



## Zelensky without kitsch: From TV president to neoliberal autocrat

**Volodymyr Zelensky's overwhelming election victory in 2019 was based on the hopes for peace of the vast majority of the Ukrainian people. His de facto nonexistent election platform was thereby replaced by his performance as Ukrainian president in a popular television series. But instead of promoting peace, Zelensky submitted to the extreme nationalists in Ukraine. Domestically, he enforced a neoliberal program of privatization and cutbacks. He banned opposition media, dismissed judges and dissolved parliament. Since the Russian invasion began in February 2022, he has tightened this grip even more. But it was the Russian invasion that turned Zelensky from a "comedian" into a democratic hero in the West.**

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*Note: This article is also available [in German](#).*

The presidential victory of Volodymyr Zelensky was largely a result of people's fatigue with the Donbas war, which erupted in 2014 with the victory of the (Euro)Maidan revolution. The overturning of the government in Kiev led to the uprising in Donbass, populated predominantly by Russian-speakers, and the creation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR), which declared themselves independent from Ukraine. The new Ukrainian government blamed for this development exclusively Russia, which – as a response to the "coup d'état," as the Kremlin dubbed the revolution – annexed Crimea and supported the Donbass separatist movement.

Ignoring the fact that the roots of the Donbass insurgency were local (roughly half of Ukraine did not support the revolution, and the majority of its opponents resided in the east, the new Ukrainian government declared the insurgents “pro-Russian terrorists” and launched against them an “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO). With the course of time, it transformed into a full-fledged war between the republics backed by Russia and the Ukrainian government supported by the West.

Since the beginning of the Donbass war, numerous efforts have been made to establish a ceasefire. In February 2015, the second peaceful treaty known as Minsk-II. was signed, which envisaged the creation of a wide autonomy for the republics within Ukraine. This would make it effectively impossible for the country to join NATO and the EU—a condition on which Russia insisted. According to the treaty, the state’s border control in Donbass would only be restored if the constitutional reform granting the republics an autonomy were fulfilled.

After the crushing defeat of the Ukrainian Army near Debaltseve. President Petro Poroshenko had no choice but to sign Minsk II to avoid greater losses. Moreover, as Poroshenko acknowledged in June 2022, Minsk-II allowed “to knock out eight years to restore economic growth and build the strength of the armed forces.” In other words, despite the signed treaty Kiev—backed by its Western partners—had no intention to fulfill the terms of the Minsk treaty and grant autonomy to the rebellious region. Albeit with a lower intensity, the Donbass war continued.

## **The Promise of Peace**

By 2019, the year of Zelensky’s ascend to the presidential power, most Ukrainians were so tired of the war that they preferred the comedian with no political experience whatsoever to established politicians whose politics had led to the Donbas disaster. Most Ukrainians considered Zelensky a candidate of national unity and peace, even though his election platform contained very few policy specifics on the issues of war and peace. “We must win peace for Ukraine,” “return the temporarily occupied territories,” and “force the aggressor to compensate for the damage caused”—this is what Zelensky’s election platform stated. It did not explain how exactly these goals were expected to achieve.

Zelensky’s rare pre-election interviews were not helpful, either. In one of them, he argued that the Minsk agreements “do not work,” that he is “ready to negotiate with the bald devil not to allow a single person to die” and that “it is necessary to speak in very simple terms.” This is how he imagined his dialogue with Russians: “What do you want? Your goal? Why have you come to us? What do you need, guys? Here are your points.” Then, he imagined, Ukraine and Russia would negotiate the differences in positions and “somewhere in the middle we would agree.”

Even without close inspection, the premises on which Zelensky grounded the possibility of establishing peace seem problematic. From Putin’s point of view, it was Ukraine that did not fulfil the Minsk agreements – not that the pact simply “did not work” by itself, as Zelensky implied. It was rather optimistic, therefore, to expect Putin to meet with Zelensky to renegotiate the agreement whose non-implementation, in his view, was Ukraine’s fault. Even less likely was the prospect of a breakthrough by way of a heart-to-heart discussion as suggested by Zelensky—after all, since 2015, when the Minsk agreements were signed, much ink had been spent analyzing the benefits of the agreements for Moscow and the reasons it insisted on full implementation.

In other words, Zelensky's "peace plan" did not seem to be a working plan at all. Rather, it looked like what scholars of populism call "calculated ambivalence"—a populist strategy of presenting controversial issues in a way that allows for possible ambiguous interpretations. The same could be said about Zelensky's promises in the economic sphere. Starting with the phrase "I will tell you about the Ukraine of my dream," his election platform linked this dream to such empty signifiers as "de-shadowing the economy," "full governmental transparency," and "victory over corruption." Consisting of only 1,601 words, the platform, however, did not provide details as to how these improved economic conditions could be achieved.

## Zelensky's TV role served as his election program

The meaning of all these and other nodal points of the platform would have remained completely empty if they had not been linked to Zelensky's television series Servant of the People, which the future president used as his unofficial election platform. For many observers, it was quite clear before the election that voters would take the promises of Holoborodko – the show's fictional president of Ukraine – as Zelensky's. After all, he was not only an actor who performed Holoborodko, but also the co-owner of the studio producing it and co-author of the scripts.



Film poster for the movie "Servant of the People 2", which was produced in 2016 after the first TV season. Zelensky plays with the symbolic language of a famous Kiev equestrian statue of the Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Modern Ukraine regularly invokes the tradition of the Dnieper Cossacks as a historical legacy.

The first episode of the first season of Servant of the People was aired by 1+1, a popular television channel, owned by Zelensky's business partner oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, in fall 2015; the third season came out right before the presidential election, in the spring of 2019. The main character of the series is Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, a history teacher whose life changes abruptly after his emotional, obscenity-filled rant about Ukrainian politics appears on the Internet. "Fuck privileges!" he shouts, promising that if he could rule the country for just one week, he would "make the teacher live as the president, and the president live as the teacher." Holoborodko's students organize crowdfunding, and millions of viewers collect the necessary sum of money to register Holoborodko as a "people's" presidential candidate. With 76 percent of the popular vote, he

wins the presidency in a landslide. It takes 51 episodes for Holoborodko to fulfill his promise. And transform Ukraine into a prosperous country where politicians serve the interests of the citizens.



**Zelensky 2015 as presidential actor in the TV series “Servant of the People”** | Image: [Screenshot](#) from the series

Zelensky [acknowledged](#) in one of his interviews that he “didn’t invent all this [the show].” “I felt all this, I am really feeling this,” he claimed. By arguing that the show was not simply a piece of artistic creation but made from his real feelings, Zelensky established unequivocal links between the real self and his virtual double Holoborodko, implying that they were essentially the same. By means of Holoborodko, Zelensky was able to perform his election promises rather than just state them.

The series depicted Ukrainian society as radically divided – but not into the East and West, as one might think, but into good people and bad elites. The latter were shown as stupid, hypocritical, greedy, unscrupulous, venal and so forth– nothing positive or redeeming. The country becomes healthy only after getting rid of both oligarchs and their puppets, corrupted politicians and officials. Some of them are imprisoned or flee the country; their property is confiscated. Others – 450,000 bureaucrats – find themselves fired. Holoborodko publicly [admits](#) that he has “staged a coup in the country.”

By pronouncing this, Holoborodko acknowledges that imprisonments and property confiscations has been carried out in an extrajudicial manner – skipping the courts is seen as an unavoidable necessity, as all of the judges in the series turn out to be corrupted as well. In this dirty political environment, Holoborodko-the-president has no other choice but to rely on his old school friends, whom he appoints to ministerial positions, to take charge of punishing all the crooked scoundrels without regard to legality.

After assuming the presidential office, Zelensky, in the spirit of his show, would also surround himself with old acquaintances and friends to help him carry out his mission of “modernizing” and “normalizing” Ukraine by bringing it up to neoliberal standards. According to Ukraine’s [Committee of Voters](#), at least thirty such people from Zelensky’s “inner circle”–with no relevant experience for performing their new governmental duties–received state positions after Zelensky came to power.

## Getting Rid of the Opposition

What is probably much more significant than Zelensky's appointing of friends is that in the spring of 2021, with his popularity in a nosedive (in January 2022, Zelensky's approval rating was as low as 17 percent) the Ukrainian president imitated Holoborodko by using questionable methods of dealing with those whom he blamed for the loss of popularity – oppositional politicians. They were sanctioned (deprived of their citizens' rights) through a decision handed down by the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC).

The first NSDC decision of this kind came into effect on February 20, 2021, when Zelensky signed sanctions by NSDC against two parliamentary deputies from "Opposition Platform – For Life" (OPZZh), a pro-Russian party and the main political rival of Zelensky's party "Servant of the People" ("servants") named after the title of the show. As a result of this unconstitutional move, three television channels controlled by the opposition – NewsOne, 112 Ukraine, and ZIK – were shut down. In the official discourse, the closure of these media outlets was linked to investigation of their owners' alleged involvement in "financing terrorism" – that is, their economic relations with Donetsk and Luhansk republics.

In August 2021, Strana.ua – another popular oppositional media outlet – was accused of spreading "anti-Ukrainian propaganda" and sanctioned by the NSDC. In December 2021, new sanctions were signed against the companies that owned the newly established channels First Independent Channel and UKRLIVE. The oppositional television channel Nash was shut down by an NSDC decision on February 11, 2022.

All these media closures happened before the Russia's invasion of 2022. Its onset prompted just another round of efforts to crush dissent, expanding on what had come earlier. On March 20, 2022, Zelensky signed a decision by the NSDC to ban 11 oppositional political parties. In parallel, he also implemented the NSDC's decision to launch a telethon called "United News #UArazom," which all national TV channels were expected to broadcast. All oppositional meanings have since come to be seen as "Russian disinformation," with the arrests of oppositional journalists and bloggers justified by the necessity of defending the sovereignty of Ukraine and punishing "traitors."

Among those arrested were Dmitry Dzhangirov, Yuri Tkachev, Yan Taksyur, brothers Kononovych, and numerous others. Many oppositionists– such as Ruslan Kotsaba, Tatyana Montyan, Dmitry Vasilets, Taras Nezalezhko, or Yuri Podolyako– were lucky enough to have made it out of Ukraine, and now work in exile. A comprehensive list of all those arrested and silenced by other means is difficult to complete because there are no court hearings of their cases. Some instances of "arrest and detention without timely judicial review," "incommunicado detention," and "enforced disappearances" are discussed in UN reports; but most cases remain unreported. There is no public oversight of the extrajudicial harassment of the opposition.

Zelensky's resorting to the NSDC– a coordinating center controlling the activity of bodies of executive power in the sphere of national security and defense– to persecute the opposition is clearly unconstitutional. Only courts may decide on who is guilty of treason and whose property should be confiscated. Moreover, the decisions of the NSDC – put into effect by presidential decrees – to impose sanctions against oppositionists ignore the direct constitutional prohibition to impose sanctions against Ukrainian citizens. This what the former head of Ukraine's Constitutional Court Oleksandr Tupytskyi repeatedly highlighted. As a result, on March 27, 2021 – also in violation of the Ukrainian Constitution – Zelensky signed a decree canceling Tupytskyi's appointment as a judge of the court.

The opposition protested. But Zelensky could afford ignoring this because he dismissed the previous parliament and during early parliamentary elections his “servants” received an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. After having captured full parliamentary and governmental control, the party machine of Zelensky could churn out and rubber-stamp neoliberal reforms despite their disapproval by most Ukrainians and the political opposition.

## **From a Popular Comedian to the Unfortunate Reformer**

With time, however, simply ignoring the opposition became insufficient – after Zelensky’s approval rating plummeted in the course of his neoliberal experimentations. This was not surprising given that Ukrainians never expected them. The election program of Zelensky’s party said nothing about the sale of national land resources, while only one phrase in Zelensky’s own program was related to it: “The formation of a transparent land market.” This phrase, however, could be interpreted as making existing land relations more transparent. In the show, Holoborodko also does not privatize public enterprises and land. That is why Zelensky’s “grand privatization” of industrial enterprises along with the abolishment of the moratorium on the sale of agricultural land appeared as a complete surprise to his voters.

The speed with which the reforms were carried out was no less astonishing. In a meeting with the new government members on September 2, 2019, Zelensky instructed Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk to review the existing list of strategic enterprises not subject to privatization by October 1, transfer about 500 state enterprises of the State Property Fund for small privatization by December 1, draft a bill to abolish the moratorium on the sale of agricultural land, and work out the new Land Code by October, with the parliament to adopt it by December.

On September 6, David Arakhamia, the leader of the parliamentary faction of “servants,” announced that on a daily basis they would adopt seven to ten laws necessary for Ukraine’s neoliberal “normalization.” This would accelerate government into “a turbo regime,” as he put it. Oppositional media explained this reckless haste by the control over Zelensky’s government by the global centers of neoliberal power interested in Ukraine’s neoliberal reforms.

The pace of the reforms turned out to be “turbo,” indeed. On October 3, 2019, the parliament approved significant reductions of fines for employers over violations of labor laws. One week later, on October 10, Zelensky announced during a meeting with journalists that the new Labor Code would simplify the dismissal of workers. Like all other reforming initiatives, he framed the issue in terms of modernization, as a matter of doing away with a relic from bygone Soviet times: “We will not have the Soviet labor code, but the labor code of an independent country. A modern one.” Predictably, trade unions saw the proposed law in a completely different light. It would seriously undermine fundamental workers’ rights, they argued.

As early as in September 2019, it became clear that many of the initiatives put forward by Zelensky and his “servants” were not popular among Ukrainians, especially the land reform: According to various polls, up to 72 percent of Ukrainians opposed lifting the moratorium on land sales, but this did not stop the “servants.” On March 30, 2020, they adopted the law on the opening of the land market during the extraordinary parliamentary meeting, convened as an exception to a coronavirus lockdown while Ukrainians could not protest.

The unpopular neoliberal reforms initiated by Zelensky, combined with the ongoing war in Donbass that he promised to stop, the lack of criminal cases against corrupt officials and oligarchs whom he promised to imprison, as well as industrial decline, salaries in arrears, budget shortfalls, rising unemployment and catastrophic rates of labor migration and depopulation, plus various scandals inside Zelensky's party – all these factors fomented massive levels of discontent.

According to Razumkov Center, in September 2019, 57 percent of Ukrainians believed that events in Ukraine were developing in the right direction. In January 2022, KIIS's sociological data showed that 64.7 percent of Ukrainians thought otherwise. It was Russia's Special Military Operation, launched in February 2022, that transformed Zelensky from an unpopular ruler selling Ukrainian land against the people's will into a national hero struggling against Russia's "unprovoked aggression."

## Zelensky's Nationalistic U-Turn

The thesis about Russia's "unprovoked aggression" has been repeatedly highlighted by Zelensky in his daily war-related speeches, which have been uncritically reproduced by Western media with a global reach. All alternative voices acknowledging at least partial fault of Zelensky himself for the ongoing disaster – primarily, because of his unwillingness to implement the Minsk agreements – were silenced. But in February 2023, Zelensky himself publicly acknowledged that he had never wanted to fulfil the treaty.

Then why did he meet with Putin in December 2019 at the Normandy forum in Paris? Why did he put his signature under a two-page Declaration in which he reconfirmed Ukraine's commitment to Minsk-II? Why in the aftermath of the Normandy forum did the official website of Ukraine's President informed Ukrainians that the Minsk agreements "continue to serve as the basis of the Normandy format, the Member States of which are committed to their full implementation"? To answer these questions, one need to realize the role of ultra-nationalists in the political life of Ukraine.

On the eve of his Paris trip of 2019, Zelensky met with radicals' fierce resistance. The nationalistic stance was crystal clear: Even the smallest concession to Russia's demands would amount to surrender, regardless of whether these demands were part of an internationally recognized agreement. Right after Zelensky announced his decision to sign the document, thousands of nationalists gathered in the center of Kiev chanting "No to capitulation!" and arguing that Minsk-II violates Ukraine's sovereignty.

Under pressure from nationalists, Zelensky resorted to arguing that Donbass elections, prescribed by the Minsk agreement, would be held only after Russian forces were withdrawn and Ukraine regained control of its border. "There won't be any elections under the barrel of a gun; there won't be any elections there if the troops are still there," Zelensky promised, trying to bat away accusations of conceding to Russia's demands. But the problem with this interpretation was that it contradicted the sequence of events prescribed by the Steinmeier Formula (a simplified version of Minsk-II) that Zelensky had already signed. In the choice between violating the international treaty and appeasing nationalists, Zelensky selected the latter.

Most people of Ukraine voted for Zelensky because he promised to establish peace; and part of the issue was doing away with the politics of ethnic nationalism. "We must initiate and adopt laws and decisions that consolidate society, and not vice versa," Zelensky-the-candidate claimed in 2019. However, after assuming the presidential office, he turned to the nationalistic agenda of his predecessor.

## Cleansing Ukraine from everything Russian

On May 19, 2021, Zelensky's government approved an action plan for the promotion of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life strictly in line with Poroshenko's language law, to the delight of nationalists and dismay of Russophones, whose numbers amount up to at least one third of the Ukrainian population. It appears symbolic that the plan was approved after on March 20, 2021, radicals set fire to the presidential office's door, demanding from Zelensky to release their "brother" charged with murder.

As many analysts believe, Zelensky made a U-turn to the nationalistic agenda because radicals, although representing the minority of the Ukrainian population, do not hesitate to use force against politicians, courts, law enforcement agencies, media workers, and so forth. Not shunning violence, they have been dictating their agenda to the entire society since the Maidan. Zelensky's Jewish identity – a factor that, in contrast to Western media, is rarely considered in Ukraine – makes it extremely difficult to believe that he sympathizes with ultra-nationalists. But one does not have to like Nazis to fulfil their demands– this is what the whole history of Nazism teaches us.

The current war only brought to the logical end Ukraine's tendency of post-Maidan radicalization. On August 5, 2021, Zelensky called all the citizens of Donbass who consider themselves Russians and love Russia to leave Ukraine. What followed this call was the eradication of everything that is related to Russia: the temples of the Russian Orthodox Church (the major church in Ukraine) being seized and clergy prosecuted; monuments to historical figures from the common Ukrainian-Russian history being demolished, Russian books being extracted from libraries, Russian-language school courses being eliminated, and so forth. In October 2022, the NDSC's head Alexei Danilov proclaimed that Russian language should vanish from Ukrainian territory completely.

Russian speakers do not have any power in contemporary Ukraine – no party represents their interests simply because all pro-Russian parties are banned. This does not mean that people cannot speak Russian in everyday life, although the representatives of some occupations are being permanently harassed by "activists" for using Russian language at work: teachers, store sellers, policemen, and so forth. No surprise that the number of those Ukrainians who came to Russia after the beginning of the current war is so big – up to three million people, according to UN estimates.

## Forced mobilization of the poor population – the rich buy themselves off the army

But sociopolitical tensions in the contemporary war-torn Ukraine are not exhausted by the issue of radical nationalism. A problem that appears today much more acute is the forced mobilization, which brings suffering to Ukrainians disregarding of their ethnic, linguistic, or religious identities. Under the state of the martial law, Ukrainian men are forbidden to leave the country; many of them are taken to the army against their will. Social media are full of videos in which men are being captured with force in public places; recently, reports on the forceful mobilization with the use of illegal methods started to appear even in mainstream Western media.

Men's unwillingness to go to the front is not necessarily about their sympathy to Russia or the lack of love to Ukraine. It is increasingly about people's outrage at injustice: neither members of political elites nor their

children are being conscripted. Moreover, well-to-do Ukrainians always have a chance to buy off the army, while their poor compatriots are deprived of such an option. The corruption in the Ukrainian military system is omnipresent, which was recently acknowledged by Zelensky himself – on August 11, 2023, he announced that all officials in charge of military recruitment offices would be dismissed because of corruption. This came as a reaction to opinion polls which showed that 89% of Ukrainians consider corruption as the country's second most important problem after Russian aggression; 77.6% assign responsibility for the president and his office.

The rise of critical sentiment is also evident in social networks even among those who can hardly be called Russia's sympathizers is suggestive. "A concentration camp" and "a prison named after Zelensky" – this is how Oleg Soskin, a former economic advisor of two Ukrainian presidents, Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, recently reacted to the registration in the Ukrainian parliament of a draft law restricting the right to travel abroad for teenagers who have not yet reached military age. Commenting on the "lawlessness" established by Zelensky's "clan" that "usurped power," Soskin argued that "in Ukraine, already 100 thousand people are in prisons. Most of them are political prisoners." More and more often, similar opinions are being voiced by other well-known public figures who previously preferred keeping silence not to bring grist to the enemy's mill.

As stated earlier, it was this war that transformed an unfortunate neoliberal reformer Zelensky into a hero struggling against Russia's "tyranny" and "barbarism" – his favorite discursive constructions. Now, amid corruption scandals, the public mood is changing once again. The war and fear keep people from protests, but many painful questions are started being discussed. What was the point of not implementing Minsk-II? Why nobody from Zelensky's inner circle fight in the war? Why do ordinary Ukrainians give the last money for the army while military commissars buy villas in Spain?

These and similar questions will get louder if the parliamentary and the presidential elections of 2024 take place – this possibility has not been excluded yet, and different political forces (such as Poroshenko's or Klichko's parties) have started mobilizing their resources in a bid to overthrow Zelensky. But even if the elections are not held, this is only a matter of time for the country to realize that there were many alternative political choices that were hidden from the public view because of shutting down oppositional media and ignoring oppositional outlooks. If they had been taken into account, the tragedy might have been avoided – this is what many Ukrainians have yet to realize.

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