



# **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**

**Ukrainian President  
and Unlikely Hero**

Don Nardo

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## Chapter Two

# A Very Modern-Style Politician and Leader

“Glory to Ukraine!,”<sup>8</sup> Volodymyr Zelenskyy shouted. He delivered those words in a clear, resonant voice, coupled with a sincere air of pride in his country. And everyone who heard him speak them, including those who disagreed with his political and social views, could sense their genuineness. Clearly, he did not utter those words for the sake of political expediency or to curry favor with his fans. Rather, there could be no doubt that they came directly from his heart.

What made the speech containing those words particularly special was that it was not a piece of scripted dialogue from one of Zelenskyy’s television, film, or YouTube performances. Instead, he delivered the address from an elegant, hand-carved wooden lectern in the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, in downtown Kyiv. The country’s 450 legislators, called deputies, along with various invited guests, had convened there on May 20, 2019, to hear the country’s new president—a former actor and comedian—give his inaugural speech. “Dear Nation!,” Zelenskyy told the audience in the hall. “All my life I tried to do all I could so that Ukrainians laughed. That was my mission. Now I will do all I can so that Ukrainians at least do not cry any more.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Decision to Run for Office

Some of the people who heard Zelenskyy speak that day were amazed that a person who had made his name strictly as an entertainer had managed to win the presidency—and in a virtual landslide. Yet those Ukrainians who knew, admired, and believed in him were not at all surprised by his win. They knew, as he did, that he had attained the highest office in the land the same way he had achieved success in other areas. He had done it through a combination of genuine talent and hard work.

At first, back in 2018 when some of Zelenskyy’s friends and aides suggested he might run for the presidency, he had been unsure about seriously following that path. On the one hand, he was quite happy being a successful actor, producer, director, and comedian. On the other, he realized that, at least temporarily, he would need to put his chosen field and pursuits aside and unselfishly devote himself to serving his country and fellow citizens.

The more Zelenskyy thought about it, the more he reasoned that public service would be a good way of paying back the public for making him an adored and wealthy individual. There was another issue to consider, nonetheless. Namely, he wondered whether he could be a good president. Eventually, he came to believe that he could and *would*. In part, what convinced him was a series of frank conversations with relatives and friends. They repeatedly pointed out that his television show *Servant of the People* was the key. The character he portrayed on that program, Goloborodko, they said, was an honest, caring, dedicated, hardworking, natural-born leader. Furthermore, they added, Zelenskyy himself was all those things, too. After all, in creating the character and show, he tried to make Goloborodko in many ways a reflection of himself. Finally, his closer confidants told him, many Ukrainians already assumed that there were real similarities between Goloborodko and Zelenskyy. So he had a sort of built-in public support base already, something any politician would envy.

**“All my life I tried to do all I could so that Ukrainians laughed.”<sup>9</sup>**

—Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his inaugural address

*Zelenskyy addresses the Ukrainian parliament following his presidential inauguration on May 20, 2019.*



Having considered all these facts and arguments, Zelenskyy had a final, long heart-to-heart talk with his wife, Olena, to make sure it would be all right with her if he campaigned for the presidency. She told him she had her reservations, since their lives would inevitably change in various ways, including becoming more hectic. But she also wanted him to be happy, she said, and if running would achieve that, she would not stand in the way. Moreover, she made the point that in her view the country would be lucky to have someone as talented and honest as he was for its leader.

### **What Did Ukrainians Worry About Most?**

The decision to run having been made, Zelenskyy went ahead and registered his political party, Servant of the People. That was only a tiny first step, he realized. Much planning and hard work would follow. One initial question was which issues and policies to concentrate on in his campaign. At first, he was somewhat unsure of some of them, partly because he had never been a politician before. Therefore, at the outset he had no well-developed platform, or set of party or governmental goals. Instead, at first, political observers Tanya Tanyarattinan and Josh Wilson point out,

his team crowdsourced ideas from his followers on social media. This led to one of the most common criticisms against Zelensky during his campaign: that he had no political vision of his own. However, his supporters spun this positively, saying that he was showing that he wanted to know how the public wanted to be governed before telling the public how it should be governed. In fact, one of the most central promises to his political platform, released in late January, 2019, is to make strong use of public referendums, particularly through the Internet, to determine the government's agenda and direction.<sup>10</sup>

## The Territorial Issue

One problem that troubled many Ukrainians was the considerable loss of territory in recent years to Russia. Zelensky had some specific ideas about how to address that issue, which had surfaced in 2014. That year Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, had seized control of Crimea, the southernmost sector of Ukraine, situated on the Black Sea's northern shores. Crimea had for generations been part of Ukraine. Despite having no legal authority to intervene in Ukrainian affairs, Putin had announced that Crimea was now an independent republic. Its leaders had requested to make Crimea part of Russia, he claimed, offering no acceptable evidence.

Under Ukraine's president at the time, Petro Poroshenko, the Ukrainians had loudly protested this naked land grab. Moreover, the vast majority of countries belonging to the United Nations, including the United States and other Western nations, condemned Russia's seizure of Crimea. But Putin had simply ignored these objections, and Poroshenko had not taken the land back.

**“His team crowdsourced ideas from his followers on social media. This led to one of the most common criticisms against Zelensky during his campaign: that he had no political vision of his own.”<sup>10</sup>**

—Tanya Tanyarattinan and  
Josh Wilson, political  
observers

*Russian soldiers march in the Crimean city of Perevalne in 2014, after Russia seized control of Crimea from Ukraine, despite protests from Ukraine and many other countries.*



That same year the Russians had also targeted the Donbas, Ukraine's easternmost region. Russian operatives had stirred up trouble by supporting and arming groups of local people who had long felt that Ukraine would be better off under Russian control. These self-described separatists took over several government buildings in the Donbas's subregions of Donetsk and Luhansk and began openly fighting with Ukrainians who did not share their views. The unrest continued there into early 2019.

## **Confronting the Country's Leading Crisis**

Zelenskyy and his campaign staff strongly emphasized these simmering separatist issues and repeatedly called the Russian presence in the Donbas the country's leading crisis. In numerous public interviews and speeches, he addressed that crisis, asserting that the best way to end the hostilities in the eastern separatist regions was to employ a twofold approach. First, he said, if elected president he would work to create a cease-fire in the disputed areas. He repeated this vow in his inaugural address.

I have been often asked what price are you ready to pay for the ceasefire? It's a strange question. What price are you ready to pay for the lives of your loved ones? I can assure you that I'm ready to pay any price to stop the deaths of our heroes. I'm definitely not afraid to make difficult decisions, and I'm ready to lose my fame, my ratings, and if need be—without any hesitation, my position to bring peace, as long as we do not give up our territories.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Zelenskyy said repeatedly during the campaign—and after his election—that he would intensify diplomatic efforts to reach an acceptable solution to the crisis in the Donbas. He emphasized that his opponent in the race, Poroshenko, who was still serving as president, had failed to solve the separatist-related problems. In spite of claiming that he would fix the problem, a great deal of Ukrainian land was now controlled by Russian soldiers. “We will not give up,” Zelenskyy said in one of his most celebrated speeches. He and the members of his government would do whatever was necessary to restore the usurped territories. “We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost,”<sup>12</sup> he promised.

## First Lady Olena Zelenska

As she has revealed in multiple interviews since 2020, Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska, was initially not comfortable with the notion of her husband running for the presidency. She has described herself as a private person and has said that the thought of making frequent public appearances as First Lady initially made her nervous. “I am a non-public person,” she explained in a 2022 interview. Nevertheless, she has adjusted to the reality of her husband's role as president, but she has also set boundaries for herself and her family.

I prefer staying backstage. My husband is always on the forefront, while I feel more comfortable in the shade. I am not the life of the party, I do not like to tell jokes. It's not in my character. But I found reasons for myself in favor of publicity. One of them is the opportunity to attract people's attention to important social issues. At the same time, this does not concern the publicity of my children: I have not posted their photos on social networks before, and now I will not either.



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# Important Events in the Life of Volodymyr Zelenskyy

- 1978** On January 25 Volodymyr Zelenskyy is born in the Ukrainian town of Kryvyi Rih.
- 1995** While in college, forms Kvartal 95, a troupe of comic performers.
- 1997** Enters Kvartal 95 into an annual TV competition held by the “Club of the Funny and Inventive People.”
- 2003** Marries his high school sweetheart, Olena Kiyashko.
- 2004** Daughter Oleksandra is born.
- 2006** Enters and wins the dance contest on the popular TV program *Strictly Come Dancing*.
- 2012** Stars as Napoléon Bonaparte in the feature film *Rzhevskiy Versus Napoleon*.
- 2013** Son Kyylo is born.
- 2015** Stars in the film *8 New Dates* and begins work on his widely popular TV show, *Servant of the People*.
- 2018** Produces and codirects the feature film *Me. You. He. She*.
- 2019** Runs for the presidency of Ukraine and wins.
- 2021** On November 8 signs a landmark law that safeguards the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, the key agency in the country’s struggle against high-level corruption.
- 2022** On February 24 declares martial law after Russia invades Ukraine.  
On March 1 addresses the European Parliament and asks for the help of the member states.  
On March 8 addresses the British Parliament and requests military aid and moral support.  
On March 16 speaks to members of the US Congress and emphasizes Ukraine’s need for military aid.  
On April 5, in a speech to the United Nations, accuses Russia of committing atrocities and criticizes inaction by the world body.  
On July 4 Zelenskyy urges the international community to support a \$750 billion plan to rebuild Ukraine.

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## About the Author

Historian and award-winning author Don Nardo has written numerous volumes about wars and warfare throughout the ages, along with biographies of wartime leaders, including Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, and now Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Nardo, who also composes and arranges orchestral music, lives with his wife, Christine, in Massachusetts.