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Opinion – Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Leadership and Europeanness in Ukraine

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, MAR 16 2022

In his 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has met his match in Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the comedian-actor turned wartime president of a proud and defiant nation. Unlike former Ukrainian leaders Viktor Yanukovich, Petro Poroshenko, or Viktor Yushchenko, Zelenskyy does not fit neatly into a preordained box or political party but represents a cross-party and cross-cultural Ukraine that is uniquely shaped by the events of 2014. His Servant of the People party, the same name as his former TV show, is not based in one region of the country with its allegiance to an oligarchic class or distinct economic interests but is an umbrella party for the 21st century. There is no playbook for Zelenskyy to follow as he is crafting the playbook in real-time.

What Zelenskyy has so masterfully achieved is to frame Ukraine as an actor in the future of Europe. He has framed Ukraine's fight as Europe's fight and is determined for Kyiv not to be a passive bystander on the stage of European affairs and conquest that has so often passed it by. For Moscow, this assertion of Ukrainian agency is a shock and tantamount to treason. Putin sees it as a personal blow, and a violation in which one of the most sacred lands of the former Soviet Union has decided to move Westwards, away from Eurasia and the demarcation line of prior struggles. In his relentless and brutal targeting of Ukrainian civilians Putin has given rise to a generation of Ukrainians who will forever be skeptical and fearful of Russia. Their neighbour is now needlessly their enemy, and it is not just Putin who will be the target of the Ukrainians' resentment.

There is much to be said about both men, but Putin is the leading actor in a tragedy of his own making with few supporting characters to hold him accountable. Zelenskyy is the leading actor in a tale that has urgently and violently entered the hearts and minds of his countrymen and fellow Europeans who were previously comfortable in their complacency. He is also a product of the past two years of COVID-19, Zooming in to Westminster, the European Parliament, the US Congress, and addressing thousands of people marching in support of Ukraine from Prague to Tbilisi.

Just as the Ukrainian flag has been unfurled both physically and digitally around the world in the past few weeks, it feels as if Zelenskyy is a constant presence in the West's living room, pulling up a chair and recounting a story that is impossible to turn away from. He could have fled before the fighting started but he didn't need a ride, words that will come to define this moment in history.

In addressing the British Parliament, Zelenskyy's tone was of Churchill, vowing to never surrender and to fight the enemy no matter where they may be. This defiant call to hunt down the aggressor was once used by Putin when he was trying to prove himself in the opening salvos of his tenure as Russian leader. In his 1999 campaign, Putin vowed to 'wipe out' Chechen rebels 'in the outhouse', a much cruder form of both Zelenskyy's and Churchill's vow to fight on the land, sea, and air. Both men are defiant in their beliefs and political outlooks, but Zelenskyy's is a collective defiance drawn from the strength of the Ukrainian people rather than the absolutist defiance that has come to permeate the Kremlin. Furthermore, for Zelenskyy, the vow isn't hollow, but it is backed up by NATO allies committing serious defensive weaponry to Ukraine despite Kyiv's accession to the alliance likely many years or decades down the road.

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Written by Alexander Brotman

In his handling of the present crisis, Zelenskyy has managed to instill in Europe a sense of its most elusive quality: urgency. Urgency in Europe's purpose, urgency in Ukraine's place in it, and urgency in confronting a Russia that was able to prey on Europe's weaknesses and vulnerabilities for far too long.

For Brussels, Zelenskyy's Europeanness is also palpable in a way that is hard to imagine for a nation not yet formally committed to Europe. What stings most for both Moscow and the established political parties in the West is his moral clarity and political acumen. Zelenskyy breaks the mold as an outsider in the age of political upsets and populists that have made bold promises but failed to deliver in times of crisis. Already he has helped neuter leading populist and far-right figures like Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen whose former embrace of Putin have now become scars on their political records.

Zelenskyy is playing the long game, tactfully and strategically building relationships with all of the major powers he needs on his side. He documents his daily battles and walkabouts and writes a heartfelt condolence letter to the family of a slain American journalist. He instills a deep sense of humanity in the Ukrainian citizens who approach young Russian conscripts who choose to surrender with a warm cup of tea and a Facetime call to their parents back home. He is saying to the world: remember how Ukraine acted in this moment of tragedy and triumph, for Ukraine will be back, and the West must be ready for it.

When Ukraine is ready it will have a much stronger case for EU accession than Serbia, a current candidate country that has sided with Moscow and refused to implement far-reaching sanctions. In championing Ukraine, Zelenskyy has shown Europe who its true friends are and where its true values lie. For Europe, he has made the moral case clear. When the guns have gone silent, Zelenskyy is betting that his moral case for Europe will match the bureaucratic and democratic necessities demanded by Brussels in order to formally accede to the European Union.

The author writes in a personal capacity and not through any professional affiliation.

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Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for several political risk publications, including Global Risk Insights, Foreign Brief, and Geopolitical Monitor, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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