

Viktor Yushchenko, Ukrainian president (2005-2010), prime minister (1999-2001)

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: Viktor Andriyovych, an undeclared war is now being fought on the territory of Ukraine. When you see footage of the residents of Ukrainian villages on their knees, of the bodies of soldiers who have died in eastern Ukraine being carried away -- these are images that no one can watch with indifference -- what do you feel?

Viktor Yushchenko: The first sensation is that today, in the world we live in, there's a power that lives near us. I wouldn't say it's a flourishing power -- it's a power of destruction, something from the Middle Ages, a power following a path that not a single European nation has joined. This is modern Russian politics. And I have tried dozens and dozens of times at conferences to make one thing clear: Don't call this a Ukrainian problem. Don't call what's going on in Azerbaijan, in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Azerbaijani problem. Don't call what's happening in South Ossetia and Abkhazia a Georgian problem. Or what's happening in Transdniestria a Moldovan problem. These are all Russian problems. It's an entire chain of destabilization that exists alongside all of us in Eastern Europe. The hardships that Ukraine is now enduring have, of course, hurt the nation tremendously. But I would very much like to see Europe and the rest of the world begin to read this situation as a conflict and a geopolitical problem. I would really advise not asking the question "for whom the bell tolls," especially in Europe. It's for us. It tolls for us.

Anna Sous: As the third president of Ukraine, and as a Ukrainian, how do you now see your mission?

Viktor Yushchenko: My mission, I think, is like that of many "neбайдужі" -- we have this good word in Ukrainian for people who are not indifferent, people who see that we need to put our strength and our experience to work in order to solve this conflict. So this is my view, which I explain to my colleagues and to politicians in the West when I speak at dozens of conferences about what's at the bottom of what's happening in Ukraine and how to resolve it. And this is why the word "war," in the political sense, has become a key phrase for politicians in Ukraine and Europe, the phrase that every day's news should begin with.

Anna Sous: Another participant in RFE/RL's "Russia & Me" project is Latvia's first president after the restoration of independence, Guntis Ulmanis, who said in our interview in Riga, and I quote, that "I can't understand why the Western world didn't see the situation in Crimea coming. For me, a former president and politician, that was rather astonishing. How could it be? No one in the world anticipated this, saw it happening, or even predicted it. In the end, the Western world had no idea what Russia was thinking." If we speak in terms of Ukraine, and not the Western world, did you foresee the occupation of Crimea and what would happen in the east of Ukraine?

Viktor Yushchenko: I would say that in the 350 years since the founding of Muscovy and the Moscow government, we haven't had a single year of peace in Ukraine. We have always lived in an atmosphere of Russian aggression. Of course, it's taken different forms. Either it's concerned our language -- 172 times! -- by banning us from speaking it, from singing songs in it, from reading liturgy in it, and so on. Or it's targeted our books, our films, our libraries, our theater, and in the end, our television, and so on. Or it involves direct occupation. Over the last 100 years we've lost a lot of territory, especially in the area bordering Russia. Of course, our politicians have always been able to read between the lines and see this constant threat from Russia. And my policy, including in Crimea, was to integrate every region in Ukraine as deeply and as quickly as possible into a united entity called the Ukrainian nation. By that I mean a political entity. I anticipated that a policy of national development was the best answer to Putin's aggression. Because a united nation cannot be defeated. Putin now goes wherever there's the Russian language, the Russian church, Russian newspapers, Russian television, Russian channels -- and he thinks that he's at home. So on the one hand when we say that this is a crisis of identity, it's true. But I'd like to say something else. Give us one generation. One generation, and you'll see that all of the problems we have in this country -- half of which existed as a Russian colony, half of which lived under Austrian, Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, Moldovan rule -- we will find a common language. Putin, naturally, sees it as his mission to create one of the geopolitical centers of the modern political world. This is how he views Russia's greatness. This is a fiasco. It's the plan of a delusional person. The fact that every day he rattles his saber, every week planes fall from the sky and missiles are fired at the wrong targets -- all this shows that this is a hopeless kind of politics. It has no future. But something else is true as well -- no one will be left to live in peace, not in Europe or anywhere else in the world. So I think you need to constantly keep two things in mind. Putin is afraid of two things: the reaction of his own people, whom he leads like a flock of sheep, and the reaction of the international community.

Anna Sous: Continuing on the theme you mentioned about identity crisis: You once said Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine were less Ukrainian than the rest of the country. You spoke about this just now. Some analysts have suggested that it's possible Ukraine could lose these territories, and that it might be more unified and easier to integrate with the European Union than if it kept these territories. For you, for the third president, this is of course an unacceptable option. But nevertheless, how would you view this possible development of the situation?

Viktor Yushchenko: You know, this is a kind of theoretical speculation. You could try to approach dozens of military conflicts this way, in Europe and the world in general. If we lose our principles, we will be defeated. We would be watering down our principles, something which sooner or later would lead us to a confrontation, and not only in Europe. The truth of your question is, of course, that we are getting what is essentially a lost region. But this is still our land. And I would not advise anybody to let themselves think that Putin will be parading around Crimea. Or Donbas. That will never happen. But we may have to pay a price, which will take us many years. And what is happening today in eastern Ukraine... of course, Putin's intention was to leave a wound that bleeds for many years, and he's already accomplished this part of the plan.

This is already difficult in and of itself -- to see hundreds of villages destroyed, shattered infrastructure, people suffering. Yesterday a woman came to me, right to my house. She was crying, her house, her cottage was destroyed -- and she doesn't know who to turn to.

Anna Sous: And she came to you?

Viktor Yushchenko: She came to me. Fortunately, I had my salary in my briefcase. And I gave it to her. These are difficult answers, difficult ordeals for people. But I want to say categorically that Ukraine, at the end of the day, will not lose one square meter. We're learning a lesson, perhaps, that you would never learn in correspondence courses or at night school. A lesson you only learn through real life. And that's national consolidation. We're starting to feel that we're really a nation, that we're a community. And no matter what language you speak or what church you go to -- to the Moscow or the Kyiv one -- you're starting to become a citizen of Ukraine.

Anna Sous: Mr. President, you say that there have been 350 years of aggressive policies toward Ukraine. So where is "your Russia?" Is there a Russia that you can call your own? Can you name three Russian politicians who typify your Russia?

Viktor Yushchenko: There is [former Prime Minister Mikhail] Kasyanov's Russia, which I had to go through as prime minister. It was perhaps the toughest period in Ukrainian-Russian relations. You know, I was very pleasantly surprised by [singer] Lev Leshchenko and his recent statements about Russian politics in relation to Ukraine. Or [actress Liya] Akhedzhakova. There is the Russia of the Nemtsovs and the Gaidars. These are my friends, and I understand this Russia. It corresponds to our own national interests.

Anna Sous: What was the most difficult, the worst, the most tragic day during your presidency with regards to Russia?

Viktor Yushchenko: I think it was the period of 2008. Up until 2008, the Russian president and I had gone through a lot together in order to build relations that would fit well with our national interests. We had very difficult talks in 2005, and not because of me. I understand that Putin wanted somebody else to be president of Ukraine. I'm not someone he feels comfortable with. But I thought that my time was historic. You know, if my political forces hadn't won in 2005, if the Orange Revolution hadn't been successful, I think that today we'd be talking about Ukraine as Novorossiia -- as a Little Russia or a New Russia province. I brought in a new policy -- the complete opposite. And I didn't just introduce this policy. It became something irreversible. When we talk about building a nation -- about our nation, our language, our national vision -- we never talked about this more than between 2005-2015. We realized that we are a nation, that we could become more consolidated. This is why Putin doesn't scare us.

Anna Sous: Viktor Andriyovych, after a series of politically motivated killings in Russia, and after what happened outside Russia with [Boris] Berezovsky and [Aleksandr] Litvinenko, what do you think are the reasons for your being poisoned before the Orange Revolution? Why has the investigation not yet been completed?

Viktor Yushchenko: These all had the same kind of motive. Of course these were political killings, of course the motive was political.

Anna Sous: Viktor Andriyovych, you spoke about Putin being afraid of two things: his own people and international reaction, as you put it. Were you ever afraid of Russia?

Viktor Yushchenko: No.

Anna Sous: Never?

Viktor Yushchenko: Never. When I had to be cautious, I was cautious. You need to keep in mind that if you think about Ukraine's national interests, a certain part of them are realized in Russia. Perhaps the economic part. Perhaps some of our security interests. I didn't curry favor with Russia. They've traditionally considered me to be a Mazepovets [follower of nationalist leader Ivan Mazepa], a Petlyurite [follower of nationalist leader Symon Petlyura], a Banderovets [follower of Stepan Bandera, a word often used to denote neo-Nazi], and during the [2004] elections people produced pictures depicting me in an SS uniform. I'm a normal person. But Russia and the Russian people need this image. Because the propaganda that has brainwashed Russians has been created by Russians from Putin's circle.

Anna Sous: Do you listen to Radio Svoboda, or read our website? During Soviet times did you listen to Radio Svoboda, and how do you see its role in Ukraine during times of change?

Viktor Yushchenko: When I was small, we had a battery-operated radio, because we had no electricity in the village where I lived, and later on we had a tube radio. Every morning things happened in the same order: at about 6 o'clock, or maybe 6:30, my father would turn on the radio, and we would all listen to it, because both children and adults would get up early in the village. I think that millions of people have changed because of radio stations like yours. There are fundamental truths. And to make a historical parallel, why will we defeat Putin? Because truth is on our side. On his side, there are lies. Satan is on his side, while God is on ours. This is why we cannot be beaten.