

'Banned' Zelensky Interview to Russian Journalists Accessible Online

Five independent Russian journalists spoke to the Ukrainian president over the weekend.

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. vk.com/vladimir_zelenskiy95

Roskomnadzor, Russia's state media regulator, has banned the first interview that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky gave to Russian journalists since the start of the invasion in Ukraine.

On Sunday Zelensky participated in a video call with three Russian journalists from leading independent news outlets: Meduza, Dozhd, and Kommersant.

Mikhail Zygar, a journalist and author of the book "All the Kremlin's Men," also participated in the discussion. He asked a question on behalf of Dmitry Muratov, Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief and Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

In 2021, Meduza and Dozhd were listed as foreign agents. In March of this year they were blocked by Roskomnadzor for “spreading fake news” about the “special military operation” in Ukraine. Kommersant has so far dodged Russian sanctions, but on Monday Novaya Gazeta announced it would "suspend operations" until the war ended.

The interview with Zelensky was published on Sunday evening. Earlier that day, Roskomnadzor issued a statement urging the news outlets to kill the story. The new law that was signed by president Putin this March punishes spreading “fake news” with up to 15 years in prison. Despite the warning, Meduza and Dozhd opted to publish the interview. It is available on YouTube, which is still accessible in Russia.

In the 90-minute conversation, Zelensky talked about attempts to assassinate him, Russophobia in Ukraine, the situation in Mariupol, Russia’s attempts to influence Ukrainian politics, and much more.

Zelensky said he was in contact with some people in Russia and grateful to the Russians who are protesting the invasion, although he admitted he was disappointed that such a high percentage of Russians support it.

On the turning point

“This month marks a global historical and cultural split,” Zelensky said. “This is not just a war. I believe the situation is far worse.”

“In 2014, when it all started,” Zelensky said, “the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine and Russian-speaking families had hoped it all would end soon.... When I ran for president, I was aware that I had to stop the war and fight the propaganda. To show that I wanted to change things — change my country, change its relationship with its neighbors, in a sense, bring things back to the way they were before 2014.”

But now, he said, “The situation can’t go back to the way it was.”

Related article: [Russia’s Novaya Gazeta Suspends Operations After Kremlin Warnings](#)

On Russian influence and assassination

Speaking of Russia’s attempts to influence Ukrainian politics, Zelensky said there were numerous attempts to “destroy” him by various means. “If we’re talking about my political destruction, there was the group of [Viktor] Medvedchuk — Putin is his daughter’s godfather. They were looking for a political way [to destroy me with] propaganda at the local elections.”

He added that this was done when they understood that Russia was losing influence on Ukrainian politics. He said that the pro-Russian political movements tried to destabilize the situation in Ukraine, but did not succeed. Ukrainian intelligence services found evidence of their plan to create “chaos in the economy and political instability in Ukraine,” which would have let the Russian forces occupy “our country a lot faster this way. This was definitely their plan,” he said.

There have also been attempts to assassinate him, but did not comment further. “Our security

service is in charge of that. They eliminate those who come here on a hunting mission. I've got nothing else to say."

"Sadly," Zelensky said, the Russian authorities "do not recognize the autonomy of Ukraine. It is our tragedy— this idea that Ukraine is not an autonomous state, but part of a larger system. The Russian president sees himself as the head of this system. We're not an atavism. We're a state with a rich history and moral code. I think we're now showing the truth of the situation."

On occupied territories

Zelensky told the journalists his goal was to "minimize the victim count, end the war as soon as possible and withdraw the Russian troops to 'compromise' territories... I realize that it is impossible to make Russia leave these territories. It would lead to World War Three," he said.

Asked about the referendum that the so-called Luhansk People's Republic might hold, Zelensky replied, "We operate in the field of legitimacy, right?... the law as seen by international institutions, not by the occupied territories... So I have no idea what Pasechnik [the head of Luhansk People's Republic] is talking about."

"For me," he added, Pasechnik "is more like president Putin's CEO. I would rather talk to the owner than the CEO."

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Russian-Ukrainian negotiations

A large part of the conversation touched upon the talks between Ukraine and Russia. According to Zelensky, the neutral status of Ukraine was the most important part of the agenda. "We are ready to do this," he said. He added that Ukraine was interested in turning this agreement into "a serious international treaty" that would guarantee the country's security. Zelensky also stated that it would be vital to hold a referendum on the neutral status of Ukraine.

The interview closed with a question from Ivan Kolpakov, Meduza's editor-in-chief. Kolpakov asked Zelensky what he thought of Putin's motivation for starting the war.

Zelensky said that Putin apparently now considers Ukraine to be a 'danger.' "First of all," he said, "it's about the loss of the influence of the Russian language. Putin has lost several million Russian speakers... Second, it's about Ukraine's success. Everyone understands that such an active and hard-working nation will manage."

He continued, "Sadly, I do not think Putin's plans are strategic. Strategy is about what will happen to a country in a hundred years. I'm in no position to give advice to the Russians, but that's what I call strategy. What will happen in five generations? Where will we be? I'm interested in what is going to happen to Ukraine, as a citizen, as a father. My children will live here... Putin has a different approach. He is focused on today. I think it is a mistake. But not only his mistake. It is also a mistake of his entourage. The party was great, but who's going to clean the mess?"

The full interview can be seen below.

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