A Conversation With President Zelensky

0:02

from The New York Times I'm Sabrina

0:03

tavernes and this is the

0:09

daily 5 years ago a TV personality and

0:12

comedian Vladimir zalinski won the

0:15

presidency in Ukraine in a landslide

0:21

Victory and

0:22

[Music]

0:24

then after 3 years in office he faced

0:28

the biggest challenge of his presidency

0:31

and of his life this is only the

0:33

beginning for Russia on the Ukrainian

0:36

land Russia is trying to defeat the

0:39

freedom of all people in Europe of all

0:41

he rose to that challenge beating back

0:44

one of the world's largest

0:45

armies but now we urgently need patot

0:50

systems and missiles for them and you

0:53

can imagine what our soldiers feel when

0:56

they simply have nothing to respond to

1:00

enemy fire the tide has turned against

1:03

him please do not ask Ukraine when the

1:08

war will

1:10

end ask yourself why is Putin still able

1:16

to continue

1:19

it today my colleague Andrew Kramer sat

1:24

down with zinski to talk about the fight

1:27

of his life and how it might end

1:30

[Music]

1:32

it's Tuesday June

1:35

4th so Andrew you've been covering

1:37

Ukraine for many years and you first met

1:40

president zinski back in 2020 before

1:42

Russia invaded tell us what he was like

1:45

back then there's just an incredible

1:48

density of events that have filled

1:50

zelinsky's tenure as president I had an

1:52

opportunity to interview president

1:54

zinsky in 2020 and this was during covid

1:57

so it was a zoom interview and it was

2:00

really a different era for zalinski he

2:02

had just come in as president he was

2:04

babyfaced he was a fresh presence in

2:05

Ukrainian politics and at this moment he

2:08

was trying to reset relations with the

2:10

United States there had been tensions

2:12

with the Trump Administration and he

2:14

wanted to turn a new page in bilateral

2:16

relations and by tension with the Trump

2:18

Administration you mean of course that

2:19

zalinski was in the middle of the first

2:22

Trump impeachment we may all forget but

2:24

Trump made a phone call to zalinski

2:26

asking him to investigate not only Joe

2:29

Biden but also his son Hunter Biden and

2:32

Trump hinted that the US would actually

2:33

withhold military aid if seninsky didn't

2:36

do that that's right the perfect phone

2:38

call that's what president Trump called

2:39

it and during this time zalinsky became

2:42

a briefly a known figure in the United

2:44

States but in Ukraine he was known as a

2:47

charismatic leader he was a television

2:50

personality before becoming president

2:52

and he had campaigned on an idea of a a

2:54

new morning in Ukraine he would crack

2:56

down on corruption and a central element

2:59

of his campaign had been to make peace

3:01

with Russia it's pretty interesting to

3:03

remember actually that zalinski started

3:05

as someone who thought it was possible

3:07

to make peace with Russia that's who he

3:09

was as a politician when he started out

3:11

and he had wide support he was elected

3:13

with 73% of the votes so a lot of

3:16

ukrainians beli that he would actually

3:17

be able to achieve this but this had

3:20

really Fallen apart and by the time I

3:22

talked to him late in 2020 the the

3:24

prospects for these negotiations were

3:26

very unclear and it was for this reason

3:29

more important than ever for the zinsky

3:31

administration to shore up support from

3:33

the United

3:34

States so that was 2020 a lot has

3:37

changed clearly at this point zalinski

3:40

is not making peace with Russia anymore

3:43

you sat down with zalinski a couple of

3:44

weeks ago why did you want to talk to

3:47

him again

3:48

now well it's it's a very interesting

3:51

and critical moment in the war the tide

3:53

has turned in the war Russia is pressing

3:56

all along the front and American Aid had

3:59

been stalled for 6 months and it was

4:02

passed recently in Congress but it

4:03

hasn't yet arrived so it's a moment

4:05

where zinsky has his back against the

4:07

wall and what seninsky has really zeroed

4:10

in on is that the NATO countries in the

4:13

United States should allow Ukraine to

4:15

use donated Western Weaponry to hit

4:18

targets inside of Russia now of course

4:21

firing American weapons into Russia has

4:23

really been a red line for the United

4:25

States through the more than two years

4:27

of this conflict because Russia is a

4:29

nuclear armed power and and there have

4:31

always been fears in the background that

4:33

this would be provocative this would be

4:35

escalatory and would would really raise

4:37

the risk of of a wider War so we wanted

4:40

to understand how zalinsky was making

4:43

that argument for Biden to allow him to

4:46

use American weapons to hit targets

4:48

inside of Russia despite the risks so

4:51

tell me about your interview start from

4:53

the beginning are we are we recording

4:55

now I'm

4:57

roll well we walked into the

4:59

presidential Administration through very

5:02

tight security it's always an

5:03

interesting experience arriving at the

5:05

presidential office in Kiev there's

5:07

sandbags and anti-tank barriers around

5:10

the building Andrew you'll sit up on the

5:12

right closest to the presid yeah we get

5:14

we made our way through the compound to

5:16

a ceremonial reception hall this was in

5:19

a 19th century building with exotic

5:21

plaster moldings on the walls called the

5:24

house of chimmer okay okay it's okay for

5:27

you good and I went to interview zinsky

5:30

with my colleagues Phil Pan the

5:31

international editor and Bill Brink the

5:33

Ukraine

5:35

editor we waited there for about an hour

5:38

before the president showed

5:43

up hi

5:46

sorry Hi president meet welcome

5:50

was when he walks into a room you you

5:53

immediately notice that he's there that

5:55

he's a present pres I believe you know

5:57

Andrew kraner he's our beer Chief here

5:59

ah well we we had an interview but it

6:01

was by Skype in 2020 I think maybe I'm

6:05

sorry it was in an another life and he

6:09

is a little bit shorter in real life

6:11

than he might appear on television and

6:13

War has changed Linsky he looks Haggard

6:16

and for the last two years he's been

6:19

bearded and wearing only military

6:21

fatigues in this case it was a green

6:23

t-shirt and green

6:25

trousers but he did seem to be holding

6:27

up all right he looked healthy and he

6:29

was very energetic thank you so much for

6:31

coming we can sit yeah after some small

6:34

talk in English can we check Ukrainian

6:39

translation he switched into Ukrainian

6:42

and we spoke with him through a

6:44

translator so the Biden Administration

6:46

has prohibited Ukraine from using

6:48

americanmade weapons to strike inside

6:50

Russia out of concern for escalation

6:53

including the risk of nuclear war and

6:55

our very first question was about this

6:57

red line your government has urged to

6:58

change to this policy given the

7:00

situation on the battlefield right now

7:12

why thank you so much well first of all

7:15

Biden Administration was really against

7:19

the use of the western weapons that's

7:21

important to mention and he became quite

7:26

animated he was gesturing he was using

7:28

his skills as a public speaker to convey

7:31

what he felt was a very important point

7:33

they are striking with the missiles from

7:35

Russian territory so how can we protect

7:38

ourselves from these strikes and he was

7:41

saying that it's really not possible for

7:43

him to fight when the Russians can

7:45

gather their forces and fly their

7:46

airplanes in Russia and then attack

7:48

Ukraine when he is not allowed to strike

7:51

back as they gather across the border

7:54

they are in the closest Villages and

7:56

settlements to the border from Russia

7:58

and knowing that we will not respond he

8:01

was conveying this sense of fighting

8:03

with one hand tied behind his back and

8:05

they have to endure the attacks from

8:08

Russia the bombings and and the

8:09

artillery strikes and they're not

8:11

allowed to hit back Russ that is their

8:15

big big

8:16

advantage and

8:19

then he talked about the northeastern

8:21

part of Ukraine near Ukraine's second

8:23

largest city

8:24

har it's been a target of Russian attack

8:27

it's bombarded almost daily

8:30

and it's now one of the focal points of

8:32

the

8:33

war to defend harke Ukraine has been

8:36

forced to divert soldiers from elsewhere

8:39

to fight this Russian incursion with the

8:41

city at their backs Russia is piling up

8:44

the troops they are and zalinsky was

8:46

telling us that his intelligence can see

8:49

the Russians unloading from trains

8:51

weaponry and Equipment just across the

8:52

border in Russia but he's not allowed to

8:54

strike it because of the restriction on

8:56

the use of Western Weaponry M and and so

8:59

he said he has no choice but to watch

9:01

them prepare to

9:08

attack and he had a very Vivid image for

9:10

this he was saying that he he sees the

9:13

Russians gathering on that side of the

9:15

border that means that tomorrow they

9:16

will not give us flowers they will give

9:18

us

9:19

death and that he knows they aren't

9:22

coming with flowers but they're coming

9:23

with death if we know that tomorrow they

9:25

are not celebrating with us but they are

9:27

killing us why can't we use our weapons

9:31

to demolish them in the point of

9:33

collection of the arms in other words

9:36

what he was saying was that they're

9:38

basically sitting ducks and if you could

9:40

only use these big powerful American

9:42

weapons to shoot inside of Russia you

9:45

know to take the war to Russians then

9:48

that could turn the tide of the war but

9:51

the Americans were just not letting him

9:52

do that that's right and he's also

9:55

asking for very specific Weaponry to do

9:58

this and it sort of speaks to zelinsky's

10:01

life over the past two and a half years

10:03

his country depends on arsenal of

10:05

Weaponry from allies who have often been

10:07

reluctant to provide it and he finds

10:10

himself often coming with what amounts

10:13

to a shopping list to these Western

10:14

Nations describing what his military

10:17

needs in any particular

10:19

circumstance we can get in the end of

10:22

the day from NATO countries and what he

10:26

told us seven system P Patriot

10:31

systems seven was that he needed seven

10:34

Patriot anti-aircraft missile

10:37

systems our analysts told us we need 120

10:41

130

10:42

f-16s and 120 to 130 F-16

10:47

airplanes and these kind of requests

10:50

well understandable his his soldiers are

10:52

engaged in combat they're suffering

10:54

casualties and civilians are being

10:55

killed so it's of dire importance to

10:57

zalinsky but these type of requests have

11:00

sometimes graded on Western politicians

11:02

so much so that last summer the British

11:04

Minister of Defense had said in response

11:07

and really in frustration that zalinsky

11:10

uh were not Amazon don't come with the

11:12

shopping list and this of course has

11:14

been the view of the US Administration

11:16

as well like hey guy we just gave you

11:19

$60 billion have some gratitude exactly

11:23

okay so it's clear why shooting American

11:25

weapons into Russia would help zinski

11:28

but how was he viewing the risk of

11:30

Russia retaliating and potentially

11:32

setting off a nuclear war because of

11:34

course that's why the US Drew this red

11:37

line in the first place right well this

11:39

is really the question of the hour on

11:41

escalation what do you say to the people

11:43

who argue that it is too risky to to

11:46

allow Ukraine to use these weapons

11:48

inside Russia because of the risk of

11:53

escalation there are no risks of

11:55

escalation and when we asked about this

11:58

zinsky asked us in a sense to get inside

12:00

Putin's head a little bit and understand

12:02

how he sees this playing

12:05

out he was saying that Putin is an

12:09

irrational actor so obviously somebody

12:11

to be feared that he could use the

12:13

nuclear weapon then when he failed to

12:16

conquer US during the first year of the

12:18

wi but if he were to use nuclear weapons

12:21

he would have used them in the first

12:22

year of the war when Russia was down and

12:25

Ukraine was up and he was also saying

12:27

that he did not use

12:29

it because he really loves his own life

12:33

Putin he's irrational but he would also

12:35

fear for his own life and he understands

12:38

that that's it the door will be totally

12:41

locked to Russia fully locked if he uses

12:45

nuclear weapons it's effect and no one

12:48

will be able to do anything with that

12:49

even his fans among the politicians they

12:52

won't be able to do anything because the

12:53

use of the nuclear weapon is not the Red

12:55

Line This is a totally different

12:57

level that's it this is the World War I

13:00

using a nuclear weapon would obviously

13:03

be risking World War III and Putin would

13:05

understand the consequences of this so

13:07

these were zelinsky's explanations of

13:09

why he felt the Russians were bluffing

13:11

on the nuclear question so zelinsky's

13:14

conclusion was that the nuclear threat

13:16

really isn't real that it's not that

13:18

much of a risk then for the West to let

13:20

Ukraine cross that red line use those

13:22

American weapons to shoot at Russians

13:25

inside Russia yes and then last week

13:28

apparently Biden was convinced by

13:29

zelinsky's arguments the Biden

13:32

Administration Administration officials

13:34

announced that American weapons could be

13:36

used to hit targets inside of Russia the

13:39

decision to shift was weighing the risk

13:42

of losing Ukraine's second largest city

13:44

hary or having it bombed into Oblivion

13:48

against a very small risk of a nuclear

13:50

war a large risk of losing a city and

13:52

and a small risk of nuclear war but

13:55

there were caveats the American

13:57

permission only allowed the use of

13:59

American weapons on the border and in

14:02

response to Russian military attacks

14:04

across the border on Ukraine and it

14:06

didn't cover the most powerful rocket in

14:08

the Arsenal that the United States has

14:10

provided the attack's guided rocket so

14:13

we won't see Ukrainian attacks on large

14:16

Russian cities using American weapons

14:18

such as Rocket attacks on Moscow but it

14:21

is evidence that the Biden

14:23

Administration has shifted red line and

14:25

it seems significant even if it's

14:27

limited so the red line May isn't

14:29

actually so R what do you think this

14:32

tells us it tells us that zilinski has

14:35

been persuasive with his style of public

14:39

performance with his style of reaching

14:41

out directly to voters in the countries

14:44

that are allies with Ukraine he has

14:46

pushed Western leaders to shift on red

14:49

lines and to continually provide more

14:52

military support for his military and

14:54

change their policies on on how they

14:56

assist Ukraine

15:00

but zilinsky has another challenge it's

15:03

something he doesn't talk about nearly

15:05

as much but it's just as important to

15:07

winning the war and this is a challenge

15:10

inside Ukraine in Ukrainian

15:12

[Music]

15:21

Society we'll be right back

15:29

so Andrew you said that there was

15:30

another big potential problem for

15:32

zalinski and that was a problem in

15:34

Ukrainian Society tell me about that in

15:37

short it comes down to this not enough

15:40

men want to fight and zalinsky doesn't

15:42

know how to make them he has been

15:45

drafting men in relatively small batches

15:48

throughout the country and those who

15:51

have signed up in the beginning they are

15:53

still serving at the front and have been

15:55

fighting continuously for 2 years so

15:57

there's fatigue of solders

15:59

who are fighting and in the Army and

16:01

there's also reluctance of those who

16:03

have not yet been drafted to be drafted

16:05

into the military so Andrew I'm really

16:07

thinking about this with you and

16:09

remembering back to those early days

16:11

when you and I were walking around the

16:12

streets of Kiev and going into draft

16:14

offices and seeing everybody who signed

16:16

up right history professors I think you

16:18

even interviewed a male stripper at some

16:21

point that we were kind of remarking on

16:23

everybody wanted to fight but that is

16:26

very different now what what happened

16:29

what

16:30

changed it's now been 2 years and

16:33

there's been a lot of dying if you look

16:35

at the number of men serving in in the

16:37

Ukrainian military now including some

16:40

units like the National Guard and Border

16:42

guards it's about 1 million men under

16:44

arms out of that 1 million about 10%

16:48

have died so far we don't know the exact

16:50

number of casualties in the Ukrainian

16:52

Army but estimates are in the range of

16:55

about 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers who

16:57

have been killed over 2 years of war

16:59

wow one thing that I found really

17:01

remarkable when you travel around in

17:03

villages and towns is that there're

17:04

almost always dry flowers all over the

17:07

roads because they're funerals so often

17:09

and and they they put these flowers down

17:11

and then they have a procession so

17:13

military vehicles will come very slowly

17:16

carrying a body and a hearse and people

17:18

will get out of their cars and they'll

17:19

kneel on the side of the road while this

17:21

procession goes by and it's these sort

17:24

of scenes that are really frightening to

17:26

men who are eligible for the draft and

17:28

who know what it would mean to be called

17:29

up and sent into the trench fighting and

17:32

how many men are eligible for the draft

17:35

in Ukraine there are three to four

17:36

million men who could be drafted and

17:38

could be serving in the military so they

17:41

could be fighting a a war of attrition

17:43

with Russia with the larger Army were

17:45

they able to mobilize and and equip

17:48

these additional soldiers but they

17:50

haven't done this and there's been quite

17:52

a bit of reluctance so they're at a

17:55

moment now where they need soldiers but

17:58

the Patriot IC wave from earlier in the

18:00

war it has really washed over and at

18:02

this point they're going to have to use

18:05

the power of calling up men against

18:06

their will in order to continue fighting

18:08

this war what does that look like in

18:11

Ukraine now well the call up of men from

18:14

villages in in some areas of Ukraine has

18:16

been so great that there are Villages

18:18

without men there are Villages where

18:21

women when they see the draft officials

18:22

coming into town they have swarmed these

18:24

vehicles and are protesting to protect

18:26

the the few remaining men in these areas

18:29

there have been Road Blocks put up in

18:31

Kiev and other towns to stop cars and

18:33

and check draft registration documents

18:36

on the street and sometimes men are

18:38

asked to report to basic training within

18:40

as little of a week after being stopped

18:42

at one of these surprise checkpoints and

18:44

this has been disruptive and men are

18:46

fearful of being caught in in one of

18:48

these roadblocks and approached by draft

18:50

officials and there even social media

18:52

apps that track where they're moving

18:54

around town for example in Kiev there's

18:56

an app called weather in Kiev and it'll

18:58

say it's raining on a certain

19:00

intersection and that would mean that

19:01

the draft officials are there and and

19:03

men should avoid that area interesting

19:07

and is zalinski acknowledging this

19:09

challenge I mean the challenge of trying

19:11

to get men to fight in the war

19:13

politically zinsky has disassociated

19:15

himself from the challenges of the draft

19:17

he's said this is a problem for

19:19

Parliament or for the military it's

19:21

politically very unpopular and he hasn't

19:24

for example given major speeches calling

19:27

on ukrainians to sign up and explaining

19:29

the draft

19:32

policies in our interview he did though

19:35

acknowledge the toll of the war on

19:37

Ukrainian society and he described this

19:39

as

19:44

divisions some people are at War some

19:48

people are not that there had been some

19:50

Rift in society between men who are

19:53

fighting and men who are not fighting it

19:55

is really serious because the society

19:58

begins

19:59

to divide and for somebody trying to

20:02

steer a country in a war this could be a

20:04

problem this separation in the society

20:07

this division at this moment the enemy

20:10

can use

20:16

it so given that fewer and fewer people

20:19

want to fight and war is obviously

20:22

fundamentally about fighting where is

20:25

Ukrainian society's head right now on

20:27

this war and what is their appetite to

20:30

stop it I mean do people want to call it

20:32

quits agree to just okay lob off a third

20:35

of their territory and give it to Russia

20:37

and finally be done with this or is a

20:40

full draft kind of mass mobilization

20:43

finally going to be on the table well

20:45

this is what makes zelinsky's situation

20:47

now so interesting is he's in a bind

20:50

he's ruling a country that on the one

20:52

hand there's massive support for

20:54

continuing the war there's incredible

20:56

anger at Russia still seething anger at

20:59

Russia over this war and no desire to

21:01

negotiate on the other hand you have

21:04

fewer and fewer people actually willing

21:06

to fight so zalinski is caught between

21:08

these two positions and it's a difficult

21:11

moment okay to summarize here zelinsky's

21:14

been pushing on these red lines abroad

21:17

he's getting stuff he made some progress

21:19

last week but it seems like it's not

21:20

enough to dig himself out of the hole

21:22

he's in and at home there's kind of a

21:24

similar Dynamic he's done these small

21:26

batch drafts of men but that also seems

21:29

like it's not enough to to really win

21:32

and now he's in this very hard place and

21:35

you know to put it very bluntly it seems

21:38

like a losing Place well this is

21:41

probably the moment of most uncertainty

21:44

for zalinski and for Ukraine since the

21:47

beginning of the war there's no popular

21:49

decision for zalinski rafting more

21:51

soldiers is unpopular if he doesn't

21:54

draft soldiers and settles in a

21:56

ceasefire negotiation that will also be

21:58

unpopular

21:59

zinsky is really squeezed between two

22:02

fires and this is all against the

22:04

backdrop of Russia escalating an

22:06

offensive that's expected to continue

22:08

through the summer how is he coping with

22:10

this this is a lot on his shoulders well

22:13

this is something that we asked in the

22:14

interview I just wanted to ask if you

22:17

could say a few words about your own

22:19

life as a wartime president and and

22:21

maybe we talked to him on what was the

22:23

817th day of the war

22:34

I'm not afraid of working for many

22:38

hours and to do my work and many other

22:42

works but the hardest is the emotions

22:45

you understand that

22:48

emotions he doesn't tell jokes like he

22:50

used to one aspect of the war is that

22:52

his life as a comedian has really come

22:54

to a close and he's become a much more

22:57

serious public figure asleep and I wake

23:00

up very early and uh he said that he

23:04

deals with some of the the stresses of

23:06

leadership by working out in the morning

23:08

I can see my wife more often she's in

23:10

the office but I see my children not

23:12

that much and he was most expressive and

23:15

went on at some length about his

23:23

family he said that through the course

23:25

of the war his children have grown up uh

23:27

his daughter is now

23:29

19 his son is 11 and he said that he

23:32

would spend time with his son working on

23:34

Spanish homework I don't know Spanish in

23:36

fact but I'm interested just in some

23:39

time to spend with him whatever he

23:47

does and these are the happiest moments

23:50

and here I can

23:53

relax Andrew how did you end the

23:55

interview I asked him what he would do

23:57

after the war and I thought his answer

23:59

was telling so if what are your plans

24:02

after the

24:04

[Laughter]

24:08

war I would

24:11

like after the

24:14

war after the victory because those are

24:16

different things he said there's a

24:18

distinction between the end of the war

24:20

and victory things I think that my plans

24:24

depend on that so I would like and then

24:26

he described what would happen after

24:27

victory would spend time with his family

24:29

and his dogs but what he left unsa was

24:32

what his life would look like if Ukraine

24:34

lost the War and what would it look like

24:38

well one scenario is that he could die

24:40

at the end of

24:43

this he's been the target of 10

24:46

assassination attempts according to his

24:49

government another possible outcome

24:51

would be that Ukraine could lose a large

24:53

chunk of its territory in a settlement

24:55

agreement so it's understandable why he

24:57

didn't go into the

24:59

details but it was still remarkable that

25:02

he acknowledged just for a moment this

25:04

vulnerability this idea that there could

25:06

be an outcome for Ukraine other than

25:16

Victory Andrew thank you thank you

25:18

Sabrina

25:25

[Music]

25:29

we'll be right

25:30

[Music]

25:36

back here's what else you should know

25:42

today on Sunday Mexican voters elected

25:45

the country's first woman and first

25:48

Jewish president Claudia

25:55

shanbom it was a landslide victory for

25:58

the 61-year-old climate scientist and

26:00

former mayor of Mexico City Shane bom a

26:04

leftist had campaigned on a promise to

26:06

continue the legacy of Mexico's current

26:09

president Andres Manuel Lopez

26:17

[Applause]

26:21

arador under a brador millions of

26:23

Mexicans were lifted out of poverty but

26:26

he was also criticized for failing to

26:28

control rampant cartel violence the

26:32

election was the largest in Mexico's

26:34

history with the highest number of

26:36

Voters taking part and it puts a Jewish

26:39

leader at the helm of one of the world's

26:41

largest predominantly Catholic

26:45

countries

26:46

and President Biden is expected to sign

26:49

an executive order on Tuesday allowing

26:52

him to temporarily seal the US border

26:54

with Mexico when the number of Migrant

26:57

Crossings exceeded a certain

26:59

threshold the order would suspend

27:01

protections for Asylum seekers in the US

27:04

and represents the most restrictive

27:06

border policy instituted by Biden who is

27:09

under intense political pressure to

27:10

address illegal

27:12

migration poll suggest that there is

27:14

growing support even inside the

27:17

president's own party for more

27:19

aggressive border measures the executive

27:22

order is likely to be challenged in

27:24

court

27:28

today's episode was produced by Nina

27:30

Feldman Claire tennis sket Rob zipco and

27:34

Diana win with help from Michael Simon

27:37

Johnson it was edited by Lisa Chow

27:41

contains original music by Maran Lozano

27:44

and Alicia BBE and was engineered by

27:47

Chris Wood our theme music is by Jim

27:50

brunberg and Ben Lanser of

27:52

wonderly special thanks to sashko chco

27:57

[Music]

28:04

[Music]

28:07

that's it for the daily I'm Sabrina

28:09

Tavern see you tomorrow

28:15

[Music]

English (auto-generated)