

2021-05-12

Review of Yuri Kostenko, Ukraine's nuclear disarmament: a history. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020+350 pp.

Cladi, Lorenzo

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/20921>

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Yuri Kostenko, *Ukraine's nuclear disarmament: a history*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020+350 pp.

This is the accepted version of a book review for *Defence Studies*

In this stimulating book, Yuri Kostenko, Ukrainian politician and leader of the Ukraine's People Party, accompanies the reader through the far-reaching and intense domestic political debate which took place in Ukraine at the beginning of the 1990s. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, Ukraine gained independence and found itself in possession of the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Kostenko was a member of the parliament of Ukraine between 1990 and 2014 and he held various cabinet ministerships between 1992 and 1998. Of particular note was Kostenko's membership of the Defence Council of Ukraine as well as ministership of environmental protection, putting him in a unique position to offer a perspective on nuclear disarmament. It seems that Kostenko is particularly interested in conveying two messages via this book. First, he appears to regret Ukraine's nuclear disarmament: the 1994 Budapest memorandum, through which the United States, the UK and Russia committed themselves to respect Ukraine's borders and its independence, is presented by the author as the 'final capitulation' (p.264). Second, Kostenko ties the historical decision by Ukraine in 1994 to commit to denuclearization to the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia.

The book is divided into seven chapters, including a helpful introduction by Paul J. D'Anieri, which helpfully sets the context for Kostenko's account of events that follows. The latter proceeds committed to a chronological series of events. It begins in chapter one with an account of how Ukraine, as a new nuclear-weapon state along with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, was invited to become party to the START I with the Lisbon protocol in place of the USSR. Chapter two, containing compelling visuals and technical details about Ukraine's nuclear warheads, takes the reader through the formulation of Ukraine's position on nuclear weapons. Kostenko details the emerging position of former President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk, who was in favour of a thorough approach to disarmament. Chapter three delves into Ukraine's negotiations with Russia and the US in the aftermath of the signing of the

START II, as the parties committed to a reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms. In chapter four, there is a detailed account of the domestic political debate which took place in the Ukrainian parliament. On the one hand, people such as Kravchuk wanted the START and Non-Proliferation Treaty ratified simultaneously. On the other hand, Kostenko and his working group preferred to postpone immediate ratification of the treaties. Chapter five looks at the road towards the approval of Ukraine's accession to the NPT as a non-nuclear state in 1994. Finally, in chapter six, titled 'capitulation', Kostenko reflects on the consequences of the ratification of the NPT and the signing of the Budapest memorandum. From Kostenko's perspective, these events were not only regrettable from a Ukrainian point of view but they also failed to achieve results in terms of global security. Russia and the US, in Kostenko's view, lost as well. He says 'the absence of a powerful, democratic influence in the region via Ukraine, has led to a regime unlike any the world has known so far' (p. 274). About the US, he argues that it also lost because 'it cannot independently ensure stability in the world today' (p. 274).

Kostenko's personal views and passionate account of events is somewhat reflected in his final statements. His own stake in the issues concerning nuclear disarmament also transpired by reading the book. It is clear that Ukraine found itself catapulted into power politics soon after declaring independence. It was a nuclear weapon state at a time when the great powers were committing to nuclear disarmament. It is somewhat inevitable to expect that this issue would prove deeply divisive in Ukraine and Kostenko took some important stances in the debate on nuclear proliferation. He wanted to make sure some conditions of disarmament would be respected. He wanted, for instance, to send nuclear weapons somewhere other than Russia, he wanted to obtain financial compensation and for Ukraine to have security guarantees. These views were, however, not shared by government officials who were eager to speeding up the process of nuclear disarmament. These were the people in the executive branch who, in turn, were ultimately responsible for communicating and negotiating with the US and Russia. Kostenko's disappointment with the turn of events is understandable.

Despite all of the above, I believe that there are some limitations in this book and the findings deserve further critical engagement. Kostenko tries at times to inject ideas

from the immense literature on nuclear proliferation into his account. However, citations to the academic literature are very sparse and infrequently followed by detailed analysis and discussion. This makes for the appearance of bold statements in the book which could be seen as quite persuasive by some readers but that are inevitably seen as unsubstantiated from a political science perspective. There is very little, for instance, on the alleged link between Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Ukraine's commitment to disarmament twenty years earlier. There is also far too little attention in Kostenko's account to the overall context in which Ukraine found itself in the early 1990s. The reader is left wondering why the international system was ripe for the promising START treaties on strategic nuclear disarmament between the US and the Soviet Union. The reader is also left wondering about the value of nuclear weapons for Ukraine at the beginning of the 1990s. In this connection, establishing clearer benchmarks¹ might help to channel the analysis and make it a bit more critical overall. One could disagree with the optimism generated by these treaties and believe that nuclear weapons ultimately guarantee a state's survival. But such a statement deserves clearer qualification as it should not become a go-ahead for states to acquire nuclear weapons or for states with existing nuclear warheads to increase their number.

Whilst the overall readability of the book is also somewhat impaired at times by clunky writing, probably as an inevitable result of the book having been translated, I would clearly like to stress that this book will prove an extremely valuable addition to reading lists of university courses in security studies and strategy for at least two reasons. It gives an original, insider perspective on Ukraine's nuclear disarmament. This take has often been neglected so plenty of credit is due to Kostenko for allowing the non-Ukrainian speaker to understand what went on domestically in Ukraine in the early 1990s. Secondly, the debate on nuclear proliferation is a never ending one and students will definitely benefit from engaging with Kostenko's ideas with reference to the available literature on the subject.

¹ In the literature on nuclear proliferation, three reasons tend to stand out as to why states want nuclear weapons. These are (a) to provide security against external threats (b) domestic actors and stake-holders may seek to influence the decision to acquire nuclear weapons and (c) nuclear weapons increase a country's prestige. For a thorough analysis see Scott Sagan (1996) 'Why do states build nuclear weapons? Three models in search of a bomb', *International Security*, 21 (3), pp. 54-86.

Lorenzo Cladi

University of Plymouth