

Zelensky interview transcript

This is the full transcript of a Zoom interview on June 4, 2021 between Axios (Jonathan Swan and Dave Lawler) and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (shown as VZ), with Zelensky's responses translated from the original Ukrainian.

AXIOS: Well, President Zelensky, I want to start with Nord Stream 2. How did you feel when you learned that the Biden administration was waiving sanctions on the company overseeing the construction of Putin's pipeline?

VZ: Well, to be honest, we were very surprised. It still seems to me that Nord Stream 2 according to our understanding, according to the security understanding of not only Europe, I am sure, but also of the United States of America as our strategic partner, we understand that this is a weapon, a real weapon, and I speak openly about it. A weapon in the hands of the Russian Federation, and it is not very understandable, I feel, and definitely not expected, that the bullets to this weapon can possibly be provided by such a great country as the United States. Because it is an exemplary civilization, an exemplary democracy in the world. I have always considered that Ukraine was defending the exact same principles in Europe. That is why I feel that this decision... It's not just me feeling it, we can actually see that... That is why this decision... Unfortunately, it is definitely not aimed at supporting Ukraine. That is why I said that I was indeed surprised. I truly thought that when it came to Nord Stream 2, the United States remained the last standing outpost, so to say. We understand that only the US is capable of stopping this construction. You know, we had this first conversation with President Biden, it was a phone conversation, and I received all the signals. They were direct signals, and I was very happy about it. I know that we've always had bipartisan support in the United States. But I've always said, indeed, all the experts and the diplomats have had the same understanding, that Biden knows Ukraine better than any other previous, former President, and therefore he understands all the issues, and, what's most important, all the security risks. That is why, again, we were very unpleasantly surprised.

AXIOS: You've used the word "surprise" a few times. How did you learn about this decision? That the Biden administration was taking to waive the sanctions on the company building Nord Stream? Did the Biden team tell you beforehand that they are going to do this, or did you have to learn about it through the press?

VZ: I've used the word "surprised" a few times because I was really surprised a few times. Besides the United States decision, the second surprise was indeed that I learned about it through the press. I feel that... well, between strategic partners the relations should be direct

AXIOS: How did they explain this decision to you after they made it?

VZ: That was actually the third time when I was surprised. I found out about it, probably, like everybody else, from the briefing... I think the first briefing was given by the press-secretary of the US President. I definitely remember the message that the briefing conveyed, though: that Nord Stream 2 is 95% completed, therefore it is very difficult to stop the construction at this stage.

AXIOS: Do you believe that Biden could still stop the pipeline being completed if he really wanted to?

VZ: I am positive. I believe that even if there was only one percent left, it would still be possible to stop such a serious leverage that Russia will have in the future to influence energy security and Europe in general, including Ukraine. Even if there was only one percent left, it just needs to be done. Moreover, everything is now in the US President's hands only, and I am sure that he is aware of that, and his team is aware of that, they know that. Even if we sometimes hear messages like: it is done, it's been a long time, it should have been stopped earlier — still, they all understand — and they are pragmatic people — that now is when they have a big opportunity, the only one, and it is in the hands of the United States of America only. To defend democracy. To defend democracy in Europe and to defend Ukraine.

Sometimes, you know... sometimes this belief in the civilized world is what brings about victory. Could anyone ever imagine that the army of a 40-million Ukraine could counter one of the "empires". What chance could a country like us possibly have, defending its territory, its people and its sovereignty? Nevertheless, my belief is that we've done it, and that we still do it every day.

Axios: What specifically could Biden do to stop the pipeline, the final 5% being completed?

VZ: First of all, there has to be a serious conversation, a serious roadmap, and it has to be a joint effort between the United States, the European Union — the stakeholder countries of the European Union, that keep building Nord Stream 2 — and Ukraine.

AXIOS: When I talk to the Biden people about this, one thing that they say is: it's not worth harming their relationship with Germany, their great ally, and that they need to work with Germany on issues like climate change, so why would we put sanctions on them, this is going to happen anyway, it's not worth it.

VZ: I understand that the relationship between the United States and Germany is very important. I wouldn't want to intervene between these two esteemed countries. However, how many Ukrainian lives does the relationship between the United States and Germany cost? That is my first question. Keeping in mind that both the US and Germany understand fully well what a substantial advantage it will be in the hands of Russia, I mean Nord Stream 2 — at the very same time when we are doing all we can to defend our country. We already have a pipeline of our own, and around it... of course, it is about supplying gas, it's about energy security... but it is also... how shall I put it... it is also a powerful political tool. As long as this pipeline is functioning, Russia is obliged to talk to Ukraine, it is obliged to talk to Europe, at the same table. If they build the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, circumventing Ukraine, it is clear that the time will come when Ukraine will no longer have this leverage. Everybody is fully aware of this.

AXIOS: What you are saying, I think, is that by making this decision Joe Biden will have blood on his hands...

VZ: Well, frankly, I wouldn't word it that way. After all, he has nothing to do with the war in Ukraine. Quite on the contrary, the United States has always helped us. However, what is definitely true, is that he can help, so that fewer people have to suffer. This is exactly what he has the power to influence.

AXIOS: Joe Biden has given, in the last four years, a lot of speeches, talking about standing up for democracy and pushing back against Vladimir Putin. Did you expect that he would be tougher against Russia when he was President?

VZ: I feel that.. Well, first of all, the most important thing is what his own people, the people of the United States of America, expect from him. I believe... I believed earlier and I still believe that he, understanding the situation deeper than any diplomat in the US — also, he knows Russia well, he knows Ukraine well, and he knows President Putin personally perfectly well... I believe that he can definitely be pragmatic, substantive and swift enough in his relations with the Russian Federation. Conclusions will be made, that is what I would like to believe. I would like to point out again that I still believe, even though recently, all those actions that we have just discussed with you... I don't know... they dampen the confidence, I think, within Ukraine, this confidence in... well, in this unwavering support.

AXIOS: I mean... If he knows the situation so well, ignorance is not an excuse. So how do you read this decision that he made, to waive sanctions?

VZ: You know, that reminds me of how Michael Jordan used to play. He is my favorite basketball player, no offence to other wonderful NBA players, who are indeed galore. Even Michael Jordan very often used to lure his opponent, sometimes by demonstrating pretend weakness or even signs of illness. He had a variety of secret tricks for making his opponent feel relaxed and for imposing his own tactics onto him, imposing the false sense of close victory. And then Jordan would change his tactics dramatically, and he would grab the victory at the very last minute. That was part of his tactics. Therefore I still believe after all, that Biden is a Jordan in politics. I think that his final three-pointer is not in the net yet, and I would like to believe that this is all part of his tactics. If this is not the case, that will be a great pity, not only for me, but for the United States as well, I am sure. There will be a feeling that in these circumstances Russia will have a great chance to prevail over the United States.

AXIOS: That's the most optimistic spin I could possibly imagine. But you are a diplomat, I get it.

VZ: (laughing, in English) It's like, written on your money. We trust in God.

AXIOS: (laughing) Oh, man! That's good... Have you been consulted at all by the Biden people about this summit that he is holding with Vladimir Putin in Geneva later this month?

VZ: Not yet, and I believe that it is up to them. However, I do think that it would be a big mistake [not to]. We have a deeper understanding of the subject, I think, and we understand Russia better as of now — because we've been neighbors for many years, and because we have the war in the East. We understand the steps they are taking: the [military] exercises, the numbers of personnel amassed along the contact line and on the temporarily occupied

territories etc. That is why I consider such consultations to be important. I believe such consultations should happen face-to-face, because many things just cannot be discussed over the phone. I understand that due to the US President's pre-existing plans and his tight schedule they might well not happen, but that choice will be only his to make. As the guarantor of the Constitution of Ukraine, I myself am ready to defend Ukraine at any moment and at any spot of the planet, I am ready to meet with him and discuss all those details before his meeting. However, we'll see how it ends up going. I am sure that some sort of contact between us, in that form or another, is quite possible.

AXIOS: What message does it send, that Biden is meeting with Vladimir Putin before he meets with you?

VZ: (pause) I think that it's... (pause) I think that it's not a message, it's... (pause) Basically it's an answer and a geopolitical vision: there are the "empires", there are the great powers of the world, and there is everybody else.

AXIOS: Okay. But how does it make you feel as somebody who really has a reason to need the United States and rely on the United States. Promises have been made to you in the past about joining NATO. I mean... we've talked for a while now and they didn't consult you about waiving the sanctions on Nord Stream, they didn't consult you about the summit with Putin. I mean... How does... How does this feel? You're the leader of Ukraine, and this is happening.

VZ: First of all, I think that in general, very wrong things are happening. Because while I personally believe that Ukraine will eventually join NATO, I have to point out that many Ukrainians increasingly don't believe this as strongly as they used to. I consider this to be a big problem. That's one thing. Secondly, I think that if we are welcome in NATO, if they really want to see us as a member, then it's no use looking into the binoculars, into some distant future and discussing this future. The issue should be resolved immediately. We are in danger right now, our independence is at stake right now, and it is now that we need help. Membership Action Plan is a real signal. Membership Action Plan is the message, the direct message. It is not the membership yet, but it is a real vision of Ukraine as a part of NATO in the foreseeable future.

Thirdly, what I make of the things that are happening, is that we really do need help, but at the same time we have to understand — keeping in mind the Nord Stream issue that you've raise, as well as the fact that we've been waiting and hearing promises about NATO for thirteen years already — it all speaks to the fact that Ukraine needs to be an actor, Ukraine needs to be counting not only on its partners, Ukraine needs to learn how to count on itself.

AXIOS: At what point do you think the Ukrainian people will give up on the United States if it continues to take decisions that show seemingly little regard for Ukrainian security?

VZ: (pause) I still believe this is not going to happen.

Axios: Michael Jordan, right?

VZ: (laughing)

AXIOS: Okay. Let's talk about Vladimir Putin. What is your assessment of what he is trying to accomplish by massing all of these troops in Eastern Ukraine?

VZ: Well, we understand that this is probably a question of escalation from the side of Russia or the separatists, along different sections of our border and in different areas within the temporarily occupied territories. We understand that it looks more like serious psychological pressure of a kind: to show who is the master of the land here, who is controlling the borders. So, if there's something "wrong" coming from the West, in terms of politics, then "we are always prepared". That is what this whole situation is about. Therefore I think this is indeed a matter of psychological pressure and restraint, on the part of Europe and the United States — and Ukraine. Ukraine has been demonstrating its restraint by not responding to any provocations.

AXIOS: Well, respectfully, I think when you are talking about the United States and Europe, 'restraint' is the wrong word. They aren't lifting a finger with their troops to defend Eastern Ukraine against Russia, and I think you know that.

VZ: And yet... You know, it is indeed Ukrainians who are losing their lives, and I don't wish people from other countries, the EU countries or the US, to start dying, too. We understand that this is true, we are paying the highest price of all of the European countries in this war. Nevertheless, I understand that it is happening within our borders. Everybody is aware, however — the Baltic states, and Poland — that today it's us, tomorrow it might be them. Yes, unfortunately, we are paying the highest price. I still would like to point out though, that both Europe and the United States have demonstrated... Still, they all were united with Ukraine at the time when there was this potential risk of escalation. Well, it is still there, but when there was the initial massing of the troops and all the power games, everybody has made rather strong statements. It wasn't sending over the troops, however, it was a dialogue, it was substantial pressure, from a wide variety of speakers. I believe that that was very important for Ukraine, for Ukraine's security — this unity among all the important players of the world political arena.

AXIOS: They put lots... They issued lots of sternly worded statements, it's true.

VZ: (shrugging his shoulders and smiling). Yes, they did

AXIOS: Yes... I heard the Biden administration was working on a new security assistance package for Ukraine after Putin began massing troops. That package, I'm hearing, seems to be on hold now. Have you heard anything about that?

VZ: Well, for instance, what we know: we did receive signals from the White House, and we... I had a meeting in person with US Senators that came over, and with the United States Secretary of State, and we discussed possible increase in military assistance. We talked about... unfortunately, I won't be able to share the details with you now, but it is very, very important for us. It was about security, it was about enhancing security in the Black and the Azov seas, along the shoreline, for our position is rather weak there, in my opinion: Russia is virtually dominating all of the Black Sea, it is true, and we admit that, and we would like to have a strong force there — for defense purposes only, for defending our country and our borders. Several other matters regarding the security assistance to Ukraine [were

discussed], but frankly, I don't have any information about these processes being on hold now. If it is true, then it's very unfortunate.

AXIOS: Next time you speak with President Biden, what will your message be? What does Ukraine want from the United States?

VZ: I am confident that the United States will reiterate its support for Ukraine. I would like to reach a new level of relations with the United States. I would like to have transparency, an understanding regarding the Membership Action Plan, regarding energy security of Ukraine, regarding the assistance with returning our territories and defending our sovereignty. Indeed, I would like to obtain understanding — and it's not a request, and it definitely isn't about money. What I want is that we are understood. When we know so well what exactly is going on with the Nord Stream, and when we hear messages like: "Well, what are the alternatives?" — it's not money that we are after. Security of our country is not for sale. If we are talking about any alternatives to anything, then what can possibly be an alternative to security? Only something stronger than what we have right now. That is why I'd like us to understand each other, with particular steps and precise timelines. Again — this is crucial for us, only because there's a war going on, and our time is measured not in minutes but in human lives, the number of lives that we are losing at this war today.

AXIOS: President Zelensky, when I write the story about you, would it be unfair or inaccurate of me to say that you are angry about the decision to waive sanctions on Nord Stream?

VZ: I'd say that...er... the feeling of anger — it is over now. I feel that... you know... it is quite a different feeling. It is a feeling of disappointment. I'd say that this would be a more accurate way to word it.

AXIOS: Okay. Mr President, I've asked all my questions, but I do want to give my colleague David Lawler just a quick chance if there's anything that I missed. Is that okay?

VZ: (switching to English) Yeah, yeah, but... We don't have time, but of course, you were sitting there — I'm sorry.

AXIOS: Two seconds, two seconds.

VZ: Ok, yes, yes.

AXIOS: Thank you President Zelensky. So, when the Biden administration talk about Russia policy, including policies that affect Ukraine, they talk about the priority of having a stable and predictable relationship with Russia, they don't want to escalate anything, they want things to be stable and predictable. I wonder if that's something you think should be the US objective, what do you make of that goal, and have you ever found it, in your experience, possible to have a stable and predictable relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia?

VZ: Everyone wants stability in the world. Everyone wants stability with their neighbors in the first place, because you live [side by side], and there is some common history, and that's true for us and Russia. But today instead of the common history we have hatred, and I am

positive that it is also common. In my opinion it is tragic. People lost one another because of politics, they lost this common history, the shared victories and the shared tragic moments of the past. I'd say that is the most dramatic loss. That, and the loss of human lives. People are still dying, and how Ukraine will ever be able to forgive this — I cannot imagine. Everyone wants stability, but whether it is achievable — I don't know.

Regarding the policies of the United States of America — what we see, in my opinion, is that all the recent American Presidents aim to forge a relationship with Russia — and that is your right. I do not want to intervene, but, if you ask me, the better scenario would be for the US to make it so that Russia starts aiming to forge the relationship with the United States — and the rest of the world. That would be the victory of the world as I see it. (In English): Thank you.

AXIOS: Thank you so much Mr. President, we really appreciate your time. And thank you to both of the interpreters as well.

AXIOS: Mr. President, thank you, seriously. It was really a pleasure, and it's great to connect with you again.