

Leonid Kravchuk, president of Ukraine (1991-1994)  
Anna Sous, RFE/RL  
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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: Leonid Makarovich, at the same we are recording this interview, the latest casualty figures for the war in Donbass [in Eastern Ukraine] are being published. Some 6,000 people have died in the conflict and 2,500 of them are Ukrainian soldiers. Do you know anybody who has died there? Is anybody you know well fighting there now?

Leonid Kravchuk: Right now the husband of my granddaughter is fighting. His surname is Menyailo. Alexey Menyailo. He is fighting. Before that an uncle of my granddaughter had been fighting. He was captured. For a few months he was subjected to all sorts of ... pressure. He was somehow exchanged and is now recovering.

I think, when the fatherland is under threat, everybody must defend it. When the war started, I said that had I been younger, I would have gone to fight. I have a gun, anyway. If an enemy enters my yard, I'll shoot.

Anna Sous: As the first president of independent Ukraine, can you do anything now to stop the war? What do you see to be your duty as a Ukrainian and as a politician?

Leonid Kravchuk: We, three [former] presidents of Ukraine - [Leonid] Kuchma, [Viktor] Yushchenko (and I) appealed directly to the current President [Petro Poroshenko]. We offered our vision on how to build relations with the West and with Russia in order to stop the murdering of people. I appear on television, on radio, I am talking to you now. I have my own vision. Of course, I understand that Ukraine by itself, no matter how hard we try, Russia will still have its own view, which is that Ukraine must be exclusively with Russia, to be more precise, under Russia. There is no sovereign Ukraine for them, Ukraine exists as part of Russia, and this is the core of their philosophy. [Once] I was sitting with [former Russian president] Boris Yeltsin, just like I am sitting now with you. His views, policies and concepts towards Ukraine were little different from those of Putin. We were talking. He asked me: "Leonid Makarovich, do you really believe that Ukraine is going to move towards Europe?" I said: "Boris Nikolayevich, you and I signed the Belavezha Accords [dissolving the Soviet Union on December 8, 1991], which clearly state that each nation decides where to go." He replied, "Oh, no. We have been together for 330 years. The word 'together' supersedes everything. It is impossible to tear us apart. Russia would never agree with Ukraine going to Europe and leaving Russia. Do you think I am the only one who thinks this? Let's go out of the Kremlin" - we were in the Kremlin at the time - "to the [Red] square and you pick 100 people. I will tell the security to gather them and you ask them whether they want Ukraine to become a sovereign European state. I guarantee: 96, 95, people out a hundred will say 'No'. This is historically our stance." Putin today thinks exactly the same.

Everybody does. Gorbachev thinks the same. There is no person in Russia who would think differently. I am talking about the political elite in power.

Anna Sous: You once coined a very telling and powerful metaphor, that Putin turned Russia and Ukraine into Cain and Abel.

Leonid Kravchuk: Yes.

Anna Sous: Do you think Russia has lost Ukraine as a strategic partner? That we will never [again] be brothers?

Leonid Kravchuk: We will never be brothers. It's for good. Maybe new generations will come, I don't know. Today, Putin is enemy number one for Ukrainians.  
Here is what Lina Kostenko wrote. I will read in Ukrainian:

Terror and blood and death and despair  
The roar of voracious waters  
The little grey man  
Has caused dark tribulation

He is a beast of a disgusting kind  
The Loch Ness monster of the Neva [river that runs through Saint Petersburg].  
All nations! Look!  
Today it's us, tomorrow - you.

[Kravchuk Continues in Ukrainian] - I deliberately read the entire poem, [to show] that the children of Ukraine's intelligentsia consider [Putin] the enemy... Sorry, I have switched to my native Ukrainian language. And it is not only Putin whom they consider Russia an enemy. I will explain. Eighty seven percent of Russians approve of Russia's policies towards Ukraine, the policy of aggression, the policy of annexing Crimea. Tell me, what kind of brotherly relations can we have in this situation?

It is not by accident that [Zbigniew] Brzezinski said Putin had done the darkest possible deed, that not only did he split Russia and Ukraine, but Russia and the rest of the Slavic people. This is what they have done. Today the entire Ukraine demolishes monuments. They take down monuments to Lenin, Stalin, to symbols of the past. They will take down everything connected to Russia, because Ukrainians consider Russia to be their enemy.

Anna Sous: Could you have imagined Russia annexing Crimea and conducting an undeclared war in eastern Ukraine when you were signing the Belavezha Accords with [Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus] Stanislav Shushkevich and Boris Yeltsin?

Leonid Kravchuk: Of course, not. I will tell you another story. We were sitting at a table with Yeltsin after a session of the Commonwealth of Independent States. A journalist asked: "Boris

Nikolayevich, there are rumors that Russia could attack Ukraine and even use nuclear weapons." Those were the days. Yeltsin looked at him, then at me, got up and theatrically twirled his index finger beside his temple [suggesting that the journalist was insane]: "Are you [crazy] - a war? Russia against Ukraine? Do you consider it possible? We are brothers. We are from the same cradle." Then he turned to me: "And what do you think, Leonid Makarovich?" [I replied,] "I think just like you, I think it's impossible." I really had thought so. To kill, to annex, means the goal must be to destroy the state. What is Putin's real goal? To destroy the Ukrainian state. In my scariest dreams I could not have imagined this. I could not have imagined that such people could even exist.

Anna Sous: You have called Putin a top-notch dictator. If you had a chance now to meet with Vladimir Putin at a conference or a summit in Moscow or Kyiv, what would you tell him? Would you have shaken his hand?

Leonid Kravchuk: Yes, I would shake his hand. I would have just said: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, time passes. You are not immortal. And we both know where we will meet, here or there, or you here and I am there, all is possible. You have done the most terrible thing for Ukraine and Russia. God will be your judge."

Anna Sous: During your presidency what was the worst, most difficult, most negative day?

Leonid Kravchuk: The most difficult day [was] the problems with the Black Sea Navy. [In July 1992] I signed a decree ordering the fleet to be subordinate to Ukraine. On the same day, without even telephoning me, Yeltsin issued a decree placing the fleet under Russia's command. De facto, a conflict had started. I think hours or days, I think probably days, were left until an actual conflict would unfold. Some of the ships had started to depart from Sevastopol to Odesa. And one of them was shot at. That was the moment when a military conflict was about to start in Crimea. I called Boris Nikolayevich. "Here is the situation," I said. "And what is it you are proposing?" he replied. I said: "Why don't you and I repeal our decrees on and same day and at the same hour. You yours, and I mine?" "I will think about it," [Yeltsin] said. One could talk to him like this. So he had thought about it. And at noon, I don't remember now what day it was, I cancelled my decree, and Boris Nikolayevich [cancelled] his. We then came up with a joint plan on the Black Sea Navy command. Together we appointed a commander. We found a solution. I am saying all this because if there is a will - a solution can be found now too. But there has to be good will.

Anna Sous: And what was the best day in Ukraine-Russia relations?

Leonid Kravchuk: That was when Yeltsin came to Kyiv [in 1990, before independence] and we signed a friendship and cooperation treaty between Russia and Ukraine. We met at Mariyinsky Palace. It was a celebration of hope. It was a good day. There were a lot of good days. I don't want to suggest that all things related to Russia meant dark days. There were good ones. The problem is the good days occurred when Ukraine accepted Russian proposals without an objection. As soon as Ukraine would take its own stance, disagreements immediately appeared.

We can feel it. So, I say that today Ukraine has no choice but to prepare and ask to be accepted into NATO. We have no choice. Only having a defense against such a neighbor could give Ukraine a chance to preserve its sovereignty and develop.

Anna Sous: Do you think Russia will return Crimea?

Leonid Kravchuk: [Russia] will never agree to return Crimea. It's impossible for Russia to agree to give Crimea back of its own will. [Perhaps] Crimea could leave on its own accord, or end up in a situation when there would be no other options because Russia would be too busy with other things to think about Crimea. When Russia starts crumbling as a multi-national state, as a state uniting different national goals and interests, different religions, when due to economic and political problems Russia has to face the task of preserving its own unity, Crimea would stop being the main issue.

Anna Sous: In your memoirs *We Have What We Have*, I noticed a photograph depicting you, Boris Yeltsin and [former U.S President] Bill Clinton signing US-Russia-Ukraine Trilateral Statement and Annex [in January 1994] on the liquidation of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Later [that year, in December 1994, your successor Ukrainian] President Leonid Kuchma signed the Budapest Memorandum [providing security guarantees to Ukraine from both Russia and the West]. On my way here from the airport, a taxi driver told me: "We shouldn't have signed it. Had we kept nuclear weapons, our territory would not be violated and nobody would have taken Crimea." You at some point told RFE/RL that these agreements had to be signed, as Ukraine could not have taken responsibility for nuclear weapons that belonged to others. What kind of international memorandum, or agreement could guarantee Ukraine's territorial sovereignty [now]?

Leonid Kravchuk: I am still convinced we had to get rid of nuclear weapons on Ukraine's territory. Firstly, [the weaponry] was made outside of Ukraine, in Moscow - we had no control of it. [The nuclear weapons] posed an internal threat to Ukraine. We could not replace the warheads because we hadn't been producing them. They were due to expire in 1998. We had to dismantle the nuclear warheads from 165 strategic missiles. We had to export them to Russia and destroy them. That was the priority. Otherwise we could have become hostages of the nuclear weapons located in Ukraine. But we should have signed a different document. I think it should have been a very precise and definitive document, which should have been approved by the UN Security Council. Maybe then, it would have been mandatory to stick to it now. We failed to come up with the right, strategically appropriate document that would have had the legal power and mechanisms to assure adherence to it. Today, I feel cheated and offended. I was one of those people who did everything possible for the world to feel better without nuclear weapons. [I did it] so the world, too, would understand [the danger] and destroy nuclear weapons. We set an example. I was proud of it. I thought that everyone thinks alike. It turns out they all understood it only up to point when they left the building. All was forgotten once the doors shut behind them.

