In the fog of war and amid Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky’s inspiring wartime leadership, it is important not to forget how politics in Ukraine worked for decades before Russia’s full-scale invasion. Even in victory, the risks for democracy in Ukraine may include the reappearance of the partially staged democratic elections that were a key element of politics in independent Ukraine prior to Zelensky: Ukrainian politicians with authoritarian ambitions periodically used economic pressure to compel people to vote for them, leading many Ukrainians to feel that they were being treated like background players on a stage, not agents of their own political destinies. These manipulations affected not only electoral outcomes, but also the meaning of democratic institutions for Ukrainians who were subject to such pressure. The danger of a return to political theater in Ukraine after victory emanates not only from the threat of Russian occupation and the Kremlin’s “referenda” at gunpoint, but also from the economic precarity of war and its deprivations.¹

Yet Ukrainian politics no longer looks as it did even five years ago, and Zelensky has participated in changes at every level of Ukrainian society—changes he was positioned to lead precisely because of, not in spite of, his previous career as an actor and comedian, where he was known for his close connection with Ukrainian audiences. To understand the nature and significance of the transformation in Ukrainian politics since his arrival on the political stage, it is helpful to examine not only Zelensky’s wartime leadership, but also his previous work. International audiences have viewed Zelensky through the narrow lens of the wartime leader who commands respect because of his courage in the face of grave danger. For those who do not know him or his story, it could seem as if Zelensky had risen above his former calling as comic and...
showman. But that misunderstands Zelensky. Many Ukrainians have long known him for his fearless and eloquent responses to injustice, and for his evident and profound patriotism. In his career as a showman, Zelensky, trained as a lawyer, led from the stage. His present heroism continues to express an integrity that Ukrainians recognized long before the Kremlin launched a full-scale invasion.

**Political Theater Before Zelensky**

In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was elected president in a landslide, earning 73 percent of the nationwide vote with a largely internet-based campaign. Before Zelensky’s election, the system that had dominated Ukrainian politics depended on large-scale political theater, as some politicians mobilized parts of Ukrainian society in staged democratic institutions, from elections to demonstrations by crowds-for-hire. Under certain previous administrations, electoral pressure and manipulation in Ukraine generally originated in the center, from the presidential administration, but they depended on the cooperation of regional political machines and many people’s reliance on local leaders for access to public goods such as energy, education, and healthcare. Politicians presided over complex patronage systems that extended into the lowest levels of government, prompting many people to participate in electoral politics not for the sake of ideas, but because they could not afford to alienate local party bosses or their employers—or to refuse payment in cash or kind to support incumbents. In some rural areas and company towns, party officials threatened people’s livelihoods if they did not turn out to vote for the right candidate or party.

For nearly two decades, even competitive elections included elements of stagecraft, as some people participated in seemingly grassroots demonstrations that were really organized and paid for by political parties. Voting often meant not choice but an obligation to local elites who could dole out or take away jobs, contracts, or cash. While many Ukrainians rebelled against the system by periodically taking to the streets in massive demonstrations, others learned quiescence from having been pressured to participate in highly manipulated campaigns and balloting.

This had consequences: It seeded doubt, drove sincerity out of politics, undermined trust in institutions, and deepened polarization. It created a divide between people whose livelihoods allowed them relative freedom from electoral manipulation and people who were compelled by force of circumstance to participate in staged democracy. Because stage-managed versions of democratic institutions can look very much like what people in liberal-democratic societies think of as the real thing, it became hard to tell the difference. For some who participated in them, the existence of staged elections some of the time, for part of the population, cast doubt on the integrity of all elections.
Even as some Ukrainians took part in massive street demonstrations in 2004 and 2014, for many other Ukrainians, a sense of helplessness and political apathy grew with each election that offered no meaningful choice.\(^2\)

As a politician, Zelensky moved Ukrainian electoral politics off the stage, running a successful presidential campaign that refused the use of patronage networks to compel votes or other orchestrated imitations of popular support. It took a comic actor, working later amid a tragedy of incomprehensible scale, to fully ensure that Ukrainian democracy could be found not only in the streets, but also at the ballot box and in local self-government. Paradoxically, Zelensky, master of onstage communication, took theater out of Ukrainian electoral politics.

### Zelensky’s Comedy State

Biographical sketches of Zelensky always include a passing mention of his career as showman and satirical actor, usually in reference to his situation comedy *Servant of the People* (2015–19). But Zelensky’s current work as a wartime president who not only actively speaks with the world, but also briefs his compatriots daily, draws upon decades of direct engagement with Ukrainians, who have known him for longer than Russians have known Vladimir Putin. Zelensky was a regular fixture on Ukrainian television starting in the 1990s in improvisational comedy competitions broadcast throughout the post-Soviet world, and starting in 2003 his troupe, Kvartal-95, performed their own musical revues on television. For many Ukrainians, Zelensky and his troupe became a symbol of continuity and calm in the twenty-first century amid years of political turmoil. Presidential administrations and mass protests came and went, but Zelensky and his improv troupe were always there.

Zelensky’s trademark as a satirical actor had been clear exposition of real-life situations familiar to Ukrainians, and a willingness always to call things by their names and to call out politicians, regardless of the risks. He did this as a young improv player, confronting Russian chauvinism from a Moscow stage, and as leader of Kvartal-95, when it criticized a sitting Ukrainian president in song.\(^3\) As a result, Ukrainians trusted Zelensky. Amid a cynical national politics that led people to respond to politics with irony, Zelensky projected honesty and sincerity.

Comedy and resilience in the face of unspeakable tragedy remains central to Zelensky’s wartime leadership and his vision of democracy, and laughter in the face of hardship has long been a part of his patriotic vision. From the stage, Zelensky and Kvartal-95 deliberately cultivated the practice of finding a way to laugh in the face of problems, using comedy as a unifying force to build social solidarity. They mocked political corruption and incompetence, territorial incursions by Russia, and Western indifference to those attacks on the international order.
Zelensky and his comedy troupe built a national vocabulary of shared experience that helped to foster a sense of what it means to be Ukrainian today.

From the stage, Zelensky encouraged shared laughter as a way to validate and overcome difficulty—a soldier’s sensibility, even as he worked as a showman. His comedy neither preached sunny denial nor expressed sadness-tinged mirth, but instead used humor—in Zelensky’s words, “the language of reasonable, healthy people”—as a tool of democratic resilience. His troupe created and performed skits and songs about challenges that Ukrainians faced in their public and private lives, from dealing with negative consequences of healthcare reform to negotiating gender roles, encouraging people to laugh together at those problems and together find solutions. For Zelensky and his troupe, comedy is an expression of freedom, a way of asserting limitless possibilities, and a tool for working through disagreements with others toward a common goal. This vision of comedy can now be found across Ukrainian society under attack: in bunker improv shows, in everyday jokes, in songs that raise morale.

This approach grew out of Ukrainian culture and the country’s written language and literature. The late-nineteenth-century poet Lesia Ukrainka wrote, “I want to laugh through tears, to sing songs amid disaster. . . . I’ll sow brightly-hued flowers on poor sad fallow land.” That poem, “Contra spem spero” is memorized by schoolchildren across Ukraine—and school textbooks containing it have been bombed, burned, and confiscated by Russian forces. Together with others in Ukrainian literature describing sacrifice in pursuit of a common purpose, the poem offers defiant joy and a vision of a better future in the face of hardship and pain.

A Shift to Political Nationhood

Today many Ukrainians credit Zelensky with unifying the country, but this work began long before Zelensky’s wartime presidential leadership. From the stage, Zelensky and Kvartal-95 participated in and guided a turn away from the east-versus-west, Russian-versus-Ukrainian identity poles that had dominated politics in independent Ukraine. Even as the Ukrainian constitution defines citizenship in civic rather than ethnic terms, politicians in Ukraine who wished to distance themselves from Russia and the Soviet past previously had emphasized the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian ethnic identity as a natural antipode. Zelensky’s theatrical work, as well as his civilian identity as a Russian speaker, showed a way for Russian-speaking Ukrainians to fully identify with the Ukrainian state and to express their patriotism.

As a performer, Zelensky articulated a form of political patriotism and a national idea that, in contrast to most modern European state-making, cultivated belonging not through imposition of a homogenous
national culture, but by elevating regional and local identities and differences. An example of this approach could be found in a popular musical number performed by Zelensky’s troupe, “De spasibo,” sung to the tune of “Despacito.” Ukraine is a country not only of people who speak more than one language, but also of arguments about whose regional dialects constitute proper Ukrainian. Zelensky and his troupe took an approach that celebrated rather than parsed local practices. In “De spasibo,” they highlighted the many possible ways to say “thank you” and “you’re welcome” in different cities across Ukraine—all different, but each comprehensible to all Ukrainians.

Since Russia’s invasion on February 24, Zelensky has continued to lead an ongoing transformation of Ukrainian society. Ever sensitive to his audience, he takes cues from his compatriots, transforming those cues into empowering messages for all. As wartime president, he has continued to articulate a Ukrainian identity rooted in shared moral qualities rather than ethnic particularity, supporting Ukrainians’ positive ideas of themselves as a political nation defined by a disposition, rather than by an imagined gene pool.

Zelensky has continued to articulate a Ukrainian identity rooted in shared moral qualities rather than ethnic particularity, supporting Ukrainians’ positive ideas of themselves as a political nation defined by a disposition, rather than by an imagined gene pool.

Since Russia’s invasion on February 24, Zelensky has continued to lead an ongoing transformation of Ukrainian society. Ever sensitive to his audience, he takes cues from his compatriots, transforming those cues into empowering messages for all. As wartime president, he has continued to articulate a Ukrainian identity rooted in shared moral qualities rather than ethnic particularity, supporting Ukrainians’ positive ideas of themselves as a political nation defined by a disposition (smilyvist’, or daring), rather than by an imagined gene pool. He offers encouragement when he addresses the nation, using Homeric epithets to describe his fellow Ukrainians in ways that help them to see the best in themselves: “Unbreakable peoples of the most daring country.”

At the same time, Zelensky has both mirrored and spearheaded a transformation in cultural practices in Ukraine. In those moments when he still leads using theater, Ukrainians are in on the act. Unlike the political theater that dominated Ukrainian politics before Zelensky, his current performances for the camera empower Ukrainians. For example, until recent months Zelensky, a lifelong speaker and wordsmith of the Russian language, spoke Ukrainian mainly in his role as head of state. Yet after February 24, Zelensky began to seem to stumble over Russian words in public. On such occasions, Zelensky would ask someone off camera, “How do you say that in Russian?” This happened often enough that Yuryi Velykyi, a Ukrainian comic and member of Kvartal-95, produced a video parody of Zelensky distancing himself from the language of the occupying forces. Zelensky may have been pretending to forget, but in doing so he led from the front, reflecting the massive flight from the Russian language among Russian-speaking Ukrainians that has been occurring nearly everywhere in Ukraine but especially in the east, since
the last days of February. No longer a marker of ethnic identity, widespread use of the state language in Ukraine has become an assertion of autonomy and independence.

Early in Zelensky’s presidency, some wondered if the values that he and his troupe expressed from the stage might amount to vague slogans, empty signifiers with no concrete policies to follow. But the values expressed in those decades of work clearly staked out a set of normative commitments that Zelensky has put into practice as wartime president.

People who followed Zelensky’s career would have expected his refusal of exfiltration at the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. Zelensky had emphasized loyalty and integrity both in his professional choices and the way he talked about those choices. As he described in a widely watched interview with Dmytro Gordon, “I will never accept conditions that would cause me to lose my pure dignity.” Zelensky’s career as a producer began when he was “excommunicated” from the international comedy improvisation league in 2003 after refusing an offer to stay on as a writer for the league—an offer that, if he had accepted, would have advanced his career while leaving his team behind.

Zelensky’s own loyalty to his colleagues and country, however, did not translate into an expectation of unquestioning loyalty toward him as leader. If during his stage career, Zelensky performed humorous critiques of politicians and encouraged social solidarity by validating individual positions and identities, as president his communication strategy has highlighted examples of constructive conflict in his interactions with constituents. He is seen engaging with people who disagree with him, setting boundaries in discussion only when disagreements become disrespectful—and Kvartal has parodied such incidents as President Zelensky sat and laughed in the studio audience.

In addition to skewering sitting politicians (who often sat in the audience at Kvartal shows), criticizing them for corruption and for failing to consult citizens about major policy decisions, Zelensky and Kvartal also asked Ukrainians to join them in examinations of conscience, in thinking about how to make the country better. For example, in 2019 they performed a song about people’s tacit acceptance of electoral manipulation. Addressing the issue on a deeper, human level, they voiced what many Ukrainians felt: that people had been taught self-pity and quiescence in the face of politicians’ intransigence. Societal change, the troupe argued in song, would mean Ukrainians admitting this fact to themselves and refusing to remain helpless.

Acknowledging the high price that would await a break with the mutually imbricated systems of oligarchic capital and electoral theater that ruled the country, Zelensky and Kvartal enjoined Ukrainians to break their silence and refuse politicians’ manipulations, to “walk into the light,” to listen “without averting your eyes, without looking
for excuses,” to “go through fire and water, for this is what freedom requires.”

Politics After Victory

As a stage performer and as president, Zelensky’s model of leadership encouraged Ukrainian society to self-mobilize for the sake of shared goals, freeing everyone “to do their part from their place,” as they see fit to achieve victory. But how will that leadership style function in postwar reconstruction, or during a potential prolonged period in which hostilities are limited to eastern and southern Ukraine, and life returns to a more stable equilibrium in the capital and surrounding regions? Sustained Russian aggression may mean that overt warfare continues amid reconstruction, but the tempo of violence and disruption may slow enough to prompt some Ukrainian people to focus on governance rather than crisis leadership.

Amid the suffering wrought by Russia’s war, Ukrainian people have acted creatively in a chaotic field to respond to the needs of their compatriots. Ukrainians displaced within and outside the country have organized self-help and humanitarian aid through Telegram channels and social-media–based platforms. Zelensky’s approach to leadership, which focuses on fostering conditions that free others to respond creatively, has been adaptive during this time when people’s main hope is to survive.

Once Ukrainians again look to their government to ensure more than their physical survival under missile fire, institutional politics will take on its former importance—as may the patronage networks long used by some political parties to gain votes. In the first days of Russia’s February invasion—when Zelensky declared with his closest presidential circle, “we are all here”—he made clear that his country would stand and fight. In mid-May, volunteers near Kharkiv pushing through temporarily occupied territory to the Russian border likewise addressed Zelensky with those words, “Mr. President, we are here.” But the patronage networks that made possible the staged democracy that existed before Zelensky’s presidency did not disappear with Russia’s war. They too are still here.

After victory, there remains the risk of a return to the status quo ante—not to Ukraine’s politics before Russia’s full-scale war, but to politics before Zelensky. Staged performances of democratic institutions happened before in Ukraine because many felt that they had little choice but to participate if they wished to preserve household economies. Amid the acute economic stress produced by war and occupation, politics after victory could draw some to participate in political-theater–style elections, “checking the right box” in exchange for guarantees of food or other forms of security as local bosses pull new strings created by wartime mobilization. And now that Ukrainians have the world’s attention, they could find themselves under pressure from different stake-
holders, domestic and international, who have offered support during the full-scale invasion—pressure that eventually could make its way to the ballot box.  

Because the political-theater model that dominated Ukrainian politics before Zelensky depends in part on continuity in economic relations—people comply with local leaders’ requests to vote in a certain way because they know they will need things from those leaders later—massive wartime displacement of people and industry may have disrupted those relations sufficiently to weaken their pull in politics. Meanwhile, the infusions of cash from abroad that eventually will support rebuilding Ukraine could trace new networks, reshaping the contours of political and economic power.

But if not, a key to maintaining Ukrainians’ unprecedented wartime engagement as participation in ordinary democratic governance may lie with the popular decentralization reforms that the Ukrainian government began implementing after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. These administrative changes, which focus on devolution of authority to local levels of self-government, incentivize grassroots mobilization and community improvement, cultivate local accountability and transparency, and potentially bypass certain existing patronage networks. The principles of Ukrainian decentralization, which strengthen local institutions but require a strong national leader to resist apparent centrifugal forces, were meant to combat separatism. Decentralization—like Zelensky’s approach to Ukrainian political identity, elevating the value of local practices in order to make possible a stronger union—is not federalism but localism, a way of trusting people with decisions about their own lives. Given a chance, decentralized governance in Ukraine could light the way for other democratic societies—just as Zelensky has reminded heads of government in those societies what a difference genuine leadership can make.

NOTES


2. Pisano, Staging Democracy.


11. Studio Kvartal 95, “(poet na russkom Despasito),” YouTube, 10 April 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv5z_AslP64.


