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Volodymyr Zelenskiy: ‘My White House invitation? I was told it’s being prepared’

The TV comic turned maverick Ukrainian leader on Putin, power and Trump’s impeachment

Володимир Зеленський: «Моє запрошення до Білого дому? Мені сказали, що готується

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/07/volodymyr-zelenskiy-tv-comic-who-became-ukraine-president-trump-putin>

What’s the difference between playing a president on screen and being one in real life? Not much, according to Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the man who’s done both.

“It’s very similar,” he says, his compact frame engulfed by a green leather armchair in his opulent presidential office. Then he changes his mind: in fact, the real job lasts a whole five years, and comes with far greater challenges than can fit into one season of a television show. “It’s true there are more problems. They are catastrophic. They appear, I’m sorry to say, like pimples on an 18-year-old kid. You don’t know where they will pop up, or when.” The 42-year-old speaks in his native Russian, his expressive face switching from boyish amusement to tortured concern in a flash.

The latest problem is coronavirus. Angry villagers, scared their hospital is hosting returnees from China, have attacked the buses transporting them. The day before we meet, Zelenskiy dispatched his health minister to join the evacuees in quarantine, as proof they pose no danger. “It was her choice, but I suggested it,” he says, chuckling in a way that implies he gave her little alternative.

It is exactly the kind of impetuous decision his television alter ego might have taken. In the Ukrainian series *Servant Of The People*, Zelenskiy plays an everyman with no political experience who is elevated to the country’s presidency. Last April, a couple of weeks after the season three finale aired, he took 73% of the vote in the country’s actual presidential election. In May, he started the job for real. In an era of outsider electoral successes, Zelenskiy’s has been perhaps the most unlikely of them all.

Running a country of 42 million people that in the past few years has seen a revolution, a land-grab by Vladimir Putin and an ongoing war in its eastern regions was not going to be an easy task, especially for a political novice. But Zelenskiy’s first real-life presidential season has thrown up one plotline that even his show’s scriptwriters might have discarded as implausible, involving another unlikely president, from across the Atlantic.

After decades in which US politicians have chided Ukraine for its venal politics, it’s ironic that an American president should try to corrupt his Ukrainian counterpart. Donald Trump wanted one thing from Zelenskiy: an investigation into the Ukrainian business dealings of Hunter Biden, son of Joe – his potential 2020 presidential opponent. Until he complied, Trump made it clear through aides that he would withhold \$391m (£303m) in military aid, along with Zelenskiy’s chance of a coveted White House visit. Trump’s interactions with Zelenskiy were at the crux of his impeachment trial in January, with the most damning evidence released by Trump himself: a memorandum of a 25 July call between the leaders. In it, Zelenskiy flatters Trump, while delicately trying not to enter into a criminal conspiracy with him: “You are a great teacher for us,” he says, in one of several passages it is hard to read without

cringing. Trump, meanwhile, underlines how much the US will do for Ukraine, if only Zelenskiy will order a probe into Hunter Biden.

His political opponents seized on his fawning tone and he was even dubbed “Monica Zelenskiy”. “You are absolutely right. Not only 100%, but actually 1,000%,” he says when Trump claims Angela Merkel “doesn’t do anything” for Ukraine (in fact, the EU is its largest financial donor). But the scandal resonated more loudly in the US; with Russia-backed troops still in the east of the country, most Ukrainians are sympathetic to maintaining US support at almost any cost.

Zelenskiy appeared rattled when Trump released the memo just hours before the two held an awkward press conference at the UN last September. Today, he looks more comfortable discussing the exchange, though he says he is tired of the impeachment saga dominating every conversation about Ukraine. “I think Ukraine has passed through this story proudly, with its head raised high,” he says. But he has still not received the promised White House invitation, and it’s clear this is an irritation. “I was told it’s being prepared. It’s hard for me to hear that. I am a person who works to deadlines. Our diplomats are discussing it with American diplomats. I would like us to have a fruitful meeting.”

But the humiliations have kept coming. In late January, two days before secretary of state Mike Pompeo was due to travel to Kyiv in a show of US support, he somewhat undermined the message by snapping at a reporter: “Do you think Americans care about Ukraine?” and asking her to point to it on a map, as if it were an obscure principality rather than the biggest country in Europe. When they met, Zelenskiy says, Pompeo insisted he had been misquoted. He says he is “grateful to the US, because actually both political parties support us”. But what about the president?

Zelenskiy pauses and laughs. He draws another breath before giving a long, convoluted and largely meaningless answer about the overwhelming US support he feels, from the president down. There’s not much else he can say. Trump is known to be vindictive, and could win another four years in November. On the other hand, if Zelenskiy comes out in full-blooded support, he will look a fool if a Democrat wins the White House. The best option, it seems, is to say nothing.

“With some issues, I don’t really understand how to help journalists. When it comes to matters of state, I’ll happily talk to you when my five years are up and tell you lots of things I can’t now. But these are state secrets.”

After 10 months in office, Zelenskiy is desperate to move the conversation on from the impeachment saga. He has agreed to a rare interview in the hope that he can “change the context” – to his focus on making a deal with Putin to end the war, and on further integration with Europe. He speaks passionately and with much gesturing, deploying the easy charm that helped him win the presidency. His future success will depend on whether he can use it to good effect on the European leaders who are his best hope of escaping his unenviable position, stuck between Trump and Putin.

In the aftermath of his election victory, Zelenskiy promised voters he would “stay a human being” and not become a typical politician. He claims to have succeeded so far, but our surroundings tell a different story. His cavernous office is done out with gilded stucco ceilings, chandeliers and ruched curtains that cascade down long windows. So far, so very presidential. But the handshakes are hardly over before Zelenskiy tells us how ill at ease he is. “I can’t even sit there, it’s awful,” he says, pointing to the wooden desk laden with malachite ornaments and a bank of secure telephones. “Previous inhabitants felt very at home in these surroundings, I guess,” he says; they make him feel “horribly uncomfortable”.

The most recent renovations were done by president Viktor Yanukovych, whose obscene corruption and cosy up to Russia prompted the 2014 Maidan revolution. We meet six years to the day since Yanukovych fled the building during bloody clashes between riot police and protesters in central Kyiv, setting in train the Russian annexation of Crimea and military incursion into eastern Ukraine.

Initially, Zelenskiy promised he would move the presidential office, but he has now decided the cost to the taxpayer would be prohibitive: “And I can’t do a renovation, because it’s a historic building,

so it would be illegal.” But it is noticeable he has not made even small changes, such as replacing the furniture or removing the kitsch bronze figurines. Maybe he needs something to complain about. Or maybe the trappings of power are proving seductive.

“It’s true, you do start getting used to it.” He laughs.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy was born in 1978, into a Jewish Ukrainian family in Kryvyi Rih, an industrial city in the south-east of Soviet Ukraine, dotted with mines and blast furnaces. It was a tough place to grow up, notorious for gangs of youths fighting to control different neighbourhoods in the years after the Soviet collapse.

Zelenskiy’s way out came through comedy. A natural performer, he organised a tight-knit group of friends from high school and law school into a comedy troupe named Kvartal 95, after the neighbourhood in which they grew up. By the mid-2000s, the troupe had moved to Kyiv and were appearing regularly on Ukrainian television. Recently, Zelenskiy has brought in some of them as key advisers. “I have a few people who work with me who have been my friends for a long time... They have no relation to business, or to the budget,” he says, insisting the appointments are about personal trust, not financial cronyism.

Zelenskiy’s humour tended toward the slapstick: his audiences preferred Benny Hill to Monty Python, he has said. In one skit, he and a fellow actor appear to play Chopsticks on the piano using only their penises. But there were also more pointed, political sketches, mocking Ukraine’s corrupt officials and oligarchs. He came to know some of his targets personally, as he took on more work as a television and film producer, bringing him wealth and connections among the elites. Sometimes this got him into trouble, if a sketch cut too deeply. Occasionally, the group poked fun at the authoritarianism of Ukraine’s big neighbour. In a skit to coincide with a Russian presidential election, Zelenskiy and his friends played the returning officers at a local polling station, suicidal because they have accidentally failed to secure a Putin victory in their district.

Servant Of The People, a sharp-edged comedy, first aired in 2015. Zelenskiy stars as high-school teacher Vasyl Holoborodko, whose classroom tirade against corruption is filmed by a pupil and posted online, propelling him to the presidency after the post goes viral. Think *Yes Minister* crossed with *House Of Cards*, transposed on to the grimly cynical world of post-Soviet politics. The popularity of the show prompted a question, backed up by favourable polling numbers: what if Zelenskiy ran for office in real life? In the final moments of 2018, on his new year television show, he announced that he would.

He ran a ludicrous, postmodern campaign, the centrepiece of which was a nationwide comedy tour that included video clips of his on-screen president. Mainly, he just wanted to make the audience laugh. One Ukrainians-on-holiday sketch poked fun at a tourist who spends his vacation watching movies on a bus. “But where did you stop?” he is asked. “Somewhere around Terminator 2,” comes the response.

Zelenskiy was up against the incumbent, Petro Poroshenko, a billionaire chocolate magnate who had won the presidency a few months after the Maidan revolution. While Poroshenko had brought some reform, he had failed to deliver on his key promise to end corruption. Lagging in the polls, he was flummoxed by Zelenskiy’s insurgent campaign, and tried to paint his opponent as a man who would appease Putin over the war. Meanwhile Zelenskiy largely avoided debate, running a populist campaign – the people against the old elites – but without the usual populist tactic of sowing anger and division. Instead, he made vague talk of unification, fighting corruption and ending the war, with few specifics.

When he did agree to a debate, he made it conditional on Poroshenko accepting a set of absurd terms: it would take place on the pitch at Kyiv’s 70,000-seater Olympic stadium, and Poroshenko would have to take a drug and alcohol test beforehand, to prove he wasn’t high. It wasn’t intended as a serious offer, but with nothing to lose, Poroshenko said yes, gamely showing up for blood and urine tests the day before. The debate was loud, confusing and largely senseless – which was how Zelenskiy

wanted it. In the stadium, both candidates came across badly, bellowing into microphones; but on television, where it really mattered, Zelenskiy was the clear winner.

The election was an easy win, too. He came first in almost every region – something new for a country that has long been divided on regional and linguistic lines. In the minutes after his crushing victory was announced, Zelenskiy strode on to the stage at his campaign headquarters accompanied by the lilting theme tune of *Servant Of The People*. Nobody quite knew what a Zelenskiy presidency would look like, including the people who had voted for him. But after a two-decade cycle of revolution and disappointment, he had won, not despite his lack of experience but because of it. He called parliamentary elections soon after, announcing that his newly formed party (named the *Servant Of The People Party*, naturally) would nominate a varied field of candidates, most without political experience. It won more than half the parliamentary seats, giving Zelenskiy huge power.

Now that he's in charge, does he regret mocking politicians so mercilessly on his TV show? Zelenskiy smiles. "I understood that, without experienced people it's impossible to run a country. But these people are at middle level. They are the bureaucrats who know where to scurry to, what to do, whom to bring the papers to."

To manage these bureaucrats, Zelenskiy has enlisted some old friends. Andriy Yermak, the man he entrusted with US negotiations last summer and recently made his chief of staff, is a former copyright lawyer. Serhiy Shefir, another presidential aide, is a co-founder of Zelenskiy's production studio. A childhood friend, Ivan Bakanov, has been made head of the secret services. While Zelenskiy's inner circle do not seem to be seeking personal enrichment, there are legitimate concerns about whether his friends are the best qualified people to run the country.

Alongside these old friends, Zelenskiy put together a cabinet composed largely of well-regarded reformers, and the general feeling in the international community was that his team was doing surprisingly well, against the odds. However, earlier this week, a few days after our interview, he fired most of the government, including the 35-year-old prime minister (and also the still-quarantined health minister). The chief prosecutor, seen as a reformer, was also dismissed by parliament. The move, which Zelenskiy gave no hint was coming during the interview, has been interpreted as a blow for genuine reform efforts.

Zelenskiy claimed to us that because he and his circle are demonstrably not on the take, it has become more difficult for anyone else to take a bribe. "The president can't change the country on his own. But what can he do? He can give an example."

While Zelenskiy appears to be enjoying himself, he admits the political spotlight has been unwelcome for his family. "It's difficult," he says. "They don't like my work." Going out for a meal has to be cleared with security; taking a nice holiday looks insensitive when his country is at war.

His wife, Olena, is a former writer for *Kvartal 95* who, like Zelenskiy, grew up in *Kryvyi Rih*. He says that while he is used to being in the public eye, she prefers to stay out of the limelight. His 16-year-old daughter is the most irritated by his new job, bristling against the security detail that now follows her everywhere. They try to hide, but she always spots them, her father says. "She's at that age when a person is usually most free," he says. "It's unpleasant for her on a human level." On the other hand, his seven-year-old son is loving it, proudly announcing to anyone who will listen that his father is the president. "I came home the other day and I said, 'Why is nobody saying hello to me?' And I can hear my own voice on the television. It was my speech. And my son says, 'Don't disturb us, we're watching the president!'"

Before Trump hijacked the script, the main villain to Zelenskiy's hero was meant to be Putin, who annexed Crimea in 2014 and sent money, men and weapons to fuel a war that has killed 14,000 people so far, many of them civilians. Large-scale fighting was halted in 2015, but regular shelling and fatalities on the frontline have been a way of life ever since. Peace could be achieved, Zelenskiy told voters, only if Kyiv began direct negotiations with the Kremlin. This was a radical departure from Poroshenko's approach and proved popular with a nation suffering from war fatigue – though a loud minority accused Zelenskiy of capitulating to Russia by even proposing talks. But he says he values

saving lives over counting territorial gains. “Who is this all being done for? For people. What’s the point of returning our territory if a million people die?”

Putin and Zelenskiy met face to face for the first time in December, at a summit in Paris, alongside Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel. They mainly stuck to the technical details of a long-ignored peace treaty, but “there were a few emotional parts”, Zelenskiy recalls: when Putin complained about radical Ukrainian nationalists, he fired back that Russia has radicals, too. Was he able to get through to Putin? “I think he listened to me. I had that feeling. I hope it’s not a false feeling.” The talks produced modest results: prisoner exchanges, an agreement to disengage military forces, and a ceasefire that has not held, with one soldier killed and several injured in a deadly flare-up in recent weeks.

It seems unlikely that Putin will agree to any peace deal remotely acceptable to Ukrainian public opinion, but Zelenskiy says he wants to move fast. “Time is ticking,” he says, pointing at his watch and announcing a timeframe of a year in which to solve the conflict, so he can focus on other domestic issues. “The government can spend one year on the entire agreement. Then it should be implemented. Any longer is prohibited. If it lasts longer, we need to change the format and choose another strategy,” he says. It’s a dramatic new deadline, but his urgency is undercut by a lack of detail. (At times like this, Zelenskiy sounds rather Trumpian.) He declines to say what the fallback strategy might be, and when his press secretary jumps in to clarify that the one-year deadline dates from the December summit, rather than the start of his presidency in May, he replies with a laugh: “I don’t know any more.” Thinking on the fly, as he often appears to, he buys himself the extra months: yes, it starts from the summit.

Zelenskiy’s aides present this kind of improvisation as part of his charm. In meetings with foreign dignitaries, they say, he will read the room and, if he feels he can succeed with a more emotional pitch, discard official briefing notes. And perhaps this might work with Merkel, for one, who reportedly watched clips from *Servant Of The People* before meeting Zelenskiy.

Convincing Merkel and others of Ukraine’s desire for closer integration into Europe is vital, he says. “We need to give people confidence that the European Union is waiting for Ukraine,” he says. If it takes 20 years, his electorate will lose hope. “People don’t really believe in words. Or rather, people believe in words only for a stretch of time. Then they start to look for action.” Merkel gets it, he thinks; he also claims to have developed a warm personal relationship with Macron, though he is wary of the French president’s recent references to the need for warmer relations with Moscow.

Watching Brexit unfold from Kyiv has been a strange experience, he says – seeing a country rush to exit the EU when Ukraine is so keen to join. “It’s like having a group of people around a table spending a nice evening together. If someone doesn’t want to sit at the table, he’ll definitely ruin the party,” he says, warming to his metaphor. “And then there are people standing outside the door, ringing the doorbell, knocking, and they’re told through the peephole: ‘Yes, you’re welcome to join but come back next time!’ And they’re still outside knocking when the party is over.”

He revels in these colourful comparisons, which sometimes take him in the wrong direction. He likens his presidency to being on a boat: “There are holes everywhere, and with your arms and legs, you are trying to close them up. This is how we’re living. We are closing the holes.” When told it sounds like a sinking ship, Zelenskiy looks alarmed, and adds: “But we’re not sinking!”

When he came to power, western diplomats worried Zelenskiy might be a proxy for Ihor Kolomoisky, a controversial billionaire whose television channel aired his show. Kolomoisky is one of a group of oligarchs who made vast fortunes in the transition from communism, while most Ukrainians remained poor. In recent years, they have rebranded themselves as generous philanthropists, while retaining an outsized influence on the political scene, and are far more deserving of the “oligarch” title than their counterparts in Russia, long since neutered by Putin.

“I want them to have walk-on parts, not leading roles,” Zelenskiy says. Kolomoisky receives no special treatment, he insists, despite their long acquaintance. He dismisses as “inappropriate” the recent

purchase of a 14-bedroom mansion on the French Riviera for €200m (£170m) by Rinat Akhmetov, a businessman whose apartment at One Hyde Park was the most expensive property ever purchased in the UK when he bought it in 2011, at £136m.

Many in Kyiv see Zelenskiy's government reshuffle this week as a sign that the old oligarchic players are reasserting their influence, despite his public claims that it was about speeding up reform. It's certainly true that Ukraine's oligarchs continue to wield tremendous power, and Zelenskiy won't be rid of their machinations simply by asking nicely. His TV president might have ordered them hanged or shot for such lavish expenditure abroad during a time of war, but the real Zelenskiy will have to work with them, asking them to invest at home and fund state projects when asked.

"If we've chosen democracy, of course we can't hang people," he says, but a twinkle appears in his eyes. "Although! Sometimes you really want to. And do you know why? Because it would be quicker. Much quicker," he says, delivering the line with a comic's timing.

"We are joking," says his press secretary, looking somewhat concerned, from the other side of the table.

"Of course we're joking," Zelenskiy says.

In their ill-fated phone call, Zelenskiy thanked Trump for providing him with a model of electoral success. "We used quite a few of your skills... we wanted to drain the swamp here in my country," he says. Is that true, or was he simply following advice that the US president responds well to flattery? He sighs and answers carefully. What Trump showed him, he says, was how an outsider can win without having to adapt to the supposed rules of the game. "I do not try to play a role. I feel good being myself and saying what I think. And in this, he really was an example – of how you can win without using the standard format."

Zelenskiy thinks the era of the political outsider is just starting and his own campaign model could succeed elsewhere. "I am certain it could, especially where people are tired, where they are running like squirrels on a wheel, and there are these long-standing politicians with big financial resources. In these places, where people are searching for a breath of fresh air, it should work."

It sounds like a clear allusion to Ukraine's neighbour to the east, and its indefatigable leader. Indeed, on the night of his election, Zelenskiy said he wanted his victory to be an example to the entire post-Soviet region, dominated by autocrats. His success has not gone unnoticed inside Russia, and many have made favourable comparisons with the man in the Kremlin: Zelenskiy walking to his inauguration, high-fiving members of the crowd, versus a lonely Putin in his limousine, gliding through the emptied streets of Moscow to his own ceremony. Zelenskiy's chummy, upbeat new year message to the nation, versus Putin's staid television address. A Russian channel recently started to broadcast *Servant Of The People*, but quickly reversed the decision, presumably fearing its message was too subversive.

Zelenskiy did not, in the end, bring down Trump, and he may well not succeed in his plans to remodel Ukraine. Could Zelenskiy's legacy turn out to be piercing Putin's aura of infallibility? "Of course a new president will appear there. Of course it will happen. What kind of president it will be, I don't know," he says. "But we can see that all totalitarian regimes end the same way."

But Putin would never simply give up power to a Zelenskiy figure in Russia. Is he predicting a bloody revolution? "I don't want people to die anywhere," he says. "But we should understand that if you keep tightening the spring, at some point it will snap."