

Register

Leonid Kravchuk

Former communist official who became the first president of independent Ukraine in 1991 and stood up to Russian interference

As a senior figure in the Ukrainian Communist Party in the late 1980s, Leonid Kravchuk came across one of the darkest secrets concealed in his party's archives. He was haunted by pictures of children dying during the famine of the early 1930s in Ukraine when forced collectivisation imposed under Stalin ruined local agriculture and caused up to ten million deaths. Kravchuk persuaded the local communist hierarchy to publish many of the photographs in a book in 1990.

Revived memory of what Ukrainians call the Holodomor, or "murder by starvation", increased pressure for Ukraine to assert its independence from Moscow as the Soviet Union approached collapse. And Kravchuk would become the first president of the newly independent state. Yet despite his embrace of *glasnost*, or openness, he was in many ways an unlikely and compromised

He formed an alliance of Ukrainian nationalists and the old Soviet elite

figure for such leadership, having spent decades in the Soviet hierarchy.

As a communist propaganda chief he had played a leading role in suppressing criticism after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine in 1986, and in 1989 he was engaged in trying to stem the growth in support for a new nationalist movement, Rukh. He had joined the Ukrainian politburo that year and in 1990 became chairman of the Ukraine's Supreme Soviet.

Yet as the reverberations from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the steady loss of the Soviet Union's leader Mikhail Gorbachev's authority were felt, Kravchuk's constitutional role became more significant. Described as a "wily fox", he began to sense an opportunity by exploiting Moscow's weakness, and creating some kind of alliance between Ukrainian nationalists and the old Soviet-era elite. His increasing willingness to challenge Moscow pleased nationalists, while his background reassured conservatives from the old regime that they would not be cast out by change.

The failed coup against Gorbachev by communist hardliners in August 1991

suddenly accelerated events. Kravchuk feared they might try again and succeed. He resigned from the Communist Party while as head of the Ukrainian parliament he helped to persuade many of his former comrades to support a declaration of independence. A referendum held in December showed that more than 90 per cent of the electorate backed independence, and at the same time Kravchuk was elected president with 61 per cent of the vote.

Shortly afterwards he accepted an invitation from the Belarusian head of state, Stanislav Shushkevich, to a meeting at a hunting lodge in a forest near the Belarusian-Polish border where, together with the Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, they reached an agreement stating: "The USSR ceases to exist as a subject of international law and as a geopolitical reality." He recalled: "I understood Ukraine could never be really independent if the USSR still existed. I came there knowing Ukrainians' aspirations to be independent. I was fulfilling their will".

The pace of political change had been staggering, yet the new Ukraine under Kravchuk faced many challenges linked to its deeply rooted integration with the Soviet state and economy.

As far as the outside world was concerned, the Soviet-era nuclear weapons stationed on Ukrainian territory (but still under Russian control) were of prime importance. Kravchuk won himself much international praise by committing to remove the weapons and make Ukraine a non-nuclear state. He visited Washington in 1992, where President Bush spoke of Ukraine entering "a season of hope and rebirth" and stated that "Ukraine's future security is important for the United States and for stability in Europe". Kravchuk was also welcomed to Britain in 1993.

He secured some financial compensation in exchange for the nuclear deal but was criticised for the failure to achieve more concrete security guarantees. When the deal was finally signed in 1994 (by which time he was no longer president) he admitted presciently that "if tomorrow Russia goes into Crimea, no one will even raise an eyebrow".

Relations with Russia had remained tense after the end of Soviet rule. Yeltsin had warned him against pursuing too



Kravchuk, right, with Boris Yeltsin in 1992. He called Russian leaders "insolent"

close a relationship with the West, saying: "Ukraine has been, is and will remain within the system of strategic national interests of Russia." For his part, Kravchuk rejected Russian proposals for closer military co-operation and often complained about what he called "imperial pressure" from Moscow and "insolent Russian leaders".

Yet Ukraine remained economically dependent on Russia. Up to 80 per cent of companies in Ukraine had been controlled from Moscow under the Soviet system, and Russia supplied nearly all of Ukraine's oil and gas. When Ukraine began to rack up huge debts to Russia over energy supplies, Yeltsin used this as a lever to exact concessions on issues such as the division of the Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol.

Kravchuk's greatest failure was arguably his neglect of economic policy. Ukraine did have substantial industrial

resources but free market reform was stifled by the retention of many of the systems and personnel of the Soviet era. Economic policy was especially chaotic with hyperinflation at one point reaching by some estimates 10,000 per cent.

The fate of the Black Sea Shipping company was seen as symbolic. It had been a huge merchant fleet with a proud history dating back to the 1830s but collapsed after being sold off to foreign companies, a decision Kravchuk later publicly regretted.

As in Russia, while a few exploited the privatisation of state-owned assets to achieve fabulous wealth, millions of Ukrainians, especially in heavy industrial areas, faced poverty. Corruption was endemic. In the 1994 presidential elections Leonid Kuchma, who had been prime minister under Kravchuk, pledged to forge closer links with Russia. He did especially well in the Russian-

speaking east of Ukraine and defeated Kravchuk, who left office in July 1994.

He was born in 1934 in Velykyi Zhytyn, a town then in Poland but later part of western Ukraine, and grew up speaking fluent Ukrainian as well as Russian. His father was killed during the Second World War and he remembered as a boy witnessing the murder of Jews in Ukraine during the Holocaust.

In the 1950s he graduated in economics from Kyiv University and taught the subject while starting his career within the Communist Party, specialising in propaganda. He eventually became the Ukrainian party's chief ideologist. In 1957 he married Antonina Mishura, who taught maths and economics. They had a son, Oleksandr, who ran a state enterprise.

After losing the presidential election in 1994 Kravchuk remained a member of parliament until 2006 and led the Social Democratic party associated with some of the country's leading business oligarchs. In 2013 he expressed support for protesters in Kyiv challenging the regime of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich and calling for closer links with western Europe.

In 2020 Kravchuk joined the Contact Group attempting to resolve the conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine, where pro-Russian separatists were pressing for autonomy, supported by Moscow. At times Kravchuk urged for a negotiated settlement, but on other occasions he warned that Russia would not make concessions as its objective was to "destroy Ukraine".

Ukraine's current leaders, while in many ways from a completely different political background to Kravchuk, have nonetheless acknowledged what they see as his vital role in establishing the independence they are now defending.

"He was a person always able to find wise words ... particularly in times of crisis," said Volodymyr Zelensky, the current president. "Thank you for the peaceful renewal of our independence" said Oleksii Reznikov, the defence minister. "We're defending it now with weapons in our hands."

Leonid Kravchuk, former president of Ukraine, was born on January 10, 1934. He died after a long illness on May 10, 2022, aged 88