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Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Presidency and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War

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Victoria Vdovychenko

Shaping up social resistance: Zelenskyy's approach to rearranging Ukraine

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has become one of the symbols of Ukrainian resistance in the West. His famous tweet “I need ammunition, not a ride” as well as the live streams from the centre of Kyiv when the missile strikes were taking place in the first days of the full-scale invasion inspired many Ukrainians, and also became iconic for other leaders worldwide. He and his wife Olena were in the lens of *Vogue* photographer Annie Leibovitz, and *TIME* magazine nominated Zelenskyy as one of the 100 most influential people of 2022. His face is depicted in murals and on postage stamps. How do the Ukrainian population view their president? What does the coordination between the governmental authorities and civil society of Ukraine look like?

Criticism by civil society and trust within society

Prior to the full-scale invasion, almost three years ago when Zelenskyy was elected, Ukrainian civil society was by no

means unanimous on the choice. While Zelenskyy won the presidential election by a significant margin with more than 70% of the vote, the heated debate between his supporters and opponents continued up until the start of the full-scale invasion. Zelenskyy was able to achieve such an election result largely due to the “wider agenda” of his election programme. In fact, he did not devote many aspects of his programme to the situation in Donbas or Crimea, unlike his rival Petro Poroshenko. Therefore, it gave him the chance to “capture” a significant part of the Russian-speaking Ukrainian electorate. Yet, this is exactly what turned a part of the active pro-Ukrainian segment of society against him – people were worried that the war with Russia and the reforms necessary for rapprochement with the European Union had taken a back seat for the newly-elected authorities.

Civil society’s criticism continued into Zelenskyy’s presidency. Particular areas of concern revolved around issues related to the rule of law and the judicial branch of power, where a lack of transparency and integrity frequently led Ukrainians to protest. Moreover, challenges arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as when Zelenskyy announced the closing of Ukraine’s borders despite masses of Ukrainians trying to return home from abroad during the lockdowns in March 2020.

From 2014, Ukrainian society became more and more prepared for a tectonic shift in relations with Russia. Over the last eight years, before the full-scale invasion, there was a gradual decline in positive attitudes towards Russia, but even despite several months of escalation near the borders of Ukraine, 34% of Ukrainians at the beginning of February 2022 still had a positive attitude towards Russians. The

polls consistently demonstrated that the army, volunteers, ordinary people in the communities, as well as the church enjoyed the greatest trust within Ukrainian society. At the same time, trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine achieved its peak: 72% of Ukrainians expressed their willingness to trust the army.

Meanwhile, 27% trusted the president and 50% did not. Accordingly, the trust-distrust balance was -23%. Compared to December 2020, the indicators deteriorated. The share of those who trusted the president decreased by five points and the trust-distrust balance had decreased by 10. The remaining governmental institutions had negative trust-distrust balances. In fact, among respondents, distrust was recorded in the central government institutions (president, parliament, government) and law enforcement agencies (national police, patrol police, security ser). Another survey by the "Rating" agency in September 2021 found that 50% of respondents expressed confidence in Zelensky, higher than in February 2021 (38%) or even September 2020 (44%).

Taking into account this trust in the army and the high distrust of the governmental authorities, which increased from 2014 in particular, Ukrainians managed to elaborate their own system of self-organization and self-coordination. Moreover, starting from the autumn of 2021, the number of territorial defence training and guerrilla movements increased significantly, signalling that Ukrainians were heavily involved in preparations to be more resilient. The lack of a proactive approach from the Ukrainian authorities did not stop Ukrainians from continuing their own preparations, peaking at the beginning of 2022. However, a lack of sincere communication with society in those decisive months – even

days – prior to the full-scale invasion was still evident. One Ukrainian media outlet, *Ukrainska Pravda*, attempted to reconstruct the first days of the full-scale invasion and it found that there was some hesitation on the part of the Ukrainian leadership in preparing Ukrainian society for the invasion.

New methods of communication

It is obvious that since 24 February 2022, President Zelenskyy has completely changed his communication with Ukrainians. Starting from the first moments, Zelenskyy left no doubts: he was staying in Kyiv. These changes were also seen in his physical appearance – updating his classic suit for military fatigues. He clearly showed the whole world that he is at home, he is not afraid, and is not going to hide anywhere. Most importantly, he did not wait out the attack on the capital hiding in a bunker, but on the contrary, he recorded video messages to his citizens and together with the Armed Forces of Ukraine represented the “first front” of Ukraine, fighting both politically and militarily. As a result, 98% of Ukrainians believe in Ukraine’s victory in the war with Russia and 91% approve of the activities of their president.

Since the very beginning of the hostilities and the introduction of martial law, communication between the Ukrainian authorities and society has intensified. The daily video addresses of the president to the Ukrainian people have become a kind of ritual – for Zelenskyy himself, but also for millions of Ukrainians who tune in to hear his voice. Undoubtedly, the public surveys and communication launched this year via the *Diia* e-governance application and platform are another positive practice which will contribute to the es-

establishment of an operational dialogue between the people and the authorities. The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine has conducted online testing among Ukrainian entrepreneurs, which should help the authorities build a strategy for economic recovery. This includes assistance for the development of Ukrainian business and exports, private participation in the development of analytics, the creation of tools for economic recovery, and necessary solutions for local communities and the financial and credit sector.

Above all, Zelenskyy demonstrated a new level of state communication never before seen in Ukraine. It was thanks to his determination and confidence, the persistent defence of the country, and support for citizens in this time of crisis that the president's rating reached an unprecedented 91%. But, surprisingly, Zelenskyy's high rating could be seen among citizens in other countries as well. In particular, in the US it is 72%. American comedian Bill Maher even joked that finally in the US there is a president whom everyone loves and who has an extremely high rating, and this is the president of Ukraine. Moreover, due to the strong position of Zelenskyy, the military achievements, and national resilience, the West also had to shift its mindset from "generally neutral" to "complete admiration". At the same time, the grain and energy crises lead to a certain fatigue of Ukraine in some European societies such as Hungary, Austria, or even Slovakia.

Society's response

It's worth mentioning that Ukrainians do not have such "blind admiration" for Zelenskyy as was seen in the EU or the US. One of the causes is the ability of Ukrainians to self-or-

ganize, which is perfectly manifested in crisis conditions and has helped even now. The other side of the coin is what the Ukrainians jokingly call “the search for treason”. This is a tendency to constantly expect the worst, which creates a certain vigilance. If we talk purely about the topic of war, then for Ukrainians, it is not Zelenskyy who is in first place, but Valerii Zaluzhnyy, the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Not so much a public figure, he became a real hero after launching a successful counter-offensive in the east and south of Ukraine.

Moreover, from the first days of the full-scale invasion, volunteers became the second front of the fight against the Russian troops, supporting the humanitarian needs of the civilian population and becoming soldiers in territorial defence units and in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. As in 2014, society’s response to the challenge of external aggression turned out to be swift and effective. Even before the start of the full-scale invasion, as tensions around Ukraine increased in 2021, Ukrainians, on their own initiative, actively participated in preparations to repel aggression. The contribution of patriotic activists to the formation of an effective system of territorial defence turned out to be enormous, if not decisive. Of particular note is the fact that the purchase of expensive equipment for territorial defence units was often carried out at the expense of the fighters themselves or thanks to volunteer networks.

Another lesson from 2014 was that helping each other using the Ukrainian language turned out to be significant in the fate of some villages and towns. Also, evacuations, temporary lodgings, as well as humanitarian support for internally displaced persons (IDPs), were in effect from the

first days of the invasion. Most of the IDPs were able to adapt to the situation due to the already well-developed grassroots self-organization movements among Ukrainians, together with almost unprecedented assistance from the democratic world.

Finally, a surge of Ukrainian patriotism and resistance in the temporarily occupied territories became a phenomenon that still needs a comprehensive understanding and scientific study. Civic activism was manifested in numerous peaceful protests against the Russian occupation in places such as Kherson, Enerhodar, Berdyansk, and Melitopol. In some places, this included the creation of a local guerrilla movement.

Public organizations and charitable foundations became volunteer headquarters and hubs for collecting resources necessary for the conditions of the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people against the Russian occupiers. This is evidence of the existence of a strong and united civil society in the country, which was finally formed and united in the face of a terrible threat. What is more, civil society activists openly declare that the inclusion and partnership of civil society is needed not only from the Ukrainian authorities, but from the EU as well. And that is why it is very important to use consultation tools and formats in which these consultations are carried out continuously.

Reforms equally important

For the most part, the EU perceives the civil society of Ukraine as its partner, an auditor of Ukrainian governmental actions. The EU has already provided around 60 million euros in new funds for civil society activities in war-affected

communities, together with 335 million euros for humanitarian aid. Even during the war, thanks in part to pressure from civil society, the Ukrainian authorities are attempting to continue the reform process, outlining reform agenda priorities and presenting them both in Lugano (July) and Berlin (October). In particular, the international community was eager to see concrete reform steps in the sectors of the judiciary, economy, energy, and public administration.

The process of relaunching the judiciary reform began even before the full-scale invasion, since judicial reform is one of the main EU priorities for Ukraine's integration process. This included certain activities such as resuming the functions of the High Council of Justice and the High Qualification Commission of Judges of Ukraine, as well as making it easier for people to gain access to justice and participate in the administration of justice. On top of this, the authorities have expressed that digitalization of the judiciary will be a priority area for overcoming the aftermath of the war.

Gaining the status of an EU membership candidate in June 2022 also obliges Ukraine to continue its reform process, including of the judiciary. The European Council's specific requirements in this regard are straightforward – Ukraine must implement reform of the Constitutional Court in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission. At the heart of this reform should be a transparent competition for the Constitutional Court, which will include the vetting of candidates for integrity. Ukraine also needs to complete a cleansing of the High Council of Justice with the participation of the Ethics Council and make a transparent selection to the High Qualifications Commission. The European Commission notes that if Ukraine's

judicial reform is successful, it will not only build an independent and accountable justice system, but also reduce the influence of stakeholders who have previously used the justice system to undermine the rule of law in Ukraine.

Another pivotal challenge for Ukraine remains the fight against corruption, as was noted by the EU and international partners during discussions in Lugano. At the same time, it is worth mentioning some of the achievements in this area, including the Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2025 and the establishment of anti-corruption institutions such as the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, as well as the High Anti-Corruption Court.

In this way, Ukraine continues to emphasize that it is willing to further decrease corruption in areas that Ukrainians consider to be the most corrupt: customs and taxation, courts and law enforcement agencies, state regulation of the economy, construction and land policies, the defence sector, health care, and social protection. Ultimately, Ukrainian resilience is being challenged by all of the above risks and threats, made worse by both Ukrainian and international structural shortcomings.

Conclusions

Objectively, the Russian Federation is trying to take advantage of the situation in order to restore its influence in Ukraine by brutally invading part of Ukrainian territory, continuing the hybrid war, and systematically using political, economic, informational, psychological, cyber, and military means. Additionally, Ukraine is affected by a wide number

of challenges arising from the effects of climate change and increasing man-made pressures on the environment, pandemics, growing inequality, rapid technological changes, terrorism, international crime, and more.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been met with fierce resistance from Ukraine's military, its government, as well as ordinary people, proving that it has its own resilient approach, a subject to be further analysed and assessed. On the one hand, Ukraine continues to be a laboratory for innovative ideas and practices within the domain of resilience, which gives substance to an all-societal approach towards security and defence. On the other hand, many new practices are available to be leveraged and new analytical capabilities offer opportunities to rethink old solutions that may have run their course.

It is certainly clear for Ukrainians that not all problems can be solved by a competent information policy alone or through the strategic communication of the president. Effective and fair economic revival will be impossible without a systematic transformation of the entire social environment – from political power to labour relations. Ukrainians understand that the improvement of their well-being will not come immediately and not to everyone at the same time. However, the most important thing now is the feeling of a change in the very atmosphere of life, and confidence that Ukraine can overcome the old defects of its national statehood which have been eating away at it from the inside for years and decades. This, in turn, will motivate the people of Ukraine to even greater achievements.



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