

FROM SUITS TO OLIVE-GREEN:

**Zelenskyy's
populism prior
to and after
Russia's invasion
of Ukraine**

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Erasmus Mundus in Global Studies
Ghent University, Leipzig University

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This essay embarks on a scholarly exploration of the nuanced realm of populist rhetoric, focusing on the case of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy within the intricate landscape of Ukraine's political dynamics. The analysis encompasses the dynamic evolution of populist discourse in response to pivotal events, particularly the heightened Russo-Ukrainian border tensions and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion. Through the examination of the period spanning from mid-November 2021 to 31 December 2022, this study elucidates the adaptation of Zelenskyy's populist strategies, illuminating the interplay of anti-polarization and inclusionary populism in the context of a significant national challenge. While Zelenskyy's approach defies traditional categorizations, his ability to tap into the collective identity of the Ukrainian people and leverage performative actions shines through. The essay assesses his populist discourse, highlighting its strengths and complexities, ultimately contributing to a more profound understanding of his populist leadership style in the face of adversity.

Current state of research on Zelensky from perspective

Initial observations of literature pertaining to the association between populism and Zelensky may create the impression of a substantial body of research examining Zelensky's populist politics. A search query "populism AND Zelensky" in Google Scholar returns 1,120 results. However, it is imperative to consider that these findings encompass academic articles that merely mention Zelensky and populism together in the texts, without necessarily constituting the central focus or objective of the analysis. Additionally, when compared with the outcomes of similar "populism AND..." search queries in Google Scholar concerning other politicians, the quantity of publications concerning Zelensky then appears relatively insignificant.

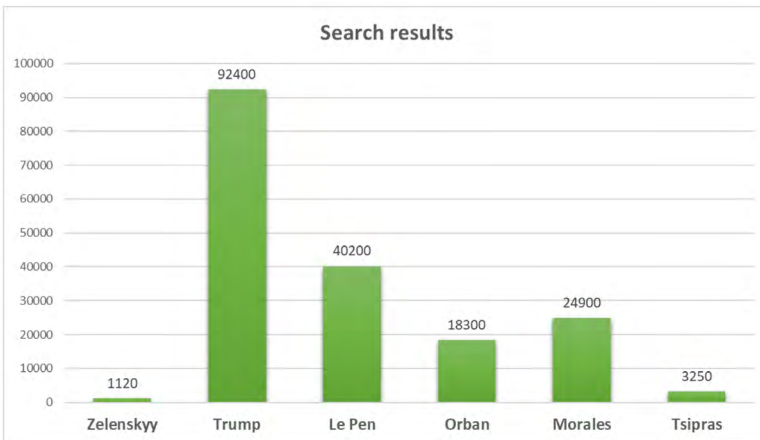


Figure 1. Google Scholar search results on notable populist leaders¹

¹ Author's work conducted in June 2023. Search results for search queries "populism AND Zelensky", "populism AND Trump", "populism AND Le Pen", "populism AND Orban", "populism AND Morales", "populism AND Tsipras" on Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>).

A comprehensive examination of specialized academic databases, namely ProQuest, Web of Science, Scopus, and Lens Scholarly, using the search query “populism AND Zelensky*”, sheds light on the limited scholarly interest in exploring the intersection of Zelensky’s political persona and populism studies. The findings reveal a scarcity of academic research that specifically delves into the nuances of Zelensky’s politics from a populist studies perspective.

Among these databases, ProQuest stands out, yielding close to a thousand sources. However, it is important to note that a significant proportion of these sources consist of news articles and non-academic publications, which may offer insights from a journalistic perspective rather than in-depth scholarly analysis. While these sources can provide valuable contextual information, they may lack the rigorous theoretical frameworks and methodologies associated with academic research.

DATABASE	SEARCH RESULTS
ProQuest	909
Web of Science	4
Scopus	5
Lens Scholarly	12

Table 1. Academic database search results on Zelensky within populist studies

The limited presence of academic studies on the topic suggests that Zelensky’s political persona within the realm of populism studies remains relatively unexplored. This gap presents an opportunity for future research to delve into the specificities of Zelensky’s political discourse, strategies, and policies within the broader context of populist phenomena.

Moreover, the investigation into the evolving nature of populism (for example, how it differs before and after the elections) is also notably restricted within academia and policy think-tanks. The changing nature of populist discourse is briefly mentioned in works on Greece’s Syriza and Bolivian leader Evo Morales within this context, but it is important to note that such mentions did not constitute the primary focus of the respective research endeavours.

QUERY	SEARCH RESULTS
allintitle: populism AND change -climate	88
populism AND "change after its rise to power"	4

Table 2. Google Scholar search results on the changing nature of populism²

Ukraine, in its particular context, offers a compelling and distinctive case for investigating the temporal dynamics and transformation of populism. This is primarily due to the ongoing armed conflict that has engulfed the country since 2013, as well as the challenging circumstances faced by President Zelenskyy, who assumed office before the full-scale Russian invasion. Undoubtedly, the protracted Russo-Ukrainian war has had a profound impact on the political landscape and might have influenced the way populism manifests itself within the country. The experience of external aggression has likely shaped the populist rhetoric and policies adopted by Zelenskyy's administration. It is important to understand how populism changes and adapts in the face of such challenges since doing so can shed light on how resilient the populist discourse can be.

Moreover, this case study opens up space for investigating how populism and conflict might be interrelated. It invites inquiry into whether the demands and difficulties of war and national security concerns have exacerbated or transformed populist tendencies in Ukraine, as well as how populist language and policies have influenced general public perceptions of and responses to the war.

² Author's work conducted in June 2023. Search results for the specified search queries on Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>).

Populism in Ukraine and Zelensky in context

It is worth asking whether Zelensky can be categorized as populist at all. Within the post-Soviet context, the term populism is frequently employed to discredit a political movement with which one holds divergent views.³ When considering the academic definition of populism, it becomes apparent that there are relatively few parties or leaders that truly align with this characterization. Moreover, among the post-Soviet leaders and parties that can be classified as populist, the majority fall to the far-left or far-right of the ideological spectrum, similar to their counterparts in Eastern and Western Europe.⁴ Therefore, one could argue that Zelensky would stand out as a distinctive case in terms of ideological alignment among post-Soviet populists.

The identification of a political leader as populist hinges on a set of defining characteristics. Populism is often described as a “thin” ideology that can intersect with various conventional ideologies while embodying a shared set of features.⁵ Mudde presents the first common feature, which is anti-elite sentiment.⁶ However, populism indices highlight several other distinguishing elements, including the homogeneity of its audience, popular sovereignty, people-centric orientation, and a Manichean worldview.⁷ In the subsequent section, the essay focuses on current literature that evaluates the extent to

³ Kuzio, 'Populism in Ukraine in a Comparative European Context'.

⁴ March, 'Populism in the Post-Soviet States'.

⁵ Stanley, 'The Thin Ideology of Populism'.

⁶ Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist'.

⁷ Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, 'How Populist Are the People?'; Schulz et al., 'Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions'.

which Zelenskyy incorporates some of these five characteristic features in his politics.

A decade ago, Kuzio drew attention to the tendency within Western academia to focus exclusively on Western European countries and those Central and European countries that were formerly part of the Soviet bloc.⁸ However, the author noted that even back then, Ukraine possessed a fractured political system characterized by weak party identification. This particular context provided an ideal environment for the proliferation of populism. Moreover, the limited understanding and appreciation of the nuanced and contested nature of populism among the public allowed politicians to exploit this knowledge gap, using populism as a means to criticize their opponents. In a subsequent work, Kuzio further underscored the significance of Ukraine in the comparative study of populism. He highlighted four distinct differences and six notable similarities between Western European and Ukrainian manifestations of populism prior to Zelenskyy's election as president. While Western European populists often focus on immigration, nationalist ideologies, anti-Islamic sentiment, and EU opposition, Ukrainian populists do not prioritize these issues. Similarities between Western European and Ukrainian populism include their shared criticism of globalization, use of radical rhetoric against corrupt elites, anti-democratic tendencies, weak support for reforms, untruthful rhetoric, and the ability to capitalize on crises for political gain.⁹ These findings reinforce the imperative to include Ukraine in the realm of comparative populism research.

The fractured political landscape, weak party identification, and the exploitation of populist rhetoric by politicians all contribute to the unique dynamics of populism in Ukraine. Integrating Ukraine into comparative studies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of populism as a multifaceted and evolving political phenomenon, enriching the broader academic discourse on populism beyond the confines of Western and Central Europe.

Within academia, analysis of Zelenskyy's rhetoric is often intertwined with examination of the discourse employed by his political party, Sluha Narodu,

⁸ Kuzio, 'Populism in Ukraine in a Comparative European Context'.

⁹ Kuzio, 'Ukrainian and European Populism'.

or Servant of the People (SN). Ash and Shapovalov contend that the brand of populism embodied by the president and his party deviates significantly from the populist narratives associated with the far right, the far left, and the political centre.¹⁰ They propose a distinct form of “anti-polarization” populism that hinges on opposition to the pre-existing polarization within the establishment. This type of populism strategically uses the weak party identification among the electorate, presenting an alternative approach to political engagement.

Scholars have tried to position Zelenskyy and SN within the broader pan-European political landscape. In this regard, Yanchenko and Zulianello challenge the notion that the electoral success of the current Ukrainian president is an isolated phenomenon specific to Ukraine.¹¹ Instead, they argue that it represents a continuation of the prevalent trend of “valence populism” observed in Central and Eastern Europe. According to their analysis, Zelenskyy’s SN adheres to the pattern of valence populism, which is characterized by its emphasis on non-positional issues and its deliberately ambiguous stance on socio-economic matters. By adopting these core features of valence populism, Zelenskyy and his party aim to broaden their support base and appeal to a wider range of voters. The concept of valence populism underscores the significance of non-ideological or non-partisan topics that resonate with the public, such as anti-corruption measures, transparency, and political reform. By prioritizing these issues over specific policy positions, valence populists seek to cultivate an image of being responsive to popular concerns and detached from established political elites.

In light of Zelenskyy’s election, Demchuk delves into the phenomenon of traditional politicians being replaced by “new faces” who lack political experience but possess extensive backgrounds in show business. The author introduces the concept of “comicrocracy” to explain this transition and examines the role of comic culture in global politics, particularly its impact on the dynamic between the media and the population.¹² This unique perspective sheds light on the distinct factors at play in the rise of unconventional political figures.

¹⁰ Ash and Shapovalov, ‘Populism for the Ambivalent’.

¹¹ Yanchenko and Zulianello, “‘Not Fighting Corruption, but Defeating It’”.

¹² Demchuk, “‘Comicrocracy’ as a Cultural and Political Reality’.

Additionally, some scholars posit that the political landscape in Ukraine during 2019-20 provided an environment conducive to the emergence of what is described as “technocratic” and “inclusionary” populism, which Zelenskyy and his party presented to the Ukrainian electorate. Viedrov presents empirical evidence that challenges the traditional dichotomy between depoliticized technocratic governance and repoliticizing populism, suggesting that the dynamics have shifted.¹³ The author demonstrates that Zelenskyy’s political strategy predominantly revolved around technocratic populism both before and after assuming office, with a primary focus on “ending the normalized emergency.” However, as hinted by the author, the full-scale Russian invasion may have altered the trajectory of Zelenskyy’s approach. The unprecedented crisis and threat posed by the invasion likely necessitated a re-evaluation of narrative previously employed strategies. The evolving dynamics of Zelenskyy’s populism in response to the Russian invasion might demonstrate the adaptable nature of populist strategies in the face of extraordinary circumstances.

The case of Zelenskyy is also discussed in relation to the influence of digital media on democracy. This recognition highlights the interconnectedness between Zelenskyy’s rise to power and the role played by digital platforms in shaping political narratives and mobilizing support. Lorenz-Spreen et al. conducted a study investigating the relationship between digital media consumption, its dual use, and the erosion of democracy on the one hand, and the rise of populism and polarization on the other.¹⁴ Following the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian case emerges as a unique example of leveraging social media to enhance morale and public engagement, in stark contrast to the information crackdown observed in Russia. Kuttig argues that when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Zelenskyy adeptly used his background in media and acting to engage in what can be described as wartime populism. He transformed his political style, adopting a more dramatic and passionate approach, appearing in videos from bunker-like settings and using slogans associated with Ukraine’s historical struggles for independence.¹⁵

¹³ Viedrov, ‘Back-to-Normality Outsiders’.

¹⁴ Lorenz-Spreen et al., ‘A Systematic Review of Worldwide Causal and Correlational Evidence on Digital Media and Democracy’.

¹⁵ Kuttig, ‘War(Time) Populism’.

In the field of mass communication, Yanchenko examines how Zelenskyy and his party employed hyperreal politics during the election campaign.¹⁶ This involved blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, employing ambiguous statements, and relying heavily on populist rhetoric. Through interviews with Zelenskyy voters, the author finds that many individuals struggle to make clear distinctions between Zelenskyy the president, Zelenskyy the actor, and the fictional character he portrayed before entering politics.

Coomans and Boulogne also explored the dynamics surrounding Zelenskyy's case along these lines.¹⁷ Their analysis ventures into the realm of hypermediatization, a phenomenon where popular culture representations precede and shape perceptions of the real. This blurring of boundaries between the political and the popular, as well as between reality and fiction, has significant implications. Prior to his election, Zelenskyy was often evaluated based on the role he played in a television series and was expected to live up to the expectations set by that fictional portrayal. However, the landscape shifted following the full-scale invasion, and Zelenskyy's significance as president hinged on his response to the aggression. As the context shifted from the hypermediatization of his fictional persona to the demands of responding to a full-scale invasion, Zelenskyy's role and significance as president undergo a profound re-evaluation.

¹⁶ Yanchenko, 'Making Sense of Populist Hyperreality in the Post-Truth Age'.

¹⁷ Coomans and Boulogne, 'Becoming the President of Ukraine'.

Pre- and post-invasion analysis

Given the restricted scope of this essay, it is beyond its purview to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Zelenskyy's evolution as a populist leader from his pre-election period up until June 2023. Instead, this essay will build upon the existing research findings that establish Zelenskyy as a populist leader, while acknowledging the presence of distinct populist features unique to him, his party, or the region. Consequently, the analysis will be limited to scrutinizing Zelenskyy's speeches from mid-November 2021 to 31 December 2022, a crucial period characterized by heightened tensions at the Russo-Ukrainian border. Therefore, this analysis will encompass the months immediately preceding the full-scale Russian invasion and the 311 days that followed. This timeline aims to trace the potential evolution of Zelenskyy's populist rhetoric in response to a significant national challenge. The sources examined in this essay will primarily include speeches accessible on the official website of the Office of the President, accompanied by videos published on Zelenskyy's official social media accounts and interviews conducted with foreign media outlets. These sources will provide valuable insights into Zelenskyy's rhetoric and actions during this critical period. To a certain extent this essay will be guided by Hawkins's populist speech rubric proposed in 2009 to assess the populist characteristics of Zelenskyy's rhetoric and actions. While the essay will not replicate the exact speech assessment and scoring, the rubric will serve as a guide for tracing populist rhetoric pre- and post-invasion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Hawkins, 'Is Chávez Populist?'

On 13 November 2021, in the midst of Russian military activities near the Ukraine border, Zelenskyy made a significant impact by releasing a video statement. He emphasized, “I hope the whole world can now clearly see who really wants peace and who is concentrating nearly 100,000 soldiers at our border,” with the intention of raising awareness among the international public.¹⁹ As reports emerged of Russia’s troop buildup near Ukraine’s territory, Ukrainian government officials, including the president, called on the international community to impose economic sanctions on Russia as a preventive measure even before any military action took place. However, these appeals were met with limited enthusiasm.

Prior to the invasion, Zelenskyy addressed his speeches not only to foreign audiences but also to the Ukrainian people. On 31 December 2021, in his New Year’s Eve address, Zelenskyy took a strikingly different approach compared to his Ukrainian predecessors and counterparts in other former Soviet countries. He delivered his speech surrounded by a diverse group of individuals who were described by the Office of the President as playing vital roles in Ukraine, including military personnel, doctors, teachers, builders, and students. In his address, Zelenskyy referred to them as “[o]ur people. Ordinary citizens. Although not [ordinary]. Our extraordinary people and citizens of Ukraine.”²⁰ This unique performative display of inclusiveness and unity was aimed at emphasizing the importance of the collective. It was a powerful statement, particularly given the escalating tensions and the speculation in Western media about the potential date of a Russian attack on Ukraine. Zelenskyy aimed to foster a sense of national solidarity and defiance in the face of an uncertain future. This approach not only set him apart from his predecessors but also aligned with his populist rhetoric, which places emphasis on the importance of the people and their collective power.

On 14 February 2022, Zelenskyy delivered a speech that employed language designed to heighten society’s sense of alertness and foster unity. Among his various statements, one particular aspect stands out as both anti-elitist

¹⁹ Reuters, ‘Ukraine Says Russia Has Nearly 100,000 Troops near Its Border’.

²⁰ ‘Do uchasti u novorichnomu pryvitanni Prezydenta bulo zaprosheho ukraintsiv, diialnist yakykh ye nadzvychno vazhlyvoiu dlia Ukrainy’.

and anti-polarizing. The president said, “And now I want to address not those who stayed with Ukraine and in Ukraine, but those who left it at the most crucial moment. Your strength is not in your money and airplanes, but in the civic position you can take. Return to your people and country, thanks to which you have gained your factories and fortunes. Today, everyone is passing a real test to become a citizen of Ukraine. Pass it with dignity.”²¹ This statement aligns with Zelenskyy’s rhetoric both before and after the election, in which he consistently criticized the Ukrainian political elite and oligarchs. However, on this occasion, he emphasized unity with the people, a sentiment echoed during his inauguration. By calling on those who had left the country to reconnect with their roots and contribute to the nation’s well-being, Zelenskyy aimed to transcend divisions and unite all citizens in the face of the ongoing crisis.

Moreover, during this speech, Zelenskyy made a significant announcement regarding 16 February, the day that had been widely speculated in the global media as the potential date for a Russian attack on Ukraine. In a symbolic gesture, Zelenskyy declared 16 February Unity Day throughout the nation. It is worth noting that this move can be seen as a populist performance, considering that Ukraine had already established a Unity Day, 22 January, which commemorates the unification treaty between the Ukrainian People’s Republic and the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic. While the traditional Unity Day has been celebrated in Ukraine for decades, Zelenskyy’s decision to proclaim an additional Unity Day for 16 February reflects his populist approach to governance. By using existing symbols and events and imbuing them with new meaning, Zelenskyy sought to tap into the collective identity of the Ukrainian people and capitalize on the sense of unity that these occasions evoke. This populist performance serves as a testament to Zelenskyy’s ability to connect with the public and leverage existing traditions to reinforce his message of national cohesion.

One particularly noteworthy and significant speech to analyse in the context of the pre-invasion period is Zelenskyy’s address at the Munich Security

²¹ ‘Zvernennia Prezydenta Ukrainy shchodo yednosti ukrainskoho suspilstva’.

Conference.²² Hawkins's rubric highlights the first element of a populist speech, which involves presenting a Manichean view of the world by distinguishing between 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'evil'. Interestingly, Zelenskyy's Munich Security Conference speech begins with a reference to his visiting the front in the Donbass region. He vividly described a kindergarten and a shell that had struck it, as well as a school and a shell that landed in its yard. While this may not precisely align with the requirement of identifying the good represented by the majority and the evil embodied by a minority, it does reflect an attempt to demarcate the notions of good and bad in order to evoke awareness and empathy among the audience.

By emphasizing the stark realities of the conflict-ridden region and illustrating the impact on innocent civilians, Zelenskyy aims to establish a moral distinction between the suffering endured by the Ukrainian people and the aggressors responsible for these atrocities. Although it may not strictly adhere to the traditional Manichean framework, this approach resonates with the broader objective of populist rhetoric by creating a clear divide between the victims (the 'good') and those perpetrating violence (the 'bad'). This rhetoric not only seeks to mobilize domestic support but also to rally the international community to Ukraine's cause, ultimately bolstering the nation's position on the global stage.

In the president's speech, which contained various intriguing statements drawing parallels with historical events such as the Second World War, the dysfunctional international system, and the Budapest memorandum, one particular remark near the end stands out for its departure from Zelenskyy's usual anti-polarizing rhetoric. In expressing gratitude to the countries that extend support to Ukraine in whatever capacity they can, he made a striking statement: "I'm not mentioning you by name – I don't want other countries to be ashamed. But it's their business, it's their karma. And it is on their conscience. However, I don't know how they will be able to explain their actions to the two soldiers killed and three wounded in Ukraine today." By refraining from directly naming the countries, the president implies that certain nations have neglected their responsibility or failed to take necessary

²² 'Vystup Prezydenta Ukrainy na 58-y Miunkhenskii konferentsii z pytan bezpeky'.

action. The choice of words, including “business” and “karma,” suggests a moral judgment, indicating that the burden of conscience rests on these countries for their inaction. This shift in rhetoric showcases the complexities of Zelenskyy’s populist approach. While he generally seeks to unite and to avoid polarization, the gravity of this particular situation led to a more confrontational tone.

On 24 February 2022, Zelenskyy’s team released a video in which he directed his appeal to Russian citizens. As in many other instances, the president aimed to provoke an emotional response. Referring to potential victims of the Kremlin’s decision to attack a neighbouring country, he said, “Who will suffer the most from this? The people. Who doesn’t want it the most? The people. Who can prevent this from happening? The people.”²³ Zelenskyy then proceeded to identify various groups of the Russian population, encompassing public figures, journalists, musicians, actors, athletes, scientists, doctors, bloggers, stand-up comedians, TikTokers, and many others. By deliberately highlighting this diverse range of Russians, the president sought to incentivize them to take action against their government’s brutal decision. His intention was to appeal to their sense of responsibility and encourage them to stand up against the potential consequences of an attack on Ukraine. By highlighting the shared humanity and potential loss that could be experienced by both Ukrainians and Russians, Zelenskyy attempted to bridge the divide and inspire unity in opposing the path chosen by the Russian government.

Despite Zelenskyy’s appeals, the full-scale invasion was not prevented. Since the early morning of 25 February 2022, Zelenskyy has been providing regular updates to the public through his social media accounts. These reports and addresses aim to keep the people informed about the situation on the front-line, the government’s and military command’s decisions, as well as actions taken on the international stage. Amidst speculations that he had fled the country and the government had relocated from Kyiv to western Ukraine, Zelenskyy released a video on 25 February 2022, in which he stood in front of the building containing Office of the President. He was surrounded by key figures, including the leader of SN’s parliamentary bloc, the head and

²³ ‘Polnyj Tekst Vıgrobraschemija Prezidenta Ukrainy Vladimira Zelenskogo K Rossijanam’.

the deputy head of the Office of the President, and the prime minister. In a resolute tone, Zelenskyy stated, “We are all here. Our military are here, our citizens are here. We are all here defending our independence, our state, and it will always be so further.”²⁴

This performative action not only dispelled the speculations surrounding Zelenskyy’s whereabouts but also reinforced the president’s anti-polarizing rhetoric. By emphasizing the collective presence of the current political elite, the army, and ordinary citizens, Zelenskyy sought to underscore their shared responsibility. This statement reiterated his populist approach, highlighting unity and inclusion. The symbolic act of standing together in front of the Office of the President aimed to reassure the public that their leadership and institutions were united in the face of the invasion. By projecting a sense of togetherness, Zelenskyy aimed to instil confidence and a shared sense of purpose among the Ukrainian population.

Zelenskyy is known for openly discussing sensitive international political topics in his speeches, addressing both Ukrainian and foreign audiences. One example is his stance on Ukraine’s prospective membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In a particular address, while recounting his conversations with foreign leaders, he stated, “I ask them: Are you with us? They answer that they are. But they are not ready to take us into the Alliance. Today, I asked twenty-seven European leaders whether Ukraine should be in NATO. I asked them directly. Everyone is afraid. They don’t answer. But we are not afraid of anything. We are not afraid to defend our country.”²⁵

This rhetoric, while presenting a somewhat oversimplified view of the complex process and criteria for NATO membership, simultaneously places pressure on NATO leaders. Zelenskyy’s words create a Manichean dichotomy of good and bad, urging these leaders to make a definitive choice. By framing the issue in such terms, he holds them accountable for their perceived inaction and highlights the expectation of the Ukrainian people. By openly discussing Ukraine’s NATO aspirations and challenging European leaders, Zelenskyy

²⁴ *Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy Shares a Message from Kyiv | USA TODAY.*

²⁵ ‘Zvernennia Prezydenta do ukraintsiw naprykintsi pershoho dnia atak Rosii’.

seeks to advance the national agenda and rally support for Ukraine's inclusion in the alliance. He employs populist rhetoric to emphasize the determination and fearlessness of the Ukrainian people in defending their country. His rhetoric serves the purpose of highlighting Ukraine's commitment and pressing for a clear response from NATO leaders, pushing them to consider the potential consequences of their actions or inaction.

Hawkins's speech rubric highlights that populist leaders not only employ Manichean terms but also ascribe cosmic significance to the moral issues they discuss. According to the author, it is typical for populist leaders to claim that these issues will impact all people universally, transcending space and time. Zelenskyy, in line with this pattern, also adopts such rhetoric. For instance, on 8 March 2022, during one of his regular daily addresses, while expressing frustration over the lack of concrete military support from partner countries, Zelenskyy stated, "[Humanity] must win in the leading capitals [of our partner countries]. It must overcome fear. It must see through any benefits [of doing nothing]. And then we will see that the Ukrainian sky is safe. Ukrainian cities will be unblocked. We can do this together as people with the world. And if the world stands aside, it will lose itself. Forever. Because there are unconditional values. They are the same for everyone."²⁶ While it is true that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a profound impact on millions of people, particularly in developing countries and those living in poverty, it is important to acknowledge that the world has witnessed numerous wars and ongoing human suffering since the Second World War. The notion that the world has lost itself or that there are universally accepted unconditional values is a highly contested issue, particularly in regions such as Asia.

While Zelenskyy's rhetoric aims to emphasize the urgency and moral importance of the situation, it is essential to critically evaluate the claim that universal values are shared by all and that the world's fate is at stake. Different cultures, societies, and regions often have diverse perspectives on what constitutes universal values, and the concept itself is subject to ongoing debate and interpretation. Nevertheless, Zelenskyy's use of cosmic rhetoric

²⁶ 'U providnykh stolytsiakh liudianist povynna peremohty strakh ta vyhody, i todi ukrainske nebo bude bezpechne, a mista – rozblokovani – zvernennia Prezydenta Volodymyra Zelenskoho'.

serves to galvanize support and highlight the significance of the conflict in Ukraine on a global scale.

Zelenskyy's rhetoric, while primarily characterized by anti-polarization, occasionally deviates from this approach, as he boldly confronts "the different". During his address to the European Council on 25 March 2022, Zelenskyy directed his remarks to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, challenging him directly. He stated bluntly, "Hungary... I want to stop here and be honest... I have been to Budapest...I was on your waterfront. I saw this memorial... Shoes on the Danube River. About the massacres. I was with my family. Listen, Viktor, do you know what's happening in Mariupol? Please, if you can, go down to your riverbank. Look at those shoes. And you will see how massacres can be repeated in the modern world. And Russia is doing it today. The same shoes. In Mariupol, there are the same people. Do you hesitate to impose sanctions or not? Do you hesitate to let weapons through or not? Do you hesitate to trade with Russia or not? There is no time to hesitate. It is time to decide."²⁷

While it is not uncommon for populist leaders to confront one another, Zelenskyy's approach maintains its distinctiveness. This direct call-out to Prime Minister Orban exemplifies Zelenskyy's unique populist style, which arguably distinguishes him from both the left and right populist leaders in Europe. By addressing Orban in such a manner and emphasizing the moral significance of the issue at hand, Zelenskyy's remarks align with Hawkins's speech rubric. By evoking the shoes on the Danube River memorial, Zelenskyy underscores the potential for atrocities to be repeated in the present day and underscores Russia's actions. Through his direct address to Orban and his emphasis on moral urgency, Zelenskyy underscores the need for decisive action. He challenges the Hungarian prime minister's hesitations regarding sanctions, supplying weapons, and trade with Russia, urging him to make a clear and resolute choice. This rhetoric aligns with Zelenskyy's populist style, as he leverages emotional appeals and historical parallels to underscore the gravity of the situation.

²⁷ 'Promova Prezydenta Ukrainy Volodymyra Zelenskoho na zasidanni Yevropeiskoi rady'.

Zelenskyy's approach to populism seems to have defied conventional expectations, particularly in the spring of 2022. During this time, he expanded the audience of his anti-polarizing populism, beyond Ukrainian citizens with diverse political views, to the members of Parliament who continue to be divided ideologically on various issues. In a speech to Parliament, Zelenskyy called for unity and emphasized the significance of collaboration. He stated, "Please agree: when there is such unity in this room, it is priceless...You are the people's deputies of Ukraine. The keywords are 'people' and 'Ukraine'. I think we will forget the trivialities and politicking until peace, although it is better to forget it forever...Today we have one party, and this party is Ukraine."²⁸ This departure from divisive rhetoric challenges the traditional understanding of populism. Instead of fostering division and emphasizing the existence of an evil elite, Zelenskyy sought to unite ideological rivals under a shared vision for Ukraine. He urged the members of Parliament to transcend "trivialities and politicking", and invoked the analogy of the legislative field as a front line. This unifying rhetoric aimed to create a sense of collective responsibility.

While populism is often characterized by a Manichean world-view and antagonistic language, Zelenskyy's approach defies these expectations. Normally, populist leaders would be defined by their divisive rhetoric. However, one could wonder whether variations could be possible. For instance, when one pulls even ideological rivals, or even 'the old evil elite', under the umbrella of unity with 'the majority' or 'the people', could that be considered another trait of populism, even if it is in the face of grave circumstances, such as a foreign invasion?

Hawkins also traced one of the traits of populism that singles out the evil minority which recently held power and manipulated the system to serve their own interests, disregarding the welfare of the majority. Consequently, systemic change is depicted as necessary, often using terms like "revolution" or "liberation" to free the people from their alleged bondage, even if such change technically occurs through elections. While Zelenskyy does not fit the traditional mould of populism in post-invasion Ukraine, his statements regarding the international system align with Hawkins's observations. During

²⁸ 'Vystup Prezydenta Ukrainy Volodymyra Zelenskoho u Verkhovnij Radij'.

his interactions with world leaders, Zelenskyy has expressed a belief that the existing international order has failed to meet its intended objectives. Rather than calling for revolution or liberation, which are more applicable to domestic contexts, Zelenskyy advocates for substantial reforms within the international system. In his speeches, Zelenskyy refrains from directly pinpointing an evil minority responsible for the dysfunction. However, he places blame on Russia, particularly as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Zelenskyy suggests that Russia capitalizes on the weaknesses of the international system, manipulating principles and defying international law to serve its own interests.²⁹ By highlighting Russia's actions, Zelenskyy implies the existence of an oppressive force within the international system, without explicitly naming it as the evil minority. While not conforming entirely to Hawkins's rubric, Zelenskyy's criticisms align with the spirit of populism in challenging established power structures and advocating for change to benefit the common good.

Zelenskyy's annual addresses to Parliament "On the internal and external state of Ukraine" consistently offers valuable material for the study of populism. His speech on 28 December 2022 is no exception and provides insightful analysis from a populist perspective. In his address, Zelenskyy explicitly called out a segment of the Ukrainian elite that either maintained connections with Russia, fled the country following the invasion, or displayed a disregard for the nation's struggles by indulging in luxurious vacations. "There is no gold in the world for crosses [pendants] or anything else that can cover the moral rust of ties to a terrorist state," he said. "And I'm sorry, if someone from the political class of Ukraine thinks that when they ski down the mountain, they motivate the soldiers to climb out of the trenches and go on the offensive – it is a sign of madness, and there will be no place for such people in politics. I ask everyone to leave their personal ambitions behind and work to protect our common home."³⁰ This speech serves as a

²⁹ 'Vystup Prezydenta Volodymyra Zelenskoho na zasidanni Rady Bezpeky OON, sklykanomu za initsiatyvoiu Ukrainy'; 'Nam potribna vasha pidtrymka, shchob pryskoryty nastannia myru – zvernennia Prezydenta Ukrainy do uchasnykiv sesii Heneralnoi asamblei Orhanizatsii amerykanskykh derzhav (OAD), yaka tryvaie v Limi'.

³⁰ 'Vystup Prezydenta zi shchorichnym Poslanniam do Verkhovnoi Rady pro vnutrishnie i zovnishnie stanovyshche Ukrainy'.

compelling example of populist discourse. Zelenskyy's ability to identify an evil minority within the Ukrainian elite and hold them accountable resonates with the populist narrative of struggle against the evil minority. By calling for a collective focus on protecting the nation, Zelenskyy reinforces the ideal of his anti-polarizing style – the unified will of the people – urging politicians to prioritize the interests of the common good over personal gain.

In his New Year's Eve speech, Zelenskyy concluded 2022 with a powerful statement: "I am here. We are here. You are here. Everyone is here. We are all Ukraine."³¹ He is echoing that short video released on 25 February 2022, featuring Zelenskyy alongside key government officials. This video could be considered a compelling example of wartime populism, emphasizing the unity and solidarity of the nation in the face of adversity. By reiterating this statement, Zelenskyy once again positioned himself as a representative of the majority, symbolizing the entirety of the Ukrainian people during times of conflict. The president's identification with the collective will of the nation reinforces the populist narrative, asserting that in times of war, the people's voice and aspirations are paramount. As such, this statement and its re-emergence within Zelenskyy's New Year's Eve speech serve as notable illustrations of populist discourse.

³¹ Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy'.

Conclusion

Margaret Canovan, in her essay on the intersection of populism and democracy, stated “[W]e should resist the temptation to write off populism in general as a pathological symptom.” The case study presented in this essay arguably serves as compelling proof of this, as what truly matters is the purpose which the populist rhetoric or style tries to serve.

A closer examination of academic databases revealed a limited scholarly focus on the intersection of Zelenskyy’s political persona and populism studies. This presents an opportunity for future research to delve into the nuances of Zelenskyy’s discourse, strategies, and policies within the broader context of populism. Additionally, the evolving nature of populism, particularly in relation to changes before and after elections or major events, remains underexplored in academic research. Ukraine’s unique context, shaped by the ongoing armed conflict with Russia, offers a compelling case for investigating how populism adapts in the face of external aggression and examining the reciprocal relationship between populism and conflict.

The current literature on Zelenskyy’s populist rhetoric highlights several key features that define his political discourse. First and foremost, Zelenskyy’s anti-elite sentiment aligns with the core characteristic of populism. However, his brand of populism deviates from the narratives associated with the far right, far left, and political centre, giving rise to a distinct form of “anti-polarization” and inclusionary populism. This type strategically exploits weak party identification among the electorate and presents an alternative approach to political engagement. Zelenskyy adheres to the pattern of valence populism, emphasizing non-positional issues and maintaining an

intentionally ambiguous stance on socio-economic matters. This allows for broader support and appeal to a wider range of voters. Zelenskyy's populist rhetoric is also examined in relation to technocratic and inclusionary populism. Finally, the influence of digital media on democracy and the interconnectedness between Zelenskyy's rise to power and the role of social media platforms are also noteworthy.

The analysis focused on Zelenskyy's populist rhetoric and its evolution during a crucial period from mid-November 2021 to 31 December 2022, encompassing the escalation of tensions at the Russo-Ukrainian border and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion. Throughout this analysis, it became evident that Zelenskyy employed populist strategies to mobilize domestic support and rally international solidarity. His rhetoric is consistent with the previous research that outlined the distinct feature of his populist style, such as anti-polarization and inclusion, as it often emphasized the importance of the people and their collective power.

Zelenskyy's speeches also consistently highlighted the distinction between the victims (the 'good') and the aggressors responsible for violence (the 'bad'), appealing to moral consciousness and empathy among the audience. Moreover, Zelenskyy demonstrated his ability to tap into the collective identity of the Ukrainian people by using existing symbols and events, imbuing them with new meaning to reinforce his message of national cohesion. He skilfully employed performative actions to dispel speculations and project a united front against the invasion.

However, it is important to acknowledge the complexities and limitations of Zelenskyy's populist rhetoric. While he aimed to unite and avoid polarization, the gravity of the situation occasionally led to a more confrontational tone. Furthermore, some aspects of his rhetoric may oversimplify complex issues or employ cosmic significance, claiming universal impact.

This analysis highlights Zelenskyy's evolution as a populist leader during a critical period in Ukraine's history. By examining Zelenskyy's speeches and actions, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of his populist leadership style in response to a significant national challenge.

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