

# Ukraine: And yet he remained a human

Maksym Butkevych Interview

Friday 31 January 2025, by [BOTA Alice](#), [BUTKEVYCH Maksym](#), [KORTAS Olivia](#) (Date first published: 4 January 2025).

***Ukrainian pacifist and human rights activist Maksym Butkevych talks about why he joined the war and how he survived two years and four months in Russian captivity as a military officer.***

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**DIE ZEIT:** Mr. Butkevych, after two years and four months as a Russian prisoner of war, you are now free. How have you been changed by your time in captivity?

**Maksym Butkevych:** I never used to have time in my life, I was haunted by my work, by my activities. On my second or third day in prison, I thought: You always wanted time, now you have it. I started to think more systematically, to sort things out. It's about pursuing the essential, the most important.

**ZEIT:** For example?

**Butkevych:** I thought about things that we were going through in captivity: Pain and fear, violence and death. I realized that I probably misunderstood violence. We think that violence wants to destroy, that it's about killing or hurting.

**ZEIT:** Is that not the case?

**Butkevych:** It is, but those things are a consequence of violence, not its essence. Violence is about dehumanizing people by treating them like objects without souls. It's about transforming living beings into something inanimate.

**ZEIT:** Please explain?

**Butkevych:** You tell a person to sing. To stop singing. To sit down, lie down, bend over. As if they were a toy. First and foremost, it's about depriving a person of their freedom. A toy doesn't make decisions. It has no agency of its own. And you can break it if it doesn't work the way you want it to.

**ZEIT:** A toy has no dignity.

**Butkevych:** For me, dignity, freedom and life are different elements of the same thing. And it's about meaning. Our lives are meaningful, that's what characterizes us humans. I often find myself thinking about what we are fighting against in [Ukraine](#). It may sound pathetic, but for me, there is the freedom of life, meaning and dignity on the one hand. And on the other, there is destruction, violence, death, senselessness and dehumanization.

**ZEIT:** You were captured on June 21, 2022. What are your memories of that day?

**Butkevych:** We had arrived two days earlier in the village of Myrna Dolyna in the [Luhansk](#) region of eastern Ukraine to reinforce the Ukrainian troops there. We were under heavy mortar fire all night. In the morning, the village was half wiped out. This is how Russian soldiers “liberate” Ukrainian villages: They wipe them out. We were ordered to take observation points on a strategically important road. I went there with eight men, half of the unit I commanded.

**ZEIT:** You were a commander within the Berlingo battalion.

**Butkevych:** Our orders were to observe whether there were any enemy movements along the road. We were forbidden from engaging the enemy without orders. We had already spent several days with almost no sleep and we had no water. Half of my people are my age or older. They joined the battle in the first days of the war, but they were civilians before that. Some had health problems. I’m not an athlete either and I was still overweight at the time. We soon lost contact, our radios went silent.

**ZEIT:** What happened then?

**Butkevych:** The next morning, we could hear enemy troops as they entered the neighboring forest. There were many of them. We were unable to report it, so we needed to leave. At that moment, one of the soldiers from another battalion said over the radio that we were almost completely surrounded, but that if we followed him, we would manage to escape together. We sensed that something was wrong.

**ZEIT:** You still had no radio contact with your commander?

**Butkevych:** No. So we followed this man’s navigation. We had been without water for almost 24 hours. I wasn’t just worried about my guys, but also about myself. I was feeling dizzy. When we reached the last navigation point, we were told to walk across a field to a wooded area. We ran as best we could. Just before the forest, the man asked us to stop. He said: “Guys, I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve been a prisoner since last night. I lured you into the enemy’s positions.”

**ZEIT:** You then laid down your arms?

**Butkevych:** Yes. We couldn’t run away. I said: Guys, do what they say. I think they would have done so anyway, but someone had to give an order. I wanted to be responsible in case something went wrong.

**ZEIT:** What was going through your mind?

**Butkevych:** It was like a children’s game: They won, we lost. We were trying to prepare ourselves to become a 200 or a 300.

**ZEIT:** In the military, 200 is slang for a dead body and 300 refers to a wounded soldier.

**Butkevych:** None of us had thought about what would happen if we were captured. I briefly regretted giving my grenade to a younger fighter who was carrying our things. The idea of blowing myself up entered my mind, but it quickly vanished. Not only because of my religious beliefs, but also because I was responsible for eight men. Any wrong move I made could have resulted in their deaths.

**ZEIT:** The first moments after capture are often the most critical. There are documented cases of unarmed Ukrainian soldiers being executed.

**Butkevych:** I later met many prisoners of war. Some have terrible stories to tell. Some were badly beaten or had to watch others being shot.

**ZEIT:** How did the Russian soldiers treat you?

**Butkevych:** They were okay. They gave us water. There were kicks and punches here and there. We were then moved deeper into the newly occupied territory and handed over to another unit. That was worse. They took everything we had.

**ZEIT:** What was taken from you?

**Butkevych:** I had a pair of headphones, a gift from a friend. The Russian soldiers had this strange habit. They would ask: Will you give this to me as a present? If you are on your knees with your hands tied behind your back and a gun pointed at you, you are probably going to say yes.

**ZEIT:** Why would they ask such a thing?

**Butkevych:** It was their way of convincing themselves that they weren't robbing or looting. Rather, they were being given a gift.

**ZEIT:** What did you tell the soldier?

**Butkevych:** I told him that I had received them as a gift. There is a saying in Russian: You don't give gifts away.

**ZEIT:** What was his reaction?

**Butkevych:** He was young and didn't know what to do. I told him: You can take the headphones as booty. So he kept them.

**ZEIT:** What happened then?

**Butkevych:** We were taken somewhere else in trucks. Our hands and feet were bound. They took us to an unfinished house, into a room with a concrete floor, brick walls and no windows. There was a red light in the corner and a plastic bucket as a toilet. These men belonged to a different unit and wore balaclavas.

**ZEIT:** How did they treat you?

**Butkevych:** The commander was a Russian officer. The first time we were brought before him, we were forced to kneel for a long time. He then started insulting and provoking the guys.

**ZEIT:** What did he say?

**Butkevych:** He asked which of them were married and where their wives were. The men replied: Germany, Poland, Turkey. Then he described his fantasies in detail.

**ZEIT:** Sexual fantasies?

**Butkevych:** Yes. He described their wives being raped by men in the countries where they lived. He described everything, anal sex, oral sex, basically group rape. I think he wanted someone to attack him or say something.

**ZEIT:** How did the men react?

**Butkevych:** Fortunately, they were silent and just looked at the ground. He then said that you have to look a Russian officer in the eye when he speaks to you, and anyone who didn't would be beaten up. It went on and on like that. Our hands had been tied for several hours by this point, they were swollen and painful. Then, they finally allowed us to use the plastic bucket as a toilet and eat something.

**ZEIT:** With your hands tied?

**Butkevych:** They always untied one of us at a time and took him to the toilet. We were then given military rations to eat and a cigarette before our hands were tied once again. It was difficult because everyone wanted to be unbound for as long as possible so that they could feel their hands again. But each of us knew that the longer we remained untied, the more painful it would be for the others. Then the Russian officer left.

**ZEIT:** Were the others just as bad?

**Butkevych:** The rest of the guards were younger. One of them said: Untie them, I'm not a sadist, damn it. They're going crazy with pain. I thought, okay, you just called your commander a sadist. Which he was.

**ZEIT:** What happened next?

**Butkevych:** The next morning, a new group of soldiers came in wearing balaclavas. Two of them had a camera and they took us one at a time to record a video. I told my guys quietly: We don't know any military secrets. Answer their questions. I knew they would cross-check what we were saying. One of our guys probably forgot our combat names because of the stress and was beat up. He was scared. Everyone was scared.

**ZEIT:** What was your impression of these men?

**Butkevych:** They wanted to talk with me because I was the only officer. They started by saying that Russia was carrying out a special military operation. War is when there is a war economy, they said, when there is a mobilization. They, on the other hand, would wipe us out without most Russians even noticing it.

**ZEIT:** That was in the summer of 2022. The war had only been going on for a few months.

**Butkevych:** I replied that Russian dictionaries, such as the famous one by Professor Sergei Ozhegov, would contradict them, but that I didn't care what words they used. They were surprised and said: Ok, you think you are prisoners of war. You're not. You disappeared on the battlefield. Only when you are taken to your destination and registered will the Geneva Convention apply to you. Until then, you don't exist. That wasn't true, of course. The Geneva Convention never applied to us.

**ZEIT:** What happened then?

**Butkevych:** They wanted to talk about why the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was wrong and the Russian Orthodox Church was right. And they wanted to know whether people who speak Russian in [Kyiv](#) are beaten. Russian and Ukrainian are my mother tongues. I told them that I only had one problem with language: When I spoke Ukrainian in Kyiv, which was a majority Russian-speaking city at the time, I was sometimes looked down at.

**ZEIT:** So the interrogation suddenly turned into a conversation?

**Butkevych:** Exactly. Then they wanted to record a video of me. They wanted me to say that we had been abandoned by our commanders and sent to death. That our weapons were junk and that Ukraine didn't care about its soldiers. That, I couldn't do.

**ZEIT:** You weren't afraid to argue with them?

**Butkevych:** Of course I was afraid. They gave me a short time to come up with a text. So I thought about formulations that seemed acceptable to me. I didn't say that our weapons were rubbish, but that they were inadequate to the task we were facing. I was also supposed to say that we weren't being beaten and that we were provided with food and water. So I did. It was true, after all. The beatings started two hours later.

**ZEIT:** Who beat you?

**Butkevych:** The Russian officer returned and wanted me to wish the Russian special forces a good hunting season on video. I tried to politely decline. He then told my men that he would now teach us the real history of Ukraine. He took out his mobile phone and read aloud the speech that Putin had given shortly before the invasion. He read every paragraph and forced my men to repeat it sentence by sentence. If they made a mistake, he would hit me with a wooden rod. It was touching to see how hard my men tried.

**ZEIT:** You were beaten for your men's mistakes?

**Butkevych:** One blow for a pause in the wrong place, two blows if they mispronounced something, three blows if they forgot a word. The officer was a professional. He kept hitting the same spot on my shoulder. I was sure he would break my bones, but he didn't.

**ZEIT:** What happened then?

**Butkevych:** He asked me if I knew the name of the Ukrainian defense minister and hit me. Then he wanted to know the name of the Russian defense minister, and he hit me again. He forced me to learn the names of Russian war heroes, each word accompanied by a blow. I knelt in front of him with my hands behind my back. Later, I thought that would make for a fitting memorial to the Russian liberators: a prisoner of war kneeling with his hands tied, and a Russian officer standing in front of him with a wooden stick.

**ZEIT:** For how long did this continue?

**Butkevych:** I suppose not too long. But the pain was so intense that I almost fainted. I tried to keep it together, though, because otherwise the officer would have beaten the others. Before he left, he made us all kneel down and, filming us, demanded that we shout "Glory to Russia," that we wish the special forces of the Russian Federation a good hunt and that we apologize for not having done so in the morning. We did as he asked. Then they took our military boots, because ours were better than theirs. We had only socks for the next several months.

**ZEIT:** How were you taken from this location to prison?

**Butkevych:** They took us away immediately afterwards. Upon our arrival, we were locked in a cell. We were given old mattresses and towels with a stamp on them: Luhansk detention facility. That's how we knew where we were.

**ZEIT:** You've always been a staunch anti-militarist. Why did you join the army?

**Butkevych:** I am still an anti-militarist. Now, people frequently refer to me as a pacifist ...

**ZEIT:** ... the word even appears on a book of your essays that was recently published in Germany.

**Butkevych:** If pacifism means being against war, then of course I'm a pacifist. If it is understood to mean that you should never fight back, then I have never been one. We don't live in a theoretical world. If you witness a crime and are in a position to stop it, but fail to do so, then you become an accomplice. You commit violence by not preventing violence.

**ZEIT:** In your writing, you have described weapons as killing machines. What did it mean for you to pick up one of these killing machines yourself?

**Butkevych:** For me, it was a tragedy that I had to pick up a gun. But it would have been even more tragic not to.

**ZEIT:** Did you think about guilt? About the fact that you could injure or kill someone?

**Butkevych:** Of course I thought about it. It was clear to me that as a commander, I would never allow more than the violence that is absolutely necessary for defense. In war, people can overreact. I wanted to be a kind of protector for those around me. I knew that it would be difficult for me if I hurt someone. But I also knew that if I didn't do it, I would have a lot more emotional problems later on. It would have made me an accomplice to a Russian crime of catastrophic proportions.

**ZEIT:** When did you decide to join the army?

**Butkevych:** I had often considered it before. Some of my friends have been fighting since 2014 ...

**ZEIT:** ... when Russia started its covert war against Ukraine in the east.

**Butkevych:** During this time, I coordinated a coalition of nine civil society organizations and the ombudsman for human rights. We helped internally displaced persons. But I was convinced that I had to fight. My friends and colleagues held me back. I was likely easy to replace on the front lines. But when it came to civil society aid, with my experience and expertise, I couldn't be replaced so easily.

**ZEIT:** What changed on February 24, 2022?

**Butkevych:** I realized that if the Russians won, there would be nothing left of my human rights work. I would end up in prison. I could flee or fight. So I registered at the conscription center.

**ZEIT:** What kind of commander were you?

**Butkevych:** I ask myself the same question. I told my men straight away that I was a jacket, which is military slang for officers who studied at a military academy but never served. I explained that we would make some decisions together, but that they should never forget that I have the last word. I tried to take care of them materially and psychologically.

**ZEIT:** What does that mean?

**Butkevych:** We were lucky that volunteers provided us with protective equipment and medical supplies. With food, with sweets. They were our guardian angels. I tried to distribute everything. Before long, a rumor began circulating that you could get almost anything from the commander with the combat name Moses, except firearms, because he didn't have any.

**ZEIT:** Did you choose Moses as your *nom de guerre*?

**Butkevych:** No, my commander did. He thought my suggestions were silly, so he called me Moses. Maybe he knew that I am religious.

**ZEIT:** Did you like the name?

**Butkevych:** Yes. There is a poem by the Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko called "Moses." It has an incredibly powerful prologue. It is about the plight of the Ukrainian people. This poem is very moving, strong, confident. Franko wrote it at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And it contains a lot of hope. When I heard the name Moses, it was the first thing I thought of.

**ZEIT:** Has the war changed your relationship to religion?

**Butkevych:** I think so, but I haven't undergone a radical transformation. For many, I am an unconventional Christian. For me, Christianity means the opposite of hierarchy, submission and violence. My positions differ from those of many of my brothers and sisters in faith.

**ZEIT:** In what way?

**Butkevych:** When it comes to LGBTQI rights or other faiths. There are Buddhists and Muslims among my friends. The core of Christian teachings has always been a part of me, but my faith felt like it was part of my private life. I hate forcing things on people, so I kept it to myself until I started fighting.

**ZEIT:** Why did you make your faith public then?

**Butkevych:** I felt that as a Christian who picks up a killing machine and feels right about it, I had to talk about it. I wrote my first text about it on Easter 2022. It was shortly before I became a prisoner of war. I prayed a lot while I was in captivity.

**ZEIT:** What did you pray for?

**Butkevych:** I prayed for people I have met in my life. For the people of Ukraine. For my brothers and sisters in arms. For the end of the invasion.

**ZEIT:** Did you also pray for your release?

**Butkevych:** I prayed that we would all be able to live the rest of our lives freely, with dignity, without fear but with meaning. But I didn't pray for my release. I prayed for those who hurt me, that they would not destroy their earthly souls, which are such wonderful gifts. For them not to hurt anyone else. I prayed that God would guide me. I prayed for patience and courage. I prayed that fear would not control me, because fear was my greatest enemy.

**ZEIT:** What can fear do to you?

**Butkevych:** When fear takes possession of you, you become a puppet, a piece of meat waiting for the next infliction of pain. I was afraid that my fear would make them make me say or do things that I could never forgive myself for.

**ZEIT:** Can you tell us about your time in Luhansk prison?

**Butkevych:** There were people inside with criminal charges and there were prisoners of war, but

we were kept in different parts of the prison. During the first few weeks, we were interrogated quite often. Some of the interrogators wore military uniform while others were in civilian clothing. Nobody ever introduced themselves. Only once did someone identify himself as a member of the Russian Investigation Committee. Other times, it was clear that the person was from military intelligence or the intelligence service [FSB](#). The interrogations by military intelligence were the most violent.

**ZEIT:** In what way?

**Butkevych:** I was lucky. I wasn't beaten as badly as many others. I didn't have to endure electric shocks except for one brief moment so I could feel what it meant. But it wasn't done with the field phone, which military intelligence usually uses during interrogations.

**ZEIT:** How does that work?

**Butkevych:** They connect the cables of a field telephone to your ears, the tip of your nose or your genitals. They then crank up the power. It's terrible.

**ZEIT:** Do fellow prisoners have to watch?

**Butkevych:** No. But they see the burns on the skin. Sometimes they can hear the screams.

**ZEIT:** How did your interrogation go?

**Butkevych:** Normally you can't see the interrogator's face because you are looking at the floor or your eyes are covered with tape, or you are wearing a hood. I was allowed to take the handcuffs off sometimes, and to lift my head. My interrogator was in a good mood. I think by then they knew I was a journalist and a human rights activist. The chairman of the department to which my interrogator belonged wanted to talk to me.

**ZEIT:** What about?

**Butkevych:** About politics, values, war. Nothing special.

**ZEIT:** Why would someone like that want to talk to you about politics?

**Butkevych:** He was a local, as were most people in the so-called Ministry of State Security of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic, and not Russian. Normally, people like him had nothing to do with prisoners of war. But they provided support to other interrogators because there was a shortage. Maybe my treatment was milder, because they knew who I was.

**ZEIT:** One would think that your biography would actually be cause for harsher treatment.

**Butkevych:** That came later, with the Russians.

**ZEIT:** Various human rights organizations have since managed to prove that the accusations levelled against you of shooting civilians in the town of Siverskodonetsk are false. How did these accusations come about?

**Butkevych:** It started three and a half weeks after my capture, on July 16, my birthday. That day, I was interrogated by two men. I assumed that they were from the Russian domestic intelligence service FSB.

**ZEIT:** What did they want from you?



**Butkevych:** They wanted me to speak on video about Ukrainian Nazi ideology and the Ukrainian leadership, and about the Soros Foundation, the spearhead of American imperialism, which undermines traditional values by promoting liberal values and LGBTQI. I told them I wouldn't say any of that unless they forced me to. And you would be able to see that in the recordings. That's when one of them grew angry. He began shouting at me and said I was a war criminal. That was the first time I heard that I was going to be convicted of war crimes.

**ZEIT:** What happened then?

**Butkevych:** They brought me to a cell. The next day, an interrogator came and described in vulgar detail what he was going to do to me. At some point he said: "Important people are coming soon who will ask important questions. Answer appropriately, otherwise we'll meet again." Upon his order, the guard hit me with his baton. Then he left me alone.

**ZEIT:** When did these important people come?

**Butkevych:** They came a few weeks. They questioned me for four hours and forced me into a stress position.

**ZEIT:** What does a stress position look like?

**Butkevych:** They pressed my head down on the table. My hands were bound tightly behind my back and my legs were tied to the chair so that I couldn't see anyone. They asked me questions about the Maidan and what I had been doing there. One of them punched my liver. I couldn't breathe. Then another one whispered in my ear: "If you cry now, I'll stick my cock in your mouth." I recognized the voice. It was the same sadist who had beaten me on the way to prison after my arrest.

**ZEIT:** Do you know who these men were?

**Butkevych:** From the conversation, I concluded that they were a special group of Russian investigators created to investigate Ukrainian war crimes. In the end, they gave me three options. Either I sign a confession, am convicted of war crimes and then exchanged. Or I could refuse, in which case they would shoot me. The third option was that I would stay in prison, and they would make my life hell. If I was ever released, I would no longer be myself, but a broken toy.

**ZEIT:** You decided to sign.

**Butkevych:** I was asked to sign two protocols because they couldn't decide where I had committed the crimes: in Myrna Dolyna or in Siverskodonetsk, where I had never been deployed. The protocols and the interrogation never appeared in my investigation file. Six days later, on August 19, 2022, I underwent a psychiatric examination. Behind the psychiatrist sat a masked man who threatened me if the answers didn't suit him.

**ZEIT:** Did the masked man talk to you?

**Butkevych:** Yes. In the end he made me a proposal: I could agree to everything they wanted me to do as quickly as possible, in which case I would be exchanged in October. Or they would return to their former manner of treating me. I had one condition: If I signed everything quickly, then no one would be guilty except me. And I wouldn't be made responsible for any deaths. He agreed.

**ZEIT:** It has been proven that all of the accusations were concocted. Why was it important to you that you not be charged with any deaths?

**Butkevych:** I knew they would use it for their propaganda. Since I had no communication with the outside world, I realized it would be difficult to explain what had really happened and that I didn't kill any civilians.

**ZEIT:** You were like a playwright writing a script at gunpoint?

**Butkevych:** No, I had to sign something during the interrogations that I never got to read. They needed a lot of convicted Ukrainian war criminals as quickly as possible for an exchange. It was only later that I was able to read my file. I was amused by how poorly the scenario was written. The file even contained a reference to the fact that there were no Russian troops at the site where I had allegedly fired the anti-tank-weapon in June 2022, only Ukrainian troops. So it was the Russians who shelled this neighborhood. When they finally occupied it, the victims of the Russian artillery were blamed on us Ukrainians.

**ZEIT:** October 2022 passed and there was no exchange. How did you carry on?

**Butkevych:** I lived the life of a typical prisoner of war. Like the others, I tried to stay as clean as possible.

**ZEIT:** Were you able to wash?

**Butkevych:** We had cold water in the cell. There was no toothbrush, no toilet paper. We shortened our nails by rubbing them against the cement floor.

**ZEIT:** That's how Soviet dissidents describe the Gulag.

**Butkevych:** That was our daily life. We had to deal with the bugs. And we couldn't sleep properly for weeks because we were so hungry. We received food three times a day, but the portions were tiny, and it was really bad. The summer of 2022 was very difficult, but later our bodies got used to it. After Russia annexed Luhansk in a referendum in September 2022, things improved.

**ZEIT:** What did you do to stay sane?

**Butkevych:** We talked a lot in the cell. Once, when I couldn't sleep because I was so hungry, I made up a kind of political science fiction story. The next morning, I told my fellow inmates about it. They wanted me to keep going, so I continued developing my cycle of stories about Russia and the world. By the end of the month, I had seven stories. By that point, I hadn't showered for a month and a half. I looked terrible.

**ZEIT:** Did you have a mirror?

**Butkevych:** No, but when we were examined for tuberculosis, there was a mirror in the treatment room. I asked the doctor if I could have a look in it. He gave me 10 seconds. I was shocked when I saw myself: pale, greenish-grey skin and a half-shaved skull, because the shaver we had been given hardly worked. It broke when it was my turn. I had grown a beard. I had this wild gaze. I wondered if it was really me.

**ZEIT:** What did you know about what was happening in Ukraine at the time?

**Butkevych:** I was only allowed to call my parents once, when they asked for a copy of my identification for the prosecution. They had taken it from me when I was captured but they had obviously lost it. I only remembered the number of a good friend who had a copy. In return, they gave me 30 seconds on the phone with my parents. It was September 2022, and I learned that my

parents were still alive. That was the most important thing for me. I also learned that my friends had organized a group chat to help me and that lots of people were talking about us. So they knew where we were.

**ZEIT:** Did you know that your country was still fighting?

**Butkevych:** I assumed that the Russians were advancing much faster. Later, new prisoners of war came into our cell. The guards also talked to us sometimes. That's how we learned that the Russians were deliberately shelling the energy infrastructure in the autumn and winter of 2022. Shortly before New Year's Eve, civilians were transferred to our cell. That's when we learned that the city of Kherson had been liberated. We cheered.

**ZEIT:** Were you convinced the whole time that you would be exchanged at some point?

**Butkevych:** I had no doubt about it. The only thing I was worried about was that I wouldn't live long enough to see it happen.

**ZEIT:** When did you realise that your health was going downhill?

**Butkevych:** When I was sent to the penal colony. I was forced to perform hard labor and developed back problems.

**ZEIT:** You were sentenced to 13 years in prison on March 6, 2023. You were then transferred to the offenders' wing and in September you were sent to the penal colony.

**Butkevych:** The conditions in the offenders' wing were much better. We could receive parcels. My friends sent books and food. There was a television, we shared cigarettes, we had one hour of yard time per day. It was incredible to see the sky and the sun for the first time in many months. I began putting on weight again; at that point I weighed just over 60 kilograms.

**ZEIT:** You had lost more than 30 kilograms since you were captured.

**Butkevych:** One day I fainted during the evening role call in the colony. It was something like a heart attack. I almost died, but only almost. Which is nice.

**ZEIT:** Were you given medical help?

**Butkevych:** Yes. But they didn't have the medication I needed. My friends sent me some. In the colony, there are usually only remedies for diarrhea or painkillers. But we didn't even have that.

**ZEIT:** You were exchanged on October 18, 2024. Did you know that the exchange was coming?

**Butkevych:** We knew that the possibility existed. But the thought seemed so inconceivable that we couldn't really allow ourselves to believe it as a way of self-preservation.

**ZEIT:** After two years of receiving no information, you returned. What kind of Ukraine did you find?

**Butkevych:** I had been expecting to find a poorer, rawer Ukraine, where everything was seen in black and white as far as freedom of expression and human rights were concerned. I had prepared myself for war-weariness. And it is there, but not to the extent that I had feared. I was worried that no more books were being published because of the destruction of industrial capacity and because people supposedly don't buy books in wartime. But they do! The theater is alive, the cultural scene is flourishing. But at the same time, everything has become darker. Almost everyone has lost someone.

**ZEIT:** After your release, you went into rehabilitation and you were then given officer's leave, which is now expiring. What comes next?

**Butkevych:** I want to help free the prisoners in the occupied territories. And I sense that there is an international Ukraine fatigue. There are more and more of those who believe that the war must end, regardless of the conditions. That is so, so wrong! I would like to explain to those who will listen why they should support us.

**ZEIT:** What do you say to these people?

**Butkevych:** So much is at stake! When Russian soldiers filmed me on the way to Luhansk, they said: When the Ukraine phase is over, we will have the most battle-hardened army in Europe, maybe even in Eurasia, and it will go further and further. I asked them where they wanted to go. As far as Poland, as far as the Baltic states? Why should we limit ourselves to Poland, they replied. They don't care about the Geneva Convention and humanitarian law. The entire system of human rights would collapse. I have seen it with my own eyes. We are not only fighting for our Ukraine, but for much more. I'm afraid many people don't realize that. That's why I am sharing my story.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity. This is the English translation of the [original German version](#).*

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