та Сходом. Для виходу з ситуації Кличко закликає ЄС та США більше координувати спільні дії стосовно санкцій проти Росії, а також говорить про більшу пряму військову підтримку України. «Якщо Україна буде наодинці в цій боротьбі, то це буде трагедія для всіх наших країн», - звернувся Кличко до світових лідерів.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/apr/27/vitali-klitschko-ex-heavyweight-boxing-champ-say>



The stakes have always been high for Vitali Klitschko — from the nine times he defended his heavyweight boxing title right through his emergence as a major opposition figure on Ukraine's violent political scene.

But when it comes to going pound-for-pound against Russian political, economic and military aggression, the 43-year-old former champ turned mayor of Kiev says the stakes have never been higher.

"How the situation in Ukraine develops will decide the future of the European Union, the future of the West and the future of democracy in the world," Mr. Klitschko said.

"This is not just a local conflict," he stressed in an interview Monday with The Washington Times. "It's a conflict between East and West."

What's needed, Mr. Klitschko said, are wider, deeper and better-coordinated U.S. and EU sanctions on Moscow, as well as more direct support for Ukraine's military in the fight against Russia-backed separatists in the nation's east.

"If Ukraine will be alone in this fight," he said in English, "it will be a tragedy for all our countries."

He is not the only Ukrainian leader to make such pronouncements. But Mr. Klitschko's voice carries a special kind of weight because he is the only one who was world-famous long before the pro-Western uprising that toppled Ukraine's government last year.

He is the only one who lasted six rounds against former heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis in 2003 — one of just two losses in his 45-fight career. Mr. Klitschko knocked 41 opponents out cold and reigned as champion from 2008 to 2013.

The power of his fists aside, it was unprecedented that Mr. Klitschko worked on a Ph.D. in sports science along the way that won him the nickname "Dr. Ironfist."

His younger brother Wladimir is still in the fight game. A current champion, he defended his titles Saturday before a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden. That Mr. Klitschko was in his brother's corner at ringside, seemed only to add to the Schwarzenegger-like mystique he carries in Ukrainian politics.

He was still a boxer when he worked his way into Kiev's city council in the mid-2000s and later into the nation's parliament. But it wasn't until political hell broke loose in Ukraine last year that Mr. Klitschko suddenly emerged as a dominant opposition figure.

His 6-foot, 7-inch frame and sculpted jawline jumped out at international photographers as he marched arm in arm with the activists who drove Ukraine's pro-Russia president, Viktor Yanukovich, from power.

In the chaotic weeks that followed, Mr. Klitschko ran for mayor and won. His boxing legend intersected with the currents of Ukrainian activism in a way that drew comparisons to Muhammad Ali's rise as a political voice among Americans in the 1960s.

There has even been talk that Ukraine's presidency could one day be within Mr. Klitschko's 80-inch reach.

Fighting for investment

Mr. Klitschko is soft-spoken. For now, he said, he just trying to make a mark by pushing local reforms to attract badly needed Western investment to Ukraine.

His swing through Washington this week is driven in part by a desire to hype positive changes he said he has managed to make after just one year in the mayor's seat.

He wants Western tech firms to take note, so he penned an op-ed for The Wall Street Journal last week touting Kiev's creation of a "one-stop shop for investors to clarify and streamline the regulatory process for registering foreign representatives and offices."

About 90,000 students graduate each year from Kiev's universities, he wrote. Corporate tax rates have been cut from 23 percent to 18 percent. City procurement operations are now "online in the interests of total transparency."

"It's not easy to make change," Mr. Klitschko told The Times. "We have to realize and make Ukraine as a modern European democratic country."

"I have a will," he said. "And it's not just me alone; 45 million Ukrainians have exactly the same vision."

But that vision is at risk of being held hostage by the conflict raging in Ukraine's east.

Slow-footed sanctions

Mr. Klitschko said he doesn't like complainers and he doesn't want to be an empty critic. He and others in Kiev have "great appreciation for the help the U.S. is giving to Ukraine," he said.

But when it comes to sanctions as a tool to deter Russia from annexing large swaths of eastern Ukraine, Washington and the EU were simply too slow to take serious action, he said.

"We were talking about sanctions a pretty long time ago and people didn't realize," Mr. Klitschko said.

A 14-month-old war that has killed more than 6,000 people in eastern Ukraine may have been avoided, he said, if Washington and its allies moved more swiftly to confront Moscow's spin and weapons.

"Without a propaganda machine and brainwashing, without financial support and weapons delivery, this conflict would have never existed," Mr. Klitschko said.

After Moscow's annexation of eastern Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March 2014, the U.S. and the EU imposed sanctions on a small number individuals and businesses close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The list was expanded to roughly two dozen in July, after a rocket that U.S. officials say was fired by Russia-backed separatists shot a Malaysia Airlines flight out of the sky over eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 onboard.

Mr. Klitschko said the asset seizures and travel bans on Mr. Putin's associates have not been enough. He suggested that Moscow's propaganda campaign is only expanding and reaching directly into Kiev.

He pointed to the deaths this months of two pro-Russia journalists in the city. The killings of Oles Buzina and Oleh Kalashnikov triggered international headlines and speculation.

Mr. Putin appeared on television to claim the killings were political. Mr. Klitschko said he believes it was subversive Russian propaganda.

“I think it’s provocation manipulation from Russia, to make it look like there are extremists or some people who hate Russians and are against Russian language and nationality,” he said. “This puts oil on the fire of the Russian propaganda machine.”

U.S. officials, meanwhile, say Russia-backed rebels are blatantly violating a February cease-fire in eastern Ukraine, but there seems to be little momentum toward an increase in sanctions.

Obama administration officials say sanctions will be lifted only if Moscow adheres to the February cease-fire.

On Monday, Rep. Mac Thornberry, Texas Republican, released his so-called chairman’s mark for the National Defense Authorization Act, which calls for providing lethal weapons to the military and national security forces of Ukraine. It authorizes \$200 million to do more to provide Ukraine with military training and assistance to defend itself from Russian aggression.

The Obama administration opposes sending weapons, fearing it will provoke more aggression from Moscow. Mr. Obama instead rallied European allies for the existing sanctions.

A diverse mix of U.S. and EU-based companies are heavily in Russia’s economy. Mr. Klitschko said he understands the sensitivities, but he suggests the stakes are simply too high.

“Many people in the world are afraid of triggering a new circle of military escalation,” he said. “I remember this from 30 years ago, when it was the Soviet Union against the United States and everyone was afraid of a thermonuclear war.”

“Nobody wants to return to that time,” Mr. Klitschko said. “But if we talk about support for Ukraine, we talk about sanctions.”

“I understand it’s painful, but we defend European values,” he said.

“We defend all of Europe.”