

Zelenskiy: Anatomy of a success

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The political situation in Ukraine since the ‘revolution of dignity’ and the Russian aggression has created a specific social context in which the public’s perception of the traditional politicians has started to deteriorate dramatically. The revolution awakened high public expectations of comprehensive reforms to the state, a new quality of governance, and the empowerment of society. However, 2014’s presidential and parliamentary elections led to only a minor turnover of the political elites, and the most important positions in the state were taken by politicians whose positions & ideas were formed in the 1990s when the oligarchic system in Ukraine was created. The reforms during the first two to three years after the revolution, which were mainly implemented under pressure from Western donors and civil society, failed to meet the public’s needs. Not only did they not lead to an improved quality of life, but they actually led to a decline and the emigration of around two million people, thus becoming an additional burden on the ‘old-new’ elite. Painful reforms, initiated but unfinished, and increasing political instability exacerbated the public’s already critical attitudes towards the political class. Just before the presidential elections, only 23% of respondents expressed trust in the president, 12% in parliament, 19% in the government, 12% in the courts, and 15% in the prosecutor’s office (poll by the Razumkov Centre in Kyiv).

The huge distrust of state institutions and politicians resulted in a search for ‘new faces’, people from outside the establishment who were not disgraced, who were untainted by corruption and could meet the public’s diverse expectations. In the initial stage of the campaign, the Ukrainian people had a choice between two such people: Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, the leader of the popular rock band *Okean Elzy*, and Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the comedian and actor. However, the former’s reluctance to announce his candidacy increased support for the latter, which only accelerated after Zelenskiy’s formal announcement at the turn of 2019 that he would run in the elections. In this way Zelenskiy became a major contender in the presidential race, and won the first round of elections.

Image and campaign

The most important source of Zelenskiy’s success is his name recognition and popularity. Unlike most other potential ‘new faces’, for whom a media campaign would have been long and costly, Zelenskiy already enjoyed the favour of a significant proportion of Ukrainian voters when he announced he would run. He owes his

popularity to performances in films, serials and satirical programmes over the last ten years and more. In addition, he has positive associations from TV productions like the *Kvartal-95* cabaret show (which has been running since 2005) and the series *Servant of the People* (since 2015). He has played the lead in both shows, both of which refer to politics. The first ridicules the political situation, the ruling class and the reforms

they implement, while the second showcases an alternate reality. Zelenskiy plays the role of a modest history teacher who, by a twist of fate, becomes president of Ukraine and effectively fights oligarchs and corrupt politicians in the defence of ordinary people's interests.

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The show's huge popularity (the biggest success in the history of Ukrainian TV production) has not only increased Zelenskiy's visibility but also habituated his audience to the lead character's political role. Moreover, in many people's eyes he has become an apt commentator on political life, criticising the government's hypocrisy and double standards: they proclaim their adherence to European values, but keep resorting to blackmail and corruption; they proclaim an anti-Russian stance, while expanding their assets by smuggling from Russia and operating factories there. Zelenskiy expresses the disappointment of society in the form of mockery, thus channelling society's fears and frustrations. The third season of *Servant of the People* began in the week before the first round of the presidential elections.

It is not only Zelenskiy's lack of political experience which works in his favour, but also his lack of coherent political views. Zelenskiy does not have to make any electoral promises, as he is commonly identified with the hero of his TV series. The illusion of a modest president who serves society and fights the pathologies of political and economic life, while at the same time approving the *status quo* without demanding any sacrifices associated with the reforms, has proved to be much more attractive than the

image built up by the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, of the defender of the poor against the oligarchs; or that of the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, of the defender of the nation against the Russian threat.

Zelenskiy's announcement that he would run in the elections, which took the form of a short film combined with his New Year's greetings, kicked off his unusual campaign. He has mainly used social networks, interacting directly with voters during his cabaret concerts, using short video clips, polls and surveys, and commenting directly on political events. This approach has reinforced his image as a candidate from outside the system. Zelenskiy has impressed the public with his naturalness, and has not tried too hard to hide his flaws. In fact, he has even emphasised them, trying to transform a weakness into a strength: when his opponents accused him of being a clown, his staff organised an internet campaign entitled 'We are all clowns' that set the traditional politicians (not clowns) against Zelenskiy and his voters (the clowns).

Zelenskiy's spontaneity contrasts with the trite quality of the campaigns run by Poroshenko, Tymoshenko and the pro-Russian candidate Yuri Boyko, which are based on geeky speeches, promises, and visits to cities and workplaces. Moreover, the actor has run a distinctly positive campaign: lacking a concrete manifesto, he has invited his followers to join in writing one, a move which has turned normal electoral logic on its head by giving his voters a feeling of empowerment. He has offered them a form of joint action, instead of promises to act on their behalf. This approach binds him to his voters, giving the illusion of a horizontal relationship, of reducing the distance between the people and power, and of cooperation in place of subordination. Even if this has been unintentional, it both fits with the demands made on the Maidan, and resonates with the mood among many young people.

Target group

Zelenskiy's campaign – which has been economical with its words and promises, and has built up the image of a man from outside politics, and who lacks any clear views on key issues – has allowed him to reach out effectively to different social groups. The most important of these are the young and the middle-aged, who – regardless of their differing political views – share a disaffection with the ossified ranks of Ukraine's current politicians. Although a large portion of these voters would have been willing to support Svyatoslav Vakarchuk in the elections, after he chose not to run, they preferred to switch their votes to Zelenskiy, young and unblemished by politics, rather than the compromised figures of Poroshenko or Tymoshenko.

Zelenskiy's manifesto is very threadbare and general, so it will not alienate people who want to halt the reforms or those who want to accelerate them, hoping he will break up the old system.

Zelenskiy has also managed to reach a group of more conservative voters who are tired of political instability, and who see the source of this chaos in the failed attempts to reform over recent years. During Zelenskiy's election campaign he did not promise to make any further fundamental changes, and limited his rhetoric to empty populist slogans about the need to fight corruption and raise living standards. In terms of foreign policy, he has used plenty of uncontroversial (and unfulfillable) slogans about the need for Ukraine to join Euro-Atlantic structures, and has called Russia's actions in Crimea and the Donbas annexation and aggression. He has spoken about the development of the state and reforms in such a threadbare and general manner that he has managed to attract both people who want to halt the reforms, and those who want to accelerate them and hope that a man from out-

side the establishment will break up the old system. The invitations to well-known reformers like the Lithuanian economist Aivaras Abromavičius and Ukraine's former finance minister (2016-18) Oleksandr Danyluk to join his campaign team were a signal to the latter group.

Last but not least, Zelenskiy has won the trust of those voters who see the actions of the president and the government in the cultural and symbolic sphere as a threat to their identity. This is because for many people, the actor embodies a different model of patriotism than the one promoted by the current government, which is based on The Ukrainisation of the public sphere and anti-Russian rhetoric. Despite the increase of patriotic and anti-Russian sentiments in Ukraine, there is still a group in society which does not agree with the state's historical policy. These are people attached to Russian culture and language, and who often (like Zelenskiy himself) use it as their primary vehicle of expression, regardless of the war with Russia in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea. This group – who are still quite large in Ukraine, and live mostly in the east and south of the country (where the actor himself comes from) – feels no less patriotic than their fellow citizens from other regions who speak Ukrainian and are more Western-oriented. However, due to the policies of Ukrainisation and de-Communisation in public life, and the general rightward shift in Ukrainian politics, some of them feel marginalised at best, or even stigmatised as a kind of Russian fifth column. Zelenskiy, as a popular, successful man who appeals to Soviet-Russian symbols, not only legitimises their views and values, but has *de facto* become their spokesman and protector.

Forecast

To a significant proportion of the electorate, Zelenskiy appears as the ideal centrist candidate: young, modern, not involved in corruption scandals, not burdened with ideology, who represents a better promise of change in the

country than the old political class. The run-off with Poroshenko will not be the battle between pro-Russian and pro-Western politicians which had been traditional for Ukraine until 2014; it will be a competition between a politician and a post-politician. The incumbent president will seek to set up the campaign before the second round as a clash between professionalism and ignorance, and he will continue his aggressive negative campaign, based on accusing his rival of real or imagined ties to Russia, and dividing Ukrainian society into good and bad citizens. This strategy, although natural and well-rehearsed before the first round, will not win him the votes for other candidates, especially as

(according to the polls) large sections of both Tymoshenko's and Boyko's voters have said they will vote for the comedian.

The first round of the elections showed that a positive campaign which promotes unity, not division, brought Zelenskiy his success (he won 19 of the country's 24 regions). If Poroshenko's staff cannot move beyond the current logic of their campaign, and if no credible material seriously compromising Zelenskiy's integrity and/or morality emerges, society's anger towards the old political elite may overcome its fear of entrusting the highest office in the country to a comedian with no political experience.

BIOGRAPHY

Volodymyr Zelenskiy was born in 1978 in Kryvyi Rih (Dnipropetrovsk region) into a family of the Russian-speaking Jewish intelligentsia, the only son of Oleksandr and Rimma. His father is a trained mathematician in cybernetics (his doctorate comes from the Moscow State Mining University), and head of the Department of Computer Science and Applied Programming in the Kryvyi Rih Economic Institute (a branch of the Vadym Hetman National Economic University in Kyiv). His mother is an engineer by training, now retired.

Zelenskiy **studied law** at the Kryvyi Rih Economics Institute, but never entered the profession. According to available information he has never served in the army. He married Olena Kiyashko (b. 1978), a friend from high school who graduated in architecture from the Kryvyi Rih Economics Institute. They have two children, Oleksandr (b. 2004) and Kyryl (b. 2013). His wife is his artistic collaborator, a co-owner of part of his property, and a writer for television and cabaret.

Zelenskiy took his **first steps in performing** while still in middle school, joining a theatre

group and the school's musical ensemble. During his studies he started working as a dancer in the Zaporozhye-Krivoy Rog-Transit cabaret group. In 1997, he and his friends founded their own cabaret **Kvartal-95**, in which he still performs today. Two years later the group was invited to perform on *KVN's Premier League*, a very popular cabaret programme on Russian television, and began performing in many post-Soviet countries. During this time Zelenskiy **lived in Russia for six years**. In 2003, after a conflict with the programme's producers, he and his group returned to Ukraine full-time, where he continued his activity and began his career as a comic actor. After 2003 his group gained wide popularity through its appearances on the 1+1 TV channel owned by Ihor Kolomoyskiy. In 2005, he signed a contract with the **Inter TV channel** owned by Valeriy Khoroshkovskiy, who at that time had close ties with Viktor Yanukovych. Kvartal-95's formula for TV cabaret quickly became one of the most popular entertainment programmes on Ukrainian television.

Zelenskiy gained great popularity for his performance and eventual **victory in the Ukrainian version of *Dancing with the Stars*** in 2006. At the same time he expanded his business in the entertainment industry, and together with his friends from college Boris and Serhiy Shefir, they founded the **Studio Kvartal-95** company, which has been responsible for the group's further productions as well as satirical programmes, comedy films, musicals and private cabaret performances. In 2010-12, he was the **main producer for Inter TV**, and hosted its entertainment programmes. According to Ukrainian media, at the time some of the shares in Studio Kvartal-95 were owned by **Valeriy Khoroshkovskiy**, who was both the owner of Inter and the **head of the Ukrainian Security Service from 2010 to 2012**. **Zelenskiy has worked with many producers and artists in Russia**, regularly appearing on Russian television alongside Filipp Kirkorov, a star of the Russian stage. As a media and show-business entrepreneur, the co-creator of cabaret programmes and comedy films, he **has achieved spectacular success, including financially**. The entertainment programmes and films produced by Studio Kvartal-95 (which are recorded almost exclusively in Russian) are also very popular in Russia itself (it was their main market until 2014) and many other post-Soviet countries.

In 2012, Studio Kvartal-95 Quarter ceased its cooperation with Inter (apparently because they were pressured not to criticise President Yanukovych), and **its productions returned to the 1+1 TV channel**. In 2015, they aired the first season of the TV series *Servant of the People*, which told the story of a history teacher who was elected president of Ukraine by chance. The series became extremely popular, with a peak audience of 20 million TV viewers, and it was recommissioned for a further two seasons, the last of which was shown just before the first round of the presidential elections in March 2019.

The nature of Zelenskiy's relationship with the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy remains unclear. Zelenskiy is seen by his political opponents and most commentators as a 'puppet' of the oligarch. It is known that in recent years he has attended Kolomoyskiy's birthday parties, and that his team includes people who have worked for the oligarch (including his former lawyer Andriy Bohdan, now a member of Zelenskiy's election team). However, the assertion that the oligarch controls Zelenskiy seems to be an exaggeration. Zelenskiy himself has played down the accusations, claiming that he is only Kolomoyskiy's partner in the television business. Although the majority of Zelenskiy's productions since 2012 have been shown on 1+1 television, it is difficult to say that the actor is financially dependent on the oligarch – rather, they are in a mutually beneficial relationship,

Zelenskiy declared his support for the demonstrators on the Maidan back in December 2013. After the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, **Studio Kvartal-95 broke off its cooperation with its Russian partners**. Members of Kvartal-95 have given special shows for Ukrainian soldiers and joined in collecting gifts for the volunteer battalions.

In December 2017, Zelenskiy and his childhood friend Ivan Bakanov founded the **Servant of the People political party**. As was explained at the time, the group was created on the basis of the already existing Party for Decisive Change, because the show's name had to be secured before it could be politically exploited by outsiders. However, as it increased its support in successive opinion polls, this formerly marginal party began to be seen as a real political project. Zelenskiy began to be mentioned as a possible presidential candidate from mid-2018. His first polls showed support for him at the level of 5-6%, and **he officially announced he was running on 31 December 2018**.

Although Volodymyr Zelenskiy is very often labelled as a 'comedian', in fact **he has been a leading figure in the Ukrainian entertainment industry for many years**, as a shareholder in companies involved in the production of films and television series which have been broadcast throughout the post-Soviet area. In 2013, the Ukrainian edition of *Forbes* put him top of the 25 richest celebrities and sports stars in Ukraine, and in 2010 the weekly *Focus* placed him fifth on the list of the most bankable show-business stars. The actual value of Zelenskiy's assets is difficult to assess, although estimates range around the US\$10m mark. From the declaration of assets which he submitted while registering as a presidential candidate, it appears that he owns several apartments and houses (including in Crimea and the UK), and holds shares in 20 companies (including Studio Kvartal-95, the 'League of Laughter' Production Centre and Kvartal-Kontsert), including one registered in Italy and four more in tax havens. Until recently he owned shares in the Cyprus-based Green Family, which owned Russian companies involved in television production. Following the disclosure of this information by investigative journalists, the actor stated that he had withdrawn from the company.

In his public statements Zelenskiy has been using the Ukrainian language increasingly often, although he does not speak the language fluently. From his few statements on the matter, it appears that (if he becomes president) he will use the Ukrainian language in public, which, like English, he is currently learning intensively. At the same time, his electoral staff are sceptical of the new language law currently passing through parliament which aims to expand the use of Ukrainian; they consider it a factor which encourages divisions rather than uniting society. Zelenskiy comes from a secular family, and it is not known whether he is religious.

Zelenskiy's **attitude towards the West remains ambiguous**. On the one hand, he presents himself as a supporter of Ukrainian soci-

ety's pro-European aspirations as expressed in its pursuit of Western living standards and the adoption of Western democratic standards. On the other hand, in a recent interview he said that "nobody in the EU is waiting for Ukraine", and that he "does not understand what NATO is." Moreover, his cabaret performances reveal his scepticism of Western structures. Yet in his manifesto he has mentioned Ukraine's desire for membership of NATO and the EU.

Zelenskiy's **ideas on how relations with Russia should develop are similarly vague**. His clearly expressed patriotic attitude shortly after the Russian aggression contrasts with his public statements during the election campaign. Before announcing that he would run in the elections, he argued that the conflict could be ended if he met Vladimir Putin personally and came to terms with the Russian side. After a wave of criticism, this position was altered; when the results from the first round of the election were issued, he announced that a meeting with Putin would only be possible after Crimea and the Donbas are returned, and compensation for war losses is paid. He continues to emphasise that the hostilities must be halted and the bloodshed ended as soon as possible, which – considering his failure to offer any ideas on how to bring this about – seems to be an attitude targeted at meeting the expectations of a society which is tired of the long-lasting conflict.

Publicly he presents himself as an 'easy-going' person who avoids severe or unambiguous political declarations. His views on many important issues remain unclear. **Neither Zelenskiy nor his staff have made any comment on historical topics**. These issues do not appear in the candidate's manifesto, which suggests that they do not have any great importance for him. It can be assumed that Zelenskiy – who comes from a Russian-speaking family in southern Ukraine – does not support a historical policy of the kind currently being conducted by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance.

During the election campaign Zelenskiy did not mention Poland, either in the context of expanding the so-called Normandy format or of bilateral relations. In his official documents Poland has been mentioned once, in a humorous tone in the manifesto which the candidate was required to submit to the Central Election Commission. In this document, Zelenskiy declared

that the Ukraine of his dreams is a country to which Polish people will emigrate for work, and to which Ukrainian workers will return from Poland. The available information suggests that the candidate's team has a generally positive attitude towards Poland, but lacks an explicit vision for the future relationship.

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