

West ‘closed door’ on Ukraine after nuclear disarmament, says key negotiator

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With the West’s support for Ukraine under scrutiny, a key figure in Ukraine’s disarmament issues a reminder

The West “closed its doors and promises” to Ukraine after its last nuclear warheads left in 1996, a key negotiator on the country’s international disarmament told openDemocracy.

That disarmament left Ukraine “without the most powerful method of protecting the state,” said Yuriy Kostenko, a former environment minister.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited the world’s third largest nuclear arsenal: [17%](#) of the world’s potential nuclear weapons, including 176 long-range [ballistic missiles](#) and 42 strategic bombers armed with more than 1,800 nuclear warheads. The caveat: Moscow kept command codes over Ukraine’s weapons, although the short-range tactical weapons were entirely in the hands of Ukraine.

But as Ukraine tried to figure out the future of these weapons in the 1990s, it was suffering the complete collapse of its economy – a factor that pushed the government to agree to Russia- and US-backed denuclearisation in exchange for economic support.

“We found ourselves in economic ruin, we found ourselves in the midst of a social crisis,” Kostenko continued. “The West turned away from us.”

He added: “The losses that Ukraine suffered as a result of disarmament, which was done according to a Russian scenario, led to today’s war.

“Russia would never have even thought of looking at Ukraine with the intention of conquering it, if there had been even one nuclear warhead in the country.”

Kostenko headed the parliamentary commission that developed a strategy for obtaining Ukraine’s nuclear free status in 1992-1994, and led the disarmament negotiation process with Russia as the first head of the Ukrainian government delegation in 1993.

For Kostenko, denuclearisation led to the West losing interest in Ukraine in terms of international defence and security. But more damningly, Kostenko believes, the Ukrainian leadership’s failure to push for an international disarmament process, rather than a Russian-controlled one, was a signal to the US that Kyiv was more comfortable with Russian influence.

Ukraine will likely always have [strong feelings](#) over how and in return for what it gave away its nuclear arsenal to Russia and in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion, it is widely considered a dark page in the country’s recent history.

Kostenko is sure Ukraine could have surrendered its nuclear weapons differently, integrated into Western political and military structures – and escaped Russian control. That could have happened, the former politician said, if a deal had been made to process nuclear material from Ukraine's warheads on Ukrainian soil, rather than their transfer to Russia.

Fragile state

Ukraine had already [declared](#) its nuclear-free status when it declared sovereignty in 1990, and as a newly-established independent state, the country was torn between pressure from both the West and Russia to give up its nuclear arsenal – simultaneously a source of leverage, security and threats.

In the end, Kostenko said, disarmament went ahead because of an “unwillingness” by the Ukrainian authorities “to understand the importance of nuclear weapons and [...] a nuclear strategy”, yet also “the reluctance of the West to truly accept Ukraine as a full-fledged subject of international law [and not a sphere of Russia's interests].”

In exchange for disarmament, Ukraine was given security assurances from Russia, the US and the UK – a deal sealed by treaty, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

It also [received US funds](#) for economic support, humanitarian assistance, market reforms and disarmament. In the wake of Russia's invasion last year, many experts [believe](#) that, as a result of the memorandum, Ukraine has the right to any aid it requires to defeat Russia on the battlefield.

“Ukraine's nuclear disarmament is the most shameful page in Ukraine's modern history,” says Kostenko, who was first elected in 1990 after 18 years in Soviet military engineering and research.

“The authorities clearly failed this first such powerful political examination of national consciousness and national interests.”

A difficult choice

International urgency to get rid of Ukraine's nuclear weapons – Bill Clinton's administration saw them as a [“potentially catastrophic blow to stability in the region”](#) – was matched within the country's political class.

Initially, Ukrainian leaders saw nuclear weapons as a burden rather than a means of ensuring national security, said Kostenko. And less than a decade after the Chernobyl power plant tragedy, pro-peace and anti-nuclear sentiments were strong in the country.

Russia pressured Ukraine to get rid of them as soon as possible. The Kremlin took the position that the weapons did not belong to Ukraine as such, but were rather weapons of the Soviet Union. For Russia, that meant they should have come under the unified command of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a successor political and military intergovernmental organisation to the Soviet Union.

Drawing on national and Soviet security documents, as well as his science background, Kostenko tried to push Ukraine towards a more “profitable” disarmament when the process of surrendering its nuclear arsenal to Russia had already begun.

As the head of the Ukrainian government delegation at the negotiations with Russia for the START-1 treaty – a key agreement on the reduction and limitation of strategic nuclear weapons – Kostenko says he did not agree that Ukraine should urgently export all of its nuclear warheads to Russia.

“Russia’s approach was not for nuclear disarmament, but for the nuclear destruction of Ukraine,” says Kostenko. This meant Ukraine itself should pay for the cost of disarmament, which would likely cause “discontent” among its tens of thousands of nuclear troops facing job losses.

He understood this would lead to “colossal problems” in the Ukrainian defence sector, yet found himself on one side of a confrontation between the legislative and executive branches of the Ukrainian government.

While independent Ukraine’s first president Leonid Kravchuk supported giving up weapons, including to Russia, the country’s parliament wanted international oversight and security guarantees.

“I started actively advocating that the process of nuclear disarmament of Ukraine be transformed into at least Ukraine’s acquisition of the status of a member of NATO as a collective security system,” Kostenko said.

Kostenko later lost his position as head of the government nuclear weapons delegation to Russia in 1993 – a decision he alleges was made by Kravchuk in response to his pro-NATO lobbying.

Confrontation

Indeed, there was a discord among the Ukrainian leadership on nuclear disarmament in the early 1990s. While parliament was voting for [laws](#) that would establish international control of Ukraine’s nuclear weapons – and not their transfer to Russia, Kravchuk, backed by Ukraine’s foreign ministry and security service, was pushing the “least favourable scenario” for the country, Kostenko explains.

“Of course, president Kravchuk bears the greatest responsibility because he made the decisions,” Kostenko says, “but proposals were prepared for him by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Security Service of Ukraine.”

As an example of the conflict between the Ukrainian parliament and president, Kostenko points to a 1992 letter by Kravchuk to then-US president George Bush, where the Ukrainian president [promised](#) to destroy Ukraine’s entire nuclear arsenal within seven years – the result of work by Ukraine’s foreign ministry. (At the same time, Kravchuk reportedly also told the Spanish prime minister in 1993 that he had no intention of complying with nuclear arms agreements – and was holding out for the “US nuclear umbrella”, according to [historian Mary Sarotte](#).)

That said, US officials believed that Ukraine was, in fact, playing a “political game” regarding the surrender of nuclear weapons, Kostenko argues – noting that as long as Ukraine had the weapons, the US was ready to work on security guarantees and financial assistance for Ukraine.

In 1993, the first year of [Clinton](#)’s presidency, Ukraine worked out a complete programme for its movement towards nuclear-free status with the US, without specifying a deadline. Under this plan, instead of nuclear weapons as its national security system, Kostenko claims, Ukraine was to receive security guarantees via NATO membership. The proposition allegedly came from under secretary of state for international security affairs Frank G. Wisner – in an attempt to persuade Ukraine that nuclear weapons would not help Ukraine in holding back Russia.

Was NATO membership offered to Ukraine?

Citing archival sources, historian Mary Sarotte [suggests](#) that extending NATO

membership to Ukraine was considered by senior US officials at the time, as part of denuclearisation plans. Another historian, Paul D'Anieri, argues that if NATO membership was offered, it was likely via the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, which in February 1994, Ukraine joined. PfP, started in 1994, is a defence cooperation agreement with former Warsaw Pact states that also contains a possible NATO membership track.

This strategy, Kostenko says, was laid on the table of Kravchuk that same year. But that effort [went no further](#).

Endgame

Kostenko gave up on his efforts to make disarmament work for Ukraine when socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz was appointed chairperson of parliament in 1994. Kostenko says he suggested to Moroz that he keep his working group, but Moroz transferred the strategic issue of nuclear disarmament to the parliament's commission on foreign affairs and relations with the CIS.

That year, 1994, the Ukrainian parliament did [ratify](#) the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a nuclear-free state, before signing the [Budapest Memorandum](#) with the US, UK and Russia, where ratifications of the non-proliferation treaty were exchanged.

According to the [parliamentary resolution](#), the ratification exchange was supposed to take place *after* "reliable security guarantees" were provided to Ukraine in Budapest, which did not happen.

In the next two and a half years, all of Ukraine's nuclear weapons were removed to Russia.

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