

The Last Word: Zelensky Wags the Dog, But Slowly

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Too often agency (and blame) for the war in Ukraine has been presumed to lie predominantly with the greater powers. Liberals like Anne Applebaum point to President Vladimir Putin's autocratic and expansionist mission to restore a greater Russia as the precipitating reagent for the crisis, while realists like John Mearsheimer hold the Americans and Europeans responsible for encouraging Ukraine to challenge Russia by seeking membership in NATO.² In both cases (and both have a case), what has been underplayed is the agency of Ukraine. Taken for granted have been President Volodymyr Zelensky's artful strategic manipulations to pull a wide community of actors into the regional conflict. His calls for military assistance have resembled what the political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. termed the "soft powers" of persuasion.³

In examining the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, scholars like Nye attempt to look beyond the "hard power" competition of arms races, economic sanctions, and proxy wars between the superpowers during the years of the Cold War. They conclude that the soft power allure of Western society across the Iron Curtain lay in a raucously more diverse culture, a shared belief in human rights, and a free-wheeling capitalism, an alternative life to a younger Soviet generation eager to sculpt fluorescent mohawks, pull on high-waisted Levi's, and down sweating cans of Coca Cola.

Unlike Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, however, today's Western chiefs of state—Joseph Biden, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz—have not emerged as charismatic leaders to front-face the military mission and the culture war against Russia. They have not pulled Ukraine into the Western sphere of influence. Indeed, in their ambivalence to confront Putin directly, they have not had to. They have been excused from spearheading this task, as the one-time actor has taken the lead role.

In stark contrast to President Ashraf Ghani, who fled Afghanistan as the Taliban inched closer to Kabul, Zelensky remained in the streets of Kyiv to rally his people. The Ukrainian president reached up to call the great powers to join his side in a grand alliance of like-minded nations. From the borderland of Eurasia, it was the Ukrainian president who commandeered moral authority, transforming himself into the standard-bearer for a Western, liberal order. He pitched Ukraine—however fumbling in its own constitutional order—as the frontline in an existential fight between democracy and authoritarianism, playing upon the notion of an imagined community of shared liberal values, cajoling the Western powers to invest in him as both a strategic partner and an ideological brother.

In reevaluations of the Cold War, historians have described a phenomenon whereby the "tail could wag the dog"—i.e., a lesser power like Ukraine could persuade and even coerce stronger ones. They term the dynamic "pericentrism" and explain how the periphery defined the center. Scholars want to exhibit agency in the ability of Chi Minh in North Vietnam or Fidel Castro in Cuba to draw

the superpowers into their local feuds. As the political scientist Tony Smith writes, "while junior members in the international system at times took actions that tried to *block, moderate, and end* the epic contest, they also took actions that played a key role in *expanding, intensifying, and prolonging* the struggle between East and West."⁴ The historian Federico Romero argues that the superpowers did not create conflicts in the developing world but "exacerbated them by pouring in weapons, money, and advisors, connecting local actors to actual networks and powerful imageries of larger historical trends, raising the stakes."⁵

Scholars like Smith and Romero have looked to identify those "local and national protagonists," "political entrepreneurs" and "postcolonial elites who exploited geopolitical tensions." For it was not just the United States and the USSR pumping artillery into the developing world. Leaders in the developing world played on the superpower conflict to attract more aid to their postcolonial battles. The lesser powers could manipulate the greater, "feeding on and contributing to the central dynamics of the East-West contest."⁶

Like the current conflict between Russia and its Western foes, the ideological pump was already primed for a standoff between the great Cold War powers before proxy fighting broke out, and like Zelensky today, the Hos, Ches and Castros and the Ben Gurions, Mandelas and Walesas had the ability to convince the all-too-eager empires that their local struggles were central to that ideological standoff. Key to their strategies were their soft power appeals, their transnational calls for higher ideals, whether communist or liberal/democratic, as the North Vietnamese pressed for aid in the 1970s from the Soviets to fend off the American "imperialists" or later, in the 1980s, the Afghani mujahidin enlisted the help of the Americans to deter the Soviet "menace."

Today, an unshaven Zelensky, in his fitted olive-green tees, has similarly fashioned for himself what Tom Wolfe once called a "radical chic." In his siren selfie videos, he radiated the charisma of the uncompromising guerilla, that musky allure of the freedom-fighter, of Ho, Castro and Che, of Simón Bolívar, of Vladimir Lenin.⁷ After each video Zelensky posted, Western allies crowded around to praise his "bravery and the resolve," his eloquence, his actorly poise; they marveled at how he had become the "Churchill of our times," the "personal embodiment of his country's refusal to yield to a murderous authoritarian," a "worthy successor" to the homburg-hatted bulldog.⁸

Indeed, in the war with Russia, a forceful Zelensky refashioned a previously underwhelming record. From a purely political perspective, the war proved to be a boon for the president. In his 2019 campaign, he ran on a platform of "sound judgment," "honesty," "pragmatism" and fair and open democratization.⁹ Yet his promises to end the conflict with Russia in the eastern regions of Ukraine, to curtail rampant corruption, to recapture his nation's economy

from a clique of oligarchs and to confront the COVID pandemic sputtered. His tenure was riven by failed judicial and anti-corruption reform, intimidation of whistleblowers and failure to prosecute allegations of “large-scale and coordinated fraud” by associates close to the president.¹⁰

Within six months of his taking the presidency, Zelensky replaced his cabinet of highly touted, fresh-faced reformers with more “seasoned” veterans of previous administrations. From a 70 percent approval rating on entering office, a year into his tenure only 25 percent of Ukrainians reported that they would support his reelection. At the two-year mark, according to the Wilson Center’s Mykhailo Minakov, Zelensky’s “decision-making [continued to be] conducted in the style of ‘emergency politics,’ without the requisite respect for Ukraine’s constitution and the division of powers stipulated therein.” Far from a bastion of liberal democracy, in January 2022 Ukraine was ranked 123rd of 180 countries in terms of government corruption by Transparency International, a ranking in the neighborhood of such perennial offenders as the Philippines and Azerbaijan. Russia, at 130th, was not far behind.¹¹

Yet the comparison of Zelensky to Churchill is persistent, and indeed it is far more apt than the well-worn laurel first appeared to be when examined beyond the hagiography. Like a bunkered Churchill over his wireless, Zelensky has spoken out not from a position of strength, not from the mountain top, not from atop a city on a hill. The pictures of Churchill with FDR (later Truman) and Stalin at the Yalta, Tehran and Potsdam postwar summits all too often have fixed the British prime minister in our minds as just one of the superpower-ed leaders. Yet in the face of Nazi aggression, after the British flight from Dunkirk in June 1940, Churchill’s leadership skills were not yet in evidence. Britain had drained its currency reserves. In December 1940, Churchill begged Franklin Roosevelt for military aid. “The “moment approaches,” he wrote, “when we shall no longer be able to pay cash for shipping and other supplies.”¹²

The British PM also had a mixed record when it came to advancing the cause of liberal democracy. After all, even as he aimed to cement an Atlantic alliance as a fraternity of democracies—as a shield to save the “free world” from tyranny—Churchill scrambled to shore up the dominion Britain maintained over its imperial holdings, and he was prepared to commit to a pact with a tyrannical Stalin. British writer Henry Hemming notes that it would take some time for Churchill to overcome the historic rockiness in Britain’s “special relationship” with the United States. Americans “generally did not see Britain as some close, beloved ally at the start of the Second World War.” Enormously unpopular among Americans, Britain had the distinction of being not only an economic rival but one of the once-great European empires that had within that same century already engulfed the world in war.¹³

Key to the persisting parallel between Churchill and Zelensky is their shared soft powers of persuasion. Both were able to make their local stories international and even global. The narrative during the early years of World War II, like the narrative of today’s fight against Russian authoritarianism, was, after all, an artfully crafted simplification of complex ideological, strategic, economic, cultural, and political circumstances. In its early stages, World War II lacked a cohesive, defining tale of cause or a hopeful, foreseeable denouement. Violent clashes crossed into theaters both in the Far East and West, with the overrunning of historic borders and the mixed ideological alliances of democracies, empires and communist states in all-out war.

The beleaguered Conservative British prime minister helped provide a cohesive story. He wagged the dog (but “softly,”) as he called for aid from his more powerful

allies.¹⁴ From underneath the bombed-out cobbles of London, Churchill rallied his people as the last bulwark for the “survival of Christian civilization” against the “abyss of a new Dark Age.”¹⁵ Through an evocation of agreed-upon values and sought-after ideals, not through coercion or bribery, he pressed the Allies to fend off a venal German empire running rampant across Europe. As Churchill beseeched FDR, “the safety of the United States as well as the future of our two democracies and the kind of civilization for which they stand, are bound up in the survival and independence of the British Commonwealth of Nations.” He invited the “Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians and the United States” to join the UK in a brotherhood of like-minded nations who shared the aims of democracy at home and a liberal order abroad.¹⁶

Zelensky manipulated Western allies by likewise calling his strategic partners to task. He insisted that they had moral duties to uphold if they were to continue to present themselves as the champions of the “free world.” He coaxed his prospective allies with ethical challenges, harnessing his soft power to great effect, tailoring his pressure to each partner’s national narratives of historical commitment, demanding they not repeat gross moral error or allow mass tragedy to strike. Indeed, an eager Zelensky ventured into the most wrought episodes of those allies’ histories to press his cause. Addressing the Bundestag, he reminded German leaders of their pledge to “never again” allow a genocide and not to permit the erection of another Berlin Wall across Europe. Speaking to the U.S. Congress, he alluded to keeping the promise of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream.” He warned the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament, of Russia “deliberately provoking a food crisis,” recalling Ireland’s Great Famine. Although later criticized for the analogy, he demanded that Israeli lawmakers in the Knesset not allow the Russians to commit a “Final Solution” against the Ukrainians.¹⁷

Like a latter-day Churchill, Zelensky struck a chord with his pleas. In contrast to the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, when Russia dominated the information space and the Western powers looked on from the sidelines, this latest crisis was dominated by the Ukrainian president. Heather Conley, the president of the German Marshall Fund, concluded that his words were “changing policy” across the world. His streaming remarks received standing ovations in the Greek parliament and the Canadian House of Commons. “There is no question that public opinion . . . in Switzerland w[as] influenced by the very successful projection of a certain image,” said Jacques Pitteloud, the Swiss ambassador to the United States.¹⁸

Zelensky’s crusade has penetrated beyond the politics of the great powers. It was the Czechs who first sent tanks to Ukraine. One former commanding general of the U.S. Army in Europe explained the extent of that investment. “The tank is not just a rental car,” he said. “Whenever you’re talking about transferring any sort of mechanized or armored vehicles, you have to also think about spare parts, maintenance packages, training, fuel, ammunition . . . to make sure they can keep things running.”¹⁹ Subsequently, Slovakia shipped an advanced air defense system, fulfilling one of Zelensky’s chief requests to help “close the skies.” The Baltic states contributed anti-armor weapons, artillery and thermal-imaging devices. As the *Washington Post* wrote, in pericentric fashion, these smaller countries “led the way” in fulfilling Zelensky’s calls for more substantial military aid.²⁰

However eager his allies have been to commit to bolstering the war against Russia, the scope of the Ukrainian president’s soft power has proven to have limits. He pressured the Americans and Europeans for even deeper support for Ukrainian independence than they were willing to provide. Western leaders pushed

back against his most aggressive hard-power demands for aircraft and for booting the Russians from the United Nations Security Council. After Pentagon spokesman John Kirby explained that the United States would not support a no-fly zone, Zelensky hit back. "Listen: we have a war!" he said. "This is not Ping-Pong! This is about human lives! We ask once again: solve it faster. Do not shift the responsibility, send us planes." He tweeted pictures of a "devastated a maternity hospital." He attempted to coerce by charging a collective guilt for ensuing war crimes, again alluding to a commitment his partners made to hold off tyranny. "How much longer will the world be an accomplice ignoring terror? Close the sky right now!"²¹

Speaking to the U.K.'s House of Commons, Zelensky returned to Churchill's refusal to quit during World War II as the historical demarcation for the British promise to fend off tyranny. "We will not give up, and we will not lose. We will fight till the end," Zelensky repeated. The "we" were Ukrainians. But in repeating Churchill's words, he made it clear that the "we" was the alliance of which he has softly taken charge. Distancing himself from his Russian neighbor to the east, he has reimagined Ukraine as part of a community of Western democracies. After the speech streamed at the Palace of Westminster, however, Prime Minister Boris Johnson did not welcome Zelensky into the Western alliance. Instead, he proclaimed pride in the British joining fight led by the Ukrainians' president. "Today," Johnson stated, "one of the proudest boasts in the free world is, 'Ya Ukrainets'—I am a Ukrainian.'"²²

Notes:

1. I would like to thank Ryan Evans and the editors of the *War on the Rocks*, as well as Clark Murdock, for reading this article and providing key insights that helped me develop it.
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