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The Steel Front experience: Building a defence capability during wartime



The ongoing war has fundamentally transformed the operational focus of our steel company [Metinvest](#). In a recent interview with journalist Roman Tsybaliuk, **Chief Operating Officer of Metinvest Oleksandr Myronenko** outlined how the business

has adapted to unprecedented challenges while scaling up its new defence manufacturing capabilities.

No Ukraine, no business

— Should [Rinat Akhmetov](#) be investing more in defence, given that Metinvest is already one of the largest taxpayers in Ukraine?

— Absolutely. If there is no Ukraine, there will be no business at all. Everyone operating here must contribute, in one way or another, to defence and support for the army.

This has been the principled position of our shareholder since the first days of the full-scale invasion. On 24 February 2022, when it all began, I contacted Metinvest's CEO to understand the plan of action. The response was clear: the owner's position is to do everything possible to preserve Ukraine, our businesses and the cities where we operate.

Since then, we have acted — each in our own role. I began the war as Director of Zaporizhstal and remained in Zaporizhzhia throughout the first year. I saw my family for the first time only nine months after the invasion began.

We do not produce weapons — we protect lives

— So, is Metinvest now moving into defence? How is this organised within a business with such a long industrial history? Is this a separate ammunition production line?

— We are not involved in manufacturing ammunition. Our focus is on saving lives and providing protection for both civilians and military units.

We currently supply part of our products as humanitarian aid. At the same time, our capabilities are limited — we have lost Mariupol and Avdiivka, and production in

Pokrovsk has been suspended. So, we cannot afford to provide everything free of charge. What we can supply, we do; and certain areas are gradually developing commercially. We work with the state, the Armed Forces and individual units to supply the products we manufacture.

At present, this is not yet a fully-fledged business. The Group's core activity remains the production of iron ore concentrate and steel, and their sale on domestic and international markets. The defence segment is currently transitioning from a humanitarian model to a commercial one.

This transition includes improving products and obtaining certifications. This involves official testing and approval by the Ministry of Defence — confirming that products meet safety standards. Once approved, they can become part of commercial operations and be scaled up.

Will this become a separate business line? Likely yes, as it requires dedicated focus and specialised teams. For now, however, it is a hybrid model combining humanitarian support and commercial activity.

“Barbecues” and bunkers: how protection works

— What exactly does Metinvest produce? We have all seen the so-called “barbecue” cages on tanks. Is there a standardised version?

— We are currently testing various solutions together with the Ministry of Defence and working towards codification. Each vehicle — and even each military unit — requires a tailored design. A single vehicle may have two or three different types of protective screens. Full standardisation is not possible, as units adapt protection to their specific conditions. Therefore, we certify individual components.

In this area, we combine commercial and humanitarian approaches. Some protection is supplied free of charge, while with certain brigades we operate on a commercial basis and aim to expand the number of contracts.

Another area is underground protective structures — corrugated steel shelters, often referred to by soldiers as “bunkers” or “barrels”. These come in different configurations, including for combat positions. For example, in 2024 and early 2025, we invested nearly UAH 700 million in building defensive lines around Pokrovsk, where such structures were widely used. Some of these lines are still holding and preventing further enemy advances. This was part of the assistance we provided to the state.

We also produce specialised shelters for drone operators. Some units request empty shells which they then equip themselves. Using these modular structures, we can assemble underground command posts tailored to specific needs.

A separate area is medical facilities. Together with medical teams, we determine the number of operating theatres, stabilisation and intensive care units required, and then design the hospital accordingly.

We are also developing civilian shelters under the “Citadel” concept, which can be installed in cities as above-ground protection. These reinforced structures are already used at our facilities, as well as at power plants and seaports across Ukraine, enabling people to take cover quickly during attacks.

Recent tests included detonations of 80 mm mortar rounds and 152 mm and 122 mm shells. The structure withstood all fragments even without being buried — effectively at the point of impact. We are now awaiting official certification before proceeding with authorisation for use.

— You call it a “barrel” or bunker, but, in reality, is it an underground armoured structure?

— No, it is not armoured. It is made of 2 mm thick steel; its corrugated shape allows it to withstand significant loads. It is installed at a depth of 4–5 metres, covered with timber and soil, which provides protection. Without this, if placed above ground, it would not withstand shrapnel.

Above-ground shelters are different: the walls are approximately 25 cm thick, with two layers of metal and a filling of sand or slag to absorb fragments. They are heavy but do not require burial.

— Guided aerial bombs are now a major threat. If installed correctly underground, can this structure withstand them?

— Yes — and unfortunately this has already been proven in practice. There have been direct hits by guided bombs on hospitals we built. Even simultaneous strikes by two or three bombs were withstood. Everyone underground — doctors and wounded — survived without injury.

There are also reports from frontline positions: when a guided bomb destroyed a platoon strongpoint, these shelters were buried, but the soldiers were recovered alive. So, while structures may collapse under impact, when installed correctly they can save lives even against such threats.

Protection for air defence systems

— You [install protective structures](#) on Abrams, Bradley, Stryker, as well as Patriot and Aster systems. But air defence systems operate outside FPV drone range — why are such protections needed there?

— This is a different solution. What we install on Aster, Patriot and now the US-made Hawk systems is protection for control modules and radar units. During missile or drone attacks, these components are vulnerable to shrapnel, and personnel can be injured. Training such specialists takes considerable time.

The military therefore tasked us with reinforcing these elements. This is not a barbecue cage, but additional anti-fragmentation protection. Drawing on our earlier experience with steel for body armour, we developed a solution resembling chainmail — a protective casing made of armour plates for control modules and radar units, safeguarding personnel during operation.

— **Have images of this equipment been made public?**

— Yes, partially. We have published some materials, though not everything, to avoid revealing sensitive details. With approval from command, one of the servicemen filmed the installation, and we shared a general view.

We have full design documentation, but we do not disclose technical details so as not to provide the enemy with information.

From volunteering to a business line

— **This began as a volunteer initiative and is gradually becoming a business — modular shelters, protective screens, hospitals. How can a unit apply to Steel Front for support?**

— The system is straightforward. Priority is given to units on the front line, particularly in critical areas such as Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk. Other requests follow.

A unit submits a formal request, after which we engage directly and determine the scope of support. With many units, we have worked since 2014 or 2022, so established contacts already exist. We then either procure and supply the required items, manufacture them ourselves or identify other forms of cooperation.

Loss of assets and business adaptation

— **You mentioned lost cities — Mariupol, Avdiivka, Pokrovsk. These are not just business losses. Azovstal was arguably the flagship asset. How has this affected Metinvest?**

— For me, every one of our assets is a flagship. Avdiivka Coke was the largest in Europe and sustained an entire city. In Mariupol, the Ilyich plant — with a new sinter plant and modernised facilities — was a cornerstone of Ukraine's steel industry.

Azovstal was unique in producing armour plate. Pokrovsk provided high-quality coking coal. All of this formed a single integrated system.

The main challenge has been to rebuild the business: logistics, supply chains, customer relationships and product mix. After the ports were blocked, we shifted to markets accessible by land — primarily Central, Northern and Southern Europe. Initially, customers made concessions, but within six months the market returned to strict pragmatism.

When the ports reopened, conditions improved and we increased production. Experience from the war since 2014 helped us adapt faster; 2022 simply upscaled these challenges.

There was also a major humanitarian dimension. Both the [Rinat Akhmetov Foundation](#) and [Steel Front](#) initially focused on humanitarian aid. We established a major hub in Poland at Metinvest Polska, collecting assistance from across Europe — clothing, food and other essentials — and transporting it by lorry to Zaporizhzhia, where it was distributed further.

The Zaporizhzhia hub operated 24/7, receiving evacuees from Mariupol, often in extremely difficult conditions. People were provided with support and assistance. This was organised jointly by Zaporizhstal, the city and local authorities.

We also supported evacuated employees from Mariupol — providing housing, clothing, food, financial assistance and helping them find employment in safer regions such as Kryvyi Rih and Kamianske, as well as at our international assets.

Later, we extended support to people from Pokrovsk. This became a systematic social effort across SCM assets — helping people regardless of which company they belonged to. We effectively built this function from scratch, and it has proven effective.

Risks and accountability for the aggressor

— **Many Ukrainian companies support the army but do not speak about it due to risks. Why have you chosen a different approach?**

— The risk of strikes exists regardless of whether we speak about it or not. Our defence-related production is located separately from main industrial sites. However, across Ukraine, all industrial enterprises operate under threat, and those in Pokrovsk, Avdiivka and Mariupol worked under constant risk. Tragically, Mariupol was encircled, and despite all efforts we could not reach it.

In my view, it is important to speak about what we do. It helps people understand the purpose of their work and see tangible results. It also encourages further support — when people see that assistance reaches units and makes a real difference. When soldiers say that their protection worked and that they survived — that is the result.

— **There is a sense that the return of occupied territories may be unlikely in the near term. Are there legal tools to hold the aggressor accountable? And do you believe Mariupol is not lost forever?**

— I believe it is not lost. I want to believe that, historically, these territories will return to Ukraine. That is why we are doing everything possible today: supporting displaced people and implementing projects to preserve the memory of Mariupol. We are assisting Mariupol residents across the country, including through [housing projects](#) for internally displaced people in Bila Tserkva. This is the principled position of both the company and Rinat Akhmetov — not to forget people and to support them.

As for accountability, legal mechanisms do exist. We document losses, collect evidence of destroyed assets, formalise this and pass it to legal teams, who file claims in European courts. It is a long process, but we are pursuing it to secure compensation for destroyed property and losses.

So, there is both a legal and a human dimension — and we are working on both.

For the Ukrainian language version of the interview please visit the the [YouTube channel of Roman Tsymbaliuk](#).