

Yuriy Ryzhenkov: “Metinvest’s core pillar is our team, thanks to which we are moving forward despite all the crises”

In an extended interview for The FAQ Talks, Metinvest Group’s CEO, Yuriy Ryzhenkov, spoke about the main aspects of life for Ukraine’s largest private company and the transformation of its business in wartime.



During a one-and-a-half-hour interview, the Group’s chief executive answered the most pressing questions, including:

- about employees and the toughest decisions
- about rebuilding Mariupol and steel construction
- about green metallurgy and Ukraine’s role in the European economy
- about Metinvest’s future, robot-aided manufacturing and skyscraper construction
- about his own vision of Ukraine’s victory in the war.

The full video of the interview is available on

[Metinvest Group’s official YouTube channel](#)

. Here are the key highlights from the conversation.

The biggest challenge is how to retain the team

- I believe that today Metinvest is, first of all, a pillar of our country. Both a financial pillar and the country’s main helper on our way to victory. Who is supporting this pillar? People themselves. Metinvest is our team, working 24/7 at our plants and in offices around the world. These are the people who make the Group what it is.

Today, our biggest challenge is how to retain the team, its best representatives, and the most motivated and talented among them. And how to preserve the businesses that we have now. We know that there is shelling every day, and that our plants have been hit. Avdiivka, New York and Novhorodsk are particularly in the crosshairs, and this is a big challenge for our people: first, how to make sure that people can work safely at our plants. Even today, under shelling, people go to work every day; they work even when an air raid siren sounds. There are some workplaces where people cannot go to a shelter. They must remain at their workplace because a process is continuous and interrupting it can be more dangerous than an enemy attack. Second, how to preserve assets, to make sure that even after a missile or a ‘shahed’ hits our plants, they are not seriously damaged.

- What were the most difficult decisions you had to take over the past year?

- The hardest decision was to shut down Avdiivka Coke. We fought hard for it in 2014, 2015 and 2016, during

the shelling, when the power was cut off. Later, a gas pipeline was built in Avdiivka together with a state-owned company, and we managed to keep the coke plant in operation back then. However, in March 2022, we had to shut it down completely because the gas pipeline was damaged, the electricity was cut off, and a large number of people were killed. So, we decided then that we needed to shut down the plant. Unfortunately, when a coke plant is shut down, there is very little chance of getting it back up and running. We will certainly revitalise what we can, but it will never be the giant it was.

And that was the hardest part because the coke plant is Avdiivka's largest enterprise. That is, people lost their jobs in a moment. We had no other option, and this was a very sad decision. There were other problems that were less dependent on us. For one, Mariupol, when we had to end our relationship with workers who remained in the occupied city. There were also shutdowns at mining and processing plants for some time in the second half of last year, but it was a little bit easier there, as we retained the teams and were able to restart the plants at the end of last year. Even now, the mining and processing plants are only 35-40% utilised, but they are running.

- Operating enterprises is primarily about supporting people, paying salaries and taxes. This is the main thing, and you are doing this diligently. What else are you doing to support Ukraine's economy?

- We have been providing humanitarian assistance since the first day of the invasion. To date, Metinvest has spent almost UAH 2 billion on humanitarian projects. Second, there is our military assistance. In total, we have already spent UAH 3.5-4.0 billion on humanitarian and military aid.

- Just as the country is suffering from the war, Metinvest also has seen people killed and wounded. How many have there been, and how has the Group been helping them and other employees?

- Unfortunately, more than 1,500 of our employees or their family members have been killed or wounded in this war. This includes losses among both the military – conscripted employees – and civilians. More than 8,000 of our employees are currently fighting in the ranks of the Ukrainian defence forces. Regrettably, we have lost more than 200 people and more than 500 have been wounded.

As for what we have been doing to help the families who have evacuated from the sites of fierce fighting, we have looked for housing for them and provided them with the opportunity to stay in health resorts or retreats for a while. Then we have tried to find them jobs so that they could return to normal life. As for our conscripted employees, we have done our best to equip them. This includes providing a helmet, bulletproof vest and possibly tactical clothing. We are trying to protect them as much as possible.

- This means that about 10% of Metinvest's employees have been conscripted...

- More than 10%; it is 15%. If we are talking about 60,000 active employees at the Group today. Eight thousand is a lot. In fact, it's every sixth.

- To what extent can Metinvest cope today with the fact that the Group has a great need for highly skilled professionals in certain occupations, and on the other hand, they have to defend the country in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine?

- The government understands this situation. That's why there is a law on the exemption of people employed in critical industries, and our industry is a strategically critical industry for the country. As such, we can book people who are most needed to keep our manufacturing running. And I always tell our guys at the plants that the war is going on everywhere: both in the trenches on the front line and at the plants. Our victory also depends on how the plant operates and how efficiently it produces armour steel, for one. So, they are soldiers just like those who are fighting in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

A country is only as strong as its home front. And all these people working at our plant are Ukraine's reliable home front, which, among other things, is bringing victory closer.

- You said that Avdiivka was affected, and a difficult decision was made to shut down the plant and support the employees, just like evacuees from Mariupol. How is their integration going at the plants today?

- To date, nearly 5,000 of our employees from these cities have applied to continue working for the Group, but only 1,500 have been employed so far. Others are taking courses to either change their occupation or upgrade their skills for new jobs. From there on, the integration is quite fast. After all, all these people – steelworkers and miners – have worked together, and they know the equipment and facilities, so they adapt quickly enough in the workplace.

Many of them are waiting to return home. I know a lot of people who, for example, came from Mariupol to work at Zaporizhstal or Kamet Steel. They have good jobs but dream of returning to Mariupol.

- The second issue of reintegration is the return to normal life for those who are currently serving in the

military: veterans and the wounded who need rehabilitation. What is the Group doing in this regard?

- We have several ongoing initiatives in this area. The biggest one is the Heart of Azovstal project launched by our shareholder, Rinat Akhmetov. It is aimed at supporting the Mariupol defenders who protected the city at the beginning of the full-scale invasion and then held out inside the Azovstal fortress and their families. Our employees were among them. Some of them were or still are in captivity. We have a multi-faceted assistance programme for them and their families.

- How easy will it be for your conscripted employees to return to the shop floor?

- War traumatises people no matter what we do, so it is always difficult to return to normal life. We have the Saving Lives initiative, established by the Rinat Akhmetov Foundation and Metinvest, through which we are assisting all our other defenders. We are helping with prosthetics and psychological rehabilitation. And these are the two most important things. After all, you can provide a job, find housing, all such things can be done. It's pretty straightforward. All it takes is money. However, to undergo psychological rehabilitation, you need psychologists who can bring this person out of the state that the war has put them in, or you need someone who can properly design a prosthesis and then teach them how to use it.

- At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Group did not stop paying salaries as a matter of principle. What is the situation like today? What is Metinvest doing to increase the earnings of its employees amid a really difficult economic situation in the country?

- First, we have so-called 'combat allowances' that we pay at the plants operating near the front line and where there are increased risks. We are also monitoring the labour market in Ukraine and will keep abreast of the market to revise salaries or introduce special allowances and bonuses throughout the duration of the war until the situation stabilises.

Renaissance of steel construction

- How can Metinvest contribute to Ukraine's post-war recovery?

- As for today, we are primarily helping our employees who have lost their homes or whose homes have been damaged. Secondly, we are helping people living in the areas where our businesses operate to repair their homes after shelling. We are even providing temporary accommodation, e.g., at our health centre in Zaporizhzhia or our retreats in Kamianske.

This is what we can do now, while the war continues. And once the war is over, we will need to rebuild the country, we will face the task of recovery. I am convinced that this recovery of Ukraine will bring a renaissance for steel construction, and we will be able to rebuild our country by supplying the steel it needs for such a rebuild. One of the stages of this effort was the launch of Metinvest's Steel Dream project.

- Will Metinvest be able to provide all the steel needed to rebuild all the buildings in Ukraine, for example?

- Unfortunately, the problem today is not the amount of steel needed to rebuild these buildings. The problem is the steel products we can produce. When we lost control of Ilyich Steel and Azovstal in Mariupol, we lost our plate, beam and rail production facilities. And today, unfortunately, we cannot supply everything that is needed for immediate construction in the country. We are bringing plates from our Italian mills, buying rails or beams in other countries and delivering them to Ukraine.

But all this can be restored. Metinvest can build new rolling facilities to produce the required products. By the way, the metallurgical panel of the Ukraine recovery conference held in Italy featured an interesting presentation of a new method of steel construction by Italian architects, where houses are built without the use of concrete or cement at all; even the foundations are made entirely of steel. These are mostly multi-storey buildings, but they can be built with modules that can be produced by shipbuilding companies located near our mill in Italy. Then all this can be transported to Ukraine, assembled at our facilities and installed wherever a building needs to be constructed.

We can buy or produce steel in other countries, bring it to Ukraine and assemble such buildings here.

- In other words, this is a kind of synchronised effort where we must combine the restoration of the industry itself with the recovery of the social sector and construction in general.

- We simply have no other choice but to do this in parallel. People need to live somewhere. And once the war is over, as soon as we win, we should start building for people. At the same time, we will rebuild our industry.

- Are there any landmarks on the list of potential steel construction projects that could be built after the war? Something that will assume a symbolic significance for Metinvest's steel?

- We have already done some things that could be symbols. For example, our safe confinement structure over the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which is also made of Metinvest steel. This is a building that has few analogues in the world. Yes, this is a sad part of Ukraine's history, but the new confinement structure represents the best we can do.

When we rebuild our country after the war, we will have the opportunity to create many such structures that we will be proud of for many years to come.

- Do you have any plans or dreams, for example, for a new steel building to rise in Ukrainian Donetsk or Mariupol, as a counterpart to the Empire State Building?

- I think this idea should be pitched from those involved in development. We are ready to help, to provide technologies that have already been accumulated at the Ukrainian Steel Construction Centre. We are ready to provide steel that can be used for this construction. We will share the contacts of Europeans experienced in the construction of these structures: architects, engineers and others.

That is, we are ready to participate fully in such projects, but the inspiration must come from the public. Inspiration should come from entrepreneurs who want to do this.

Revival of Mariupol

- How do you see the future of Mariupol?

- This is an interesting question, but why only Mariupol? We need to remember that, unfortunately, we left Donetsk once. When I talk about our victory, I believe that Donetsk, Mariupol, Crimea and Luhansk will be liberated from the occupiers. So, we need to think about how to rebuild the whole of eastern Ukraine, not just Mariupol.

If we are talking specifically about Mariupol, Metinvest certainly has a vision for its recovery. Rinat Akhmetov has already joined the Mariupol Reborn project. We have already allocated funds for this centre, which will help us, first of all, to elaborate a city development strategy. This is important. We cannot expect to come back and rebuild Mariupol as it was. We all understand that there were good things in Mariupol, but there were also things that we would not like to recreate.

As such, a new city strategy is needed, a new industrial strategy. One can't just come and say: we will now fully rebuild Azovstal. Today, Azovstal is a symbol, it is a fortress. Therefore, we will need to understand what part of the steelmaking operations should remain in Mariupol, what it will look like, and what the so-called industrial map of the city should look like. And only then should we start rebuilding the city.

- Continuing with the topic of Mariupol's recovery, how do you see Metinvest Group's role in this process?

- Today it is about being the main partner in creating the design of the future city: developing this design and identifying the specific steps to be taken. Then our role is to be the main partner in the reconstruction. It will be a modern city with a developed economy.

- Azovstal: to what extent can you currently assess the damage to the steelworks?

- Unfortunately, from what we can see in the photos and videos, it appears that the damage is severe. Nevertheless, I do not give up hope that we will be able to resume some production at Azovstal. When the Ukrainian military liberates Mariupol, when we get there, we will see what we can do about it.

- We understand that the propaganda of the aggressor works to tell fables about the resumption of production at the plant even tomorrow.

- We don't see an opportunity for them now to revive any production at Azovstal. I think the most they will be able to use Azovstal or Ilyich Steel for is as repair bases.

- Then there is a question for the future: do we come and estimate how long it may take for the resumption of mills?

- Once, we reviewed the archives related to the restoration of Mariupol and Donetsk after the Second World War. And we saw that at Azovstal, the first furnace was launched six months after the liberation, while, for example, it only took four months at Donetsk steel. Therefore, the technology exists and we have an understanding of how quickly production can be resumed. But here, we should not forget that we have no desire to resume using the old technology that existed at Ilyich Steel and Azovstal, because it is all from yesterday. Today, the whole world is moving towards green metallurgy, electrometallurgy, and the restoration of our plants in Mariupol will take place in this vein.

Therefore, the restoration of production using new green technologies will take more time, because it will be necessary to build almost from scratch. This takes three to five years.

- In addition to resuming production at Azovstal, are there any ideas to create a memorial at the site of the plant itself? To honour the memory of the heroes who defended the city?

- Heroes need to be honoured now: when they return from captivity, when they and their families need help. And this is exactly what we are doing now with the Heart of Azovstal project. I believe that this is the most important memorial to the defenders of Azovstal. As for what to do on the site of the plant – a monument, a park or something else – the Mariupol community will decide when the city becomes Ukrainian again.

- An important issue for all the territories that will return to Ukraine is the return of people to these territories and the reintegration of those who remained there.

- That is precisely why the Mariupol Reborn project exists. It is needed to develop the meanings that will be embodied in new Mariupol and will allow people who have left for western or central Ukraine, or to Europe, to return home. And it should also cover the reintegration of those people who are now in Mariupol. As far as I understand, more than 100,000 people remained in the city. This is a very large number. Some remained there for various vital reasons, while others remained because they believe in the 'Russian world'. We will have to decide how to reintegrate all the people. I am convinced that those who believe in the 'Russian world' will simply go as far as possible towards their 'Russian world', as happened in Kherson, for example. So, I don't think there will be problems with this. But we will have to deal with people who remained there because of some vital considerations and could not leave, in order for there to be normal integration and for them to become normal members of the community in the future.

- Who will be the first to return to the communities? Will people come for work, for opportunity? Will activists, patriots of the city – in a good sense of the word – come back?

- We saw how it was in Kherson. Nova Poshta and Ukrtelekom will be the first to come back. And then others will return. Our engineers who will survey the city and the plants and draw conclusions about how we can adjust our plans to restore the city's economy, will be among them.

Defence production and Metinvest's support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine

- Metinvest provides a lot of help to those who are defending Ukraine today. What are the main focuses of this important support? What are the plans?

- At the very beginning of the war, I had a telephone conversation with our shareholder Rinat Akhmetov, and he was the first to believe in the victory of Ukraine. He said that we will definitely win, there is no doubt about it, but in order to win, everyone must work for victory. And then he said: "Do whatever it takes for us to win." I talk to him almost every day now. After all, the situation is not simple, both on the markets and at our enterprises. But I can see that the position of our shareholder has not changed. It has even strengthened, become tougher: he believes in victory, and he also believes that victory is possible only if everyone helps our country to achieve this victory. Therefore, our task has not changed. We will win.

If we talk in detail about what has been done in a year and a half, we began to help the army, like all volunteers. They delivered equipment and vehicles. During all this time, we have delivered more than 400 vehicles, almost 2,000 thermal imagers and nearly 1,200 drones to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. We delivered quite a lot of different things, even armoured vehicles.

But in parallel with this, we began to think that during the war we could not just buy something or bring it from abroad. We need to set up production here, at home, so that our army is provided with the products of our enterprises. During the war, we started manufacturing 24 new products at our enterprises related to the military in one way or another, such as armour steel. We have already supplied 150,000 armoured vests for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Now we can say that every tenth military servicemember in the Armed Forces of Ukraine wears body armour made of Metinvest steel. I even talked to the guys on the front lines. They told me how they took foreign body armour with ceramic plates, pulled out these plates, and inserted Metinvest's instead. Because they trusted our products more. This is very nice to know.

- Is it because of the optimal thickness and weight of the Metinvest armoured plates?

- At first, we thought that the highest protection is the best, and we made Class 6 body armour right away. But then, when we began to communicate with the military, we realised that you can only sit in a trench with this class of body armour. You can neither move forward nor backward. And this is impractical for military operations, plus the load on the back, which causes pain.

Therefore, Metinvest has developed a lighter model of body armour, corresponding to Class 4 or 5, that is relatively lightweight. It weighs 8-9 kilogrammes. You can even run in it.