

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #24

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Zelensky's Presidency: The First Three Years

The story of domestic politics in Ukraine, following its independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, has been a sad one. So far there have been six presidents, two of whom were removed because of mass demonstrations protesting election fraud in 2004 and 2014; in both of these cases, the presidents who were removed were closely tied to Putin's regime. Like other post-Soviet states, the transition from Communist Party leadership to a more democratic government has been difficult. The economic decline that accompanied the breakup of its former centralized economy was a painful process in which members of the elite, like in Russia, took advantage of the chaos and become wealthy oligarchs. Corruption was pervasive and the resulting economic disparity between the elites and the average Ukrainian was not what most people hoped for.

Zelensky's Roots: This was the tumultuous context in which Volodymyr Zelensky was born in January 1978, in the city of Kryvyi Rih in central Ukraine. His parents were Jews; his father was a professor and a computer scientist, and his mother was an engineer. Zelensky grew up speaking Russian, mastered English as well, and earned a law degree in 2000, which was an undergraduate major at Kyiv National Economic University. Instead of practicing law, Zelensky became a satirical actor and showman. He became a regular fixture on Ukrainian television starting in the 1990s. He participated in improvisational comedy competitions and then organized his own group, Kvartal-95, who performed their own musical revues on television. Because of his direct engagement with Ukrainian audiences for decades, he was much better known in Ukraine than Putin was in Russia.

Zelensky the Actor & Television Producer: In the midst of political and economic struggles in Ukraine, Zelensky became known for his fearless responses to injustice, along with his outspoken patriotism. What most of us don't know is that he was viewed as a hero by Ukrainians long before the Russians attacked their country in February 2022. The trademark of Zelensky and Kvartal-95 was a clear focus on the problems facing the average citizen, and his team was famous for naming injustices in Ukrainian society and calling out politicians who failed to deal with these problems. Their skits dealt with a wide range of topics, from healthcare reform to gender roles, and encouraged people to laugh about these problems and work together to find solutions. Comedy became an expression of freedom and a tool for working through disagreements to achieve a common goal.

As an actor, Zelensky talked about a new form of patriotism and a national ideal that emphasized the significance of regional and local identities, rather than a single national culture that needed to be enforced, like in neighboring Hungary. His group developed music that highlighted the differences in languages and dialects in Ukraine, and their songs celebrated this variety. He was leading a transformation of Ukrainian society, emphasizing how all the citizens of his country shared moral qualities, rather than exclusive ethnic characteristics. His TV situation comedy, *Servant of the People* (2015-2019), in which he played the role of a teacher who acted like the president of his country, gave him immense popularity. The values that Zelensky and his colleagues staked out in their decades of theatre and television work were put into practice when he became the country's wartime president.

Zelensky the President: In the presidential election of March 2019 and the follow-up run-off a month later between the two leading candidates, Zelensky won in a record landslide vote, with more than 73% approval over the incumbent president. After his election and following the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, he called on his people to be brave and courageous, to “go through fire and water, for this is what freedom requires.” Along with his wife, Olena Zelenska, and their two children, a daughter and a son, they have set the standard for fearless leadership. They have both called on their compatriots to self-mobilize for the sake of their country, freeing themselves to do their part to achieve victory. The president’s approach to leadership is to free people to creatively respond to the needs around them, and this is happening in remarkable ways.

During the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, the Ukrainian government began to implement a policy of decentralizing power and putting authority into the hands of local leaders, encouraging grassroots mobilization, and cultivating accountability and transparency. This is not Russian-style federalism, but localism – giving people the power to make decisions to bolster the well-being of their community. Zelensky committed his government to these same goals.

The Challenges Zelensky Faces: In addition to the overwhelming challenges Zelensky now faces in this war with Russia, and the complexity of diplomatic relations with NATO and European Union leaders, the tasks that lie ahead are staggering. Here are just a few of these incredible future challenges: rebuilding the infrastructure of a Ukraine that has been brutally demolished by Russian forces; figuring out how to get Ukrainians to come back home from the safety of neighboring NATO countries and the desolate locations where Ukrainians who were forcibly removed have been resettled in Russia; resolving Ukraine’s deep-seated corruption and the power of oligarchs who have a history of using their wealth to build more assets; and the removal of secret Russian agents planted in Ukrainian government offices since 2014. How many of us would apply for this job as president of Ukraine?

We will track some of these subjects in future essays. My hope is that he remains a man of integrity, as he has been for decades before he was elected president. Becoming a global personality can bring with it some changes that many other well-known leaders unfortunately practice. My prayer for him is that he “does justice” and “walks humbly” (Micah 6:8).

NOTE: If you are interested in learning more about this leadership couple, YouTube has numerous videos of their speeches to world leaders. There have been several biographies recently issued and more are coming out. I used numerous sources for this essay, but relied heavily on Jessica Pisano’s “How Zelensky Has Changed Ukraine,” *Journal of Democracy* (July 2022).

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