

## **The Fate of Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky: A Political Portrait**

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Ivan Katchanovski teaches at the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa In Canada.

The current President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky is hailed by the politicians, the media, and many others in the West as a modern-day Churchill who is winning the war with Russia. He is heralded by them as a champion of freedom, democracy, European values, and as a brave and heroic defender of Ukraine, its sovereignty, and Ukrainians from the Russian invasion which they call a genocide. Zelensky is greeted by standing ovations during his frequent speeches to the Western parliaments, universities, business, entertainment, and sport events. He is treated like a celebrity and a hero in numerous media interviews. In contrast, the politicians and the media in Russia claim that Zelensky is a clown, a drug addict, and a US puppet presiding over the neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine, which is US colony and which they claim wages genocide of Russia-speakers in Donbas.

As a scholar specializing in the Ukrainian politics, I sketch this political portrait of Zelensky based on my academic research and various evidence. Both the Western and the Russian narratives concerning Zelensky have little to do with reality, and are fiction or propaganda. The truth became the first casualty of the Ukraine-Russia war, including truth about Zelensky.

A popular comedian, Zelensky won the presidential elections because of backing from the powerful oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky. His popular 1+1 TV channel gave Zelensky a free platform and run a TV series which showed Zelensky as president of Ukraine. It was called Servant of People, which Zelensky used to name his own party.

“The Pandora papers” investigation revealed multimillion undeclared offshore accounts of Zelensky and large transactions which linked Kolomoisky to Zelensky. After he became president of Ukraine, Zelensky appointed many of his friends and colleagues from his comedy career into influential positions. The Ukrainian media reported that one of them, who became the head of the Office of President of Ukraine, even de facto runs certain tasks of presidency. There are various reports of corruption in the entourage of Zelensky, and he recently fired or arrested some officials after US pressure.

Following a brief period of relative democratization after the victory of Zelensky in the presidential elections, he instituted a largely non-democratic rule. He blocked the Constitutional Court of Ukraine and used the Russian invasion to ban 16 opposition parties and charge six leaders of the opposition parties, including Poroshenko, with state treason.

Zelensky promised during his election campaign a peaceful resolution of the war in Donbas, tackling corruption, raising salaries, and lowering natural gas prices. He was elected with high popular support, primarily in his native Russian-speaking South and in the East. He defeated

incumbent president Poroshenko who ran on the nationalist platform of “army, faith, and language.”

But Zelensky abandoned his promises soon after the elections and turned into Poroshenko on steroids. He did this turnabout because of the pressure from the far right and the West. The far right, including neo-Nazis, openly rejected his personal plea to withdraw from the frontline in Donbas according to the Paris agreement and they attacked his office with the police standing by. This demonstrated that the far right has power to overthrow Zelensky. The famous military style clothing that Zelensky wears during the war even during his official visits, is produced by a popular clothing brand which also sells clothing with neo-Nazi symbols.

But Zelensky is no way a neo-Nazi. He is Jewish and is a political populist, who makes his decisions and changes his policy based on how popular they would be. But his placating and mainstreaming of the numerically small but powerful and violent far right in order to preserve his power was used by Russia as a pretext to justify its illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Zelensky failed to foresee and prevent the Russian invasion in spite of the information from the US intelligence. His promises to join NATO and to take back the self-proclaimed separatist republics in Donbas and Russian-annexed Crimea, and his policies of curtailing use of Russian language were inflated by Russia and used to justify its illegal invasion. However, Zelensky did not flee Kyiv after the Russian invasion, and Putin’s apparent plan of the regime change in Ukraine then failed.

Former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett revealed that after he informed Zelensky two weeks into the war that Putin promised not to kill him, Zelensky left his secret bunker and filmed himself in his presidential office saying that he was not afraid. There are no confirmations of claims that he survived dozen assassination attempts by Russia during the war. Zelensky is a talented actor who knows how to play to the audience, and he successfully uses these skills in his numerous public speeches and daily video addresses. This helped him to gain tremendous popularity during the war.

But his power to a large extent depends on the US backing. The US replaced Kolomoisky as the patron of Zelensky after he became president. Former Israeli prime minister Bennett recently revealed that the Biden administration and leaders of other major Western countries blocked the Ukraine-Russia peace deal, which he was negotiating as a mediator on Zelensky request in March 2022, because they wanted to continue to strike Putin. Bennett said that there was a good chance of reaching such a deal and that Putin promised not to kill Zelensky and dropped demilitarization of Ukraine demand, while Zelensky dropped NATO membership of Ukraine. Fionna Hill, the former senior U.S. National Security Council official wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine that according to many former senior US officials Russia and Ukraine “tentatively agreed on the outline of a negotiated transitional settlement.” Ukrainska pravda previously reported citing sources close to Zelensky that the peace talks broke because of the visit by then British prime minister Boris Johnson to Kyiv in April 2022 after he delivered Zelensky the message from “the collective West” not to negotiate with Putin but to “press him” and that the

West would not provide security guarantees even if Ukraine would sign a peace agreement with Russia.

As a result, Zelensky abandoned peaceful resolution of the armed conflict and gambled against the odds on winning the war with Russia with massive military, intelligence, economic, and humanitarian assistance of the West, which uses Ukraine to contain and weaken Russia. This decision has tremendous consequences for Ukraine. Zelensky stated that the war would only end with taking back all lost territory of Ukraine, which means not only territories of Donbas and parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia that were illegally annexed by Russia during the war but also Crimea that was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014 following the Western backed violent overthrow of the pro-Russian government by means of the Maidan massacre and assassination attempts against then president Viktor Yanukovich. But the costs to Ukrainians in terms of military and civilian casualties, loss of territories, and economic devastation of Ukraine as result of the Russian invasion are very high and likely to grow significantly, in particular, during the expected new Russian offensive. The outcome of this war would determine not only the future of Ukraine but also the future of Zelensky.