

Ukraine and Europe from Chernobyl to Zelensky

An interview with Rebecca Harms

August 29, 2019

HBO's retelling of the Chernobyl disaster had viewers around the world riveted this year, its sobering portrayal of the events consciously chiming with the ecological peril humanity faces in 2019. We sat down with Rebecca Harms, the longstanding Green MEP and a powerful voice in support of democratic engagement with the former Soviet Union, to get her take on the series and the wider nuclear debate today, as well as to reflect on Europe's relations in the region and climate activism's new-found momentum.

Green European Journal: HBO released a miniseries on Chernobyl this year. What was your impression of it?

Rebecca Harms: The series is an authentic account of the horrors of the 1986 disaster. The script of the series is based on the best book ever written about the catastrophe, Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*. The filming took place at the Lithuanian Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant and in Kyiv, and so the locations and the feel of the movie really take you back to the 1980s' Soviet Union.

The renewed interest in the Chernobyl disaster is definitely not unfounded. This catastrophe must not be forgotten, as its consequences are not only felt to this day, but extend far into the future.

There are still people who say that the whole catastrophe was triggered by bad Soviet technology, and that similar accidents could not happen in the EU.

The design of the facility definitely played a role in the Chernobyl disaster, as well as the ambitions of Soviet engineers. The idea of an accident occurring was completely neglected by those running the reactors.

But that does not mean that accidents cannot happen in reactors of other types, and in other countries. With Fukushima or Harrisburg, Japan and the US have both had their own experiences – although Harrisburg in 1977 ended smoothly. Most Japanese people said after March 2011, that until the day of the catastrophe they thought that Japanese nuclear power plants were safe.

It is mistaken to consider one's own equipment to be safe and only that of others to be dangerous. I commissioned a report after a serious accident in Forsmark, Sweden and it shows how – not only there – but also in Brunsbüttel [Germany], Civaux [France], Paks [Hungary], Mihama [Japan] and Davis Besse [USA] there were incidents on the brink of disaster. It is worth looking at the [Residual Risk](#) study if you want to understand why nuclear energy is a high-risk technology.

Some people argue that protecting the climate requires us to continue relying on nuclear power, at least for a time, because it is still better than coal.

That is like asking Beelzebub to assist in an exorcism. The casualties a society endures after a nuclear disaster are

terrible in every way. Tens of thousands pay with their lives. Many more with their health. Many people lose their homes, their past and their future.

For the 20th anniversary of the disaster, I asked the British scientist Ian Fairlie to make an impact assessment of the Chernobyl fallout. Based only on peer-reviewed data, he concluded that in the aftermath of Chernobyl 30 000 to 60 000 cancers were caused by the nuclear disaster. The International Atomic Energy Agency estimates only 4000 casualties. That figure is from the Vienna office and shows that we cannot trust it on this issue.

I fear that we will see increasing numbers of victims in Japan after Fukushima. Following the disaster, people were evacuated hesitantly, too late and from a far too small radius of the plant. The protective measures for the tens of thousands of workers during the clean-up work were also insufficient.

The casualties a society endures after a nuclear disaster are terrible in every way. Tens of thousands pay with their lives.

The normal day-to-day operation of nuclear power is harmful for both people and the environment. No state that uses nuclear power has found a responsible solution for the safe disposal of highly radioactive waste. Even though in some countries the search has been going on for 40 to 50 years.

New nuclear power plants are also very expensive. The constructions in Olkiluoto in Finland or Flamanville in France are economic disasters for the companies involved. Because of these experiences, the EU Commission or France both want to extend the term for old reactors. But those nuclear power plants run on technology from 30-50 years ago, and extending their operations by decades, with no major tests, bears high risks.

The alternative to nuclear power is not coal. The alternative is a smart energy strategy in which renewable energies, efficiency, and energy-saving methods are developed in parallel, spanning all areas of production, distribution, and consumption. The energy transition is the best project for Europe's future, and one that can have many positive effects for innovation and employment.

You just came back from Ukraine where you participated in an election observation mission. What were your impressions?

This election was an early parliamentary election after Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election with incredibly strong support. And his success continued afterwards in the parliamentary election. This is unprecedented in Ukraine, there has never been a president who could rely on a majority in the Rada [the single-chamber Parliament of Ukraine].

The election was still based on the old system with party lists and direct mandates, where half of the Parliament members are elected from constituencies using first-past-the-post voting. Even among the direct mandates surprisingly many candidates from Zelensky's party prevailed. It seems that the times when it was easy to win a parliamentary mandate with the help of money and good relationships are finally coming to an end.

After six years, is Ukraine finally reaping the fruits of the Maidan?

The Maidan also influenced the legislature of former President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman. But towards the end of the term it became clear that – despite some major reforms and the creation of independent authorities and a new high court to fight corruption – Ukrainians were not satisfied with the progress made. It is impressive that democracy in Ukraine is now so strong that its citizens have achieved change in free

elections – instead of igniting another Maidan.

The people elected by a large majority to the Verkhovna Rada and the Presidential Palace have incredibly ambitious reforms to see through, and they need to do much better than their predecessors. This applies in particular to the judicial reform, the security authorities, and the decentralisation of the country.

Did you meet Volodymyr Zelensky in person?

I met him during the presidential campaign. A good friend of mine, the journalist Serhiy Leshchenko joined Zelensky's election campaign and asked me to meet him. He wanted people in Brussels and in Germany to have an idea of the kind of person he was. I met him on the condition that the meeting was not be made public until after the election so it could not be used in any way. I have to say that I found Volodymyr Zelensky very likable. It is a truism to say that he is not a politician, but it is exactly for that reason many Ukrainians have put their hopes on him. The politicians who have determined the political path of Ukraine in recent decades are no longer trusted.

During the campaign, Zelensky was accused of being a puppet of the oligarchs. Do we know more about to what extent he can be influenced?

The relationship between the president and the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi is widely debated in Ukraine for good reason. If Kolomoyskyi becomes a new grey eminence in Ukrainian politics, it will be hard for Zelensky to fulfil his promises. His staffing decisions are mixed in this respect. Some have been praised by civil society, others are very controversial, such as appointing Andriy Bogdan, the former lawyer of Kolomoyskyi, the head of the presidential administration.

What should the EU do in Ukraine?

I hope that the reforms in Ukraine will continue – based on the Association Agreement with the EU and the arrangements made with other international supporters. The EU must bear in mind that the citizens of Ukraine have to benefit from our commitment. The state institutions need to work better for their citizens, and many improvements are needed to the administration, justice system, schools and hospitals. Social issues must not be placed in the back seat in the reforms and establishment of a functioning state.

Apart from that, I wish that the European Union would do what most Ukrainians want. Namely, to fight harder for peace and to push Vladimir Putin end to the occupation and war in Ukraine. After more than five years of defending themselves against Russian aggression and more than 13 000 deaths, their wish should not come as a surprise. Zelensky received a lot of support in his campaign because he shared this desire for peace. However, this is not an unconditional wish: they want peace within the original borders of Ukraine.

That cannot be achieved by Ukraine alone. It needs much more commitment from the international community. The Russian sanctions imposed by the EU following Putin's occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the war on Ukraine in the Donbass must not be called into question. Megaprojects like the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (which will transport gas from Russia to Germany) must not be pursued as long as peace is not achieved for Ukraine.

But it looks like the Nord Stream 2 pipeline will be finished this year. Is the German government applying a double standard when, on the one hand, it expects EU countries to stick to their rules with regard to Russia, but on the other hand continues its own business with Russia?

That is a question that I get again and again in Ukraine. Why is Germany doing it? It is the single biggest mistake of German politics. Despite Russian aggression towards its neighbours, the Germans are going ahead with business as usual. With Nord Stream 2, Germany systematically contradicts the line that Chancellor Angela Merkel is

pursuing in the European Union and waters down the sanctions on Russia.

2019 marks the 10th anniversary of the EU's Eastern Partnership with the countries to its East. How successful was this project?

It is great to see what is happening in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia where – despite massive Russian interference and even occupation – you have new generations not only fighting for more democracy but – step by step – getting it too.

I do not know when and how this will happen, but I do not believe that the desire for democracy and justice will forever be spared from Russia.

I first came to know this region a long time ago, in 1988 after my first visit to Chernobyl. I never expected miracles. After the Maidan, I thought that it would not take just one legislature, but one or two new generations of politicians until Ukraine could become the kind of place its citizens would like it to be: a normal state in which Parliament represent the interests of citizens, the institutions work, and the rule of law prevails. In that sense, the developments have by far exceeded my expectations.

Will these countries have a chance to join the EU at some point in the future?

In Eastern Europe as well as in some Nordic countries, such as Sweden, there are governments that take this very seriously and who emphasise this commitment in different forums. I also think that our association agreements could be even more successful if the door to the European Union were kept open. But future accessions are not quick or easy to do. On the one hand, reforms and the construction of a functioning constitutional state need time. On the other hand, the EU is not ready to deal with new member states.

Should the European Union manage the accession of these countries differently than that of the Eastern European countries, where we see problems with the rule of law?

The EU has to draw conclusions from the conflicts over the rule of law. I know that this is being rejected by many of my colleagues, but it is self-deception to see all these difficulties with the rule of law in Hungary and then, at the same time, pretend that states can be allowed to join the same way. In my opinion, the safest way to approach new member states is to deal more seriously with the accession criteria and the EU's founding principles.

How do you evaluate the situation in Russia now? With the release of the journalist Ivan Golunov, we have seen that the Russian state is not almighty.

I've been banned from Russia for a long time and therefore I couldn't gain a first-hand view. But my impression is that in Russia there is a great deal of curiosity and astonishment that Ukraine has managed to become free and democratic and that presidents and old elites are being voted out. This development counteracts Putin's propaganda that Ukraine must be freed from some kind of fascism.

Zelensky today is particularly interesting for Russians because his success began on Russian television. At the same time, polls and protests in Moscow show that the approval ratings of Putin are waning. The support the president gained with the occupation of Crimea and the war against Ukraine has been lost. There are signs that Russia too can and will change. I do not know when and how this will happen, but I do not believe that the desire for democracy and justice will forever be spared from Russia.

As a long-time activist, how do you see climate activism in Germany and Europe at the moment?

Of course, there is more attention for climate change and the need to do something about it. That was seen with the ‘green wave’ and the successes of the Greens in the last European elections, as well as some national elections. But it is a pity that we are not leaving our North-Western European corner. The EU’s climate policy cannot be as ambitious as it needs to be if Greens lack a strong presence in the South and East.

On what issues did you make impact on the politics of the European Parliament?

As an MEP and as group leader, we made a significant impact on the debate on energy transition and nuclear energy. This was made clear again recently in the dispute over European financing for the dismantlement of the Ignalina nuclear plant where I managed to achieve a unanimous decision of the European Parliament against the proposals of the European Commission and in favour of a much fairer financing decision commensurate to the risks of the project.

I think that I laid some foundations for a sustainable policy in the climate debate. The whole discussion about the Green New Deal, the connection of ecological innovation projects with the creation of sustainable growth and future-proof jobs, was led by me together with my Luxembourgish colleague Claude Turmes. I still remember that we could not move the German Greens to run an election campaign under the slogan Green New Deal, because Germans would not understand it. Instead, their posters featured “WUMS”, an abbreviation for economy and environment, human and social [*Wirtschaft und Umwelt, menschlich und sozial*]. I was mad but today I have to laugh about it.

All our work on the Green New Deal needs to be strengthened. My feeling is that, in the discussion with Fridays for Future and given the attention the Greta Thunberg phenomenon has brought us, we should talk less about CO₂ targets by 2030 and more about the economic innovation and industrial restructuring with which we want to achieve climate goals. I am convinced that the necessary change needs a broad social understanding to work. Great transformations are achieved not through conflict, but by consensus that takes the social effects into account. The Greens’ role is to be the mediators who create broad support for transformation in these times of climate change.



Rebecca Harms was a Member of the European Parliament for Alliance '90/The Greens from 2004 to 2019. She is a former co-president of the Greens/EFA in the European Parliament.

Published August 29, 2019

Interview in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/ukraine-and-europe-from-chernobyl-to-zelensky/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe.

In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.