

Dr Volodymyr & Mr. Zelensky: the dark side of the Ukrainian president

by Guy Mettan*



Guy Mettan (Picture ma)

"Héros de la liberté", "Hero of Our Time", "Der Unbeugsame", "The Unlikely Ukrainian Hero Who Defied Putin and United the World", "Zelensky, Ukraine in

blood": the Western media and leaders no longer know what superlatives to use to sing the praises of the Ukrainian president, so fascinated are they by the "amazing resilience" of the comedian miraculously transformed into a "warlord" and "saviour of democracy".

For the past three months, the Ukrainian head of state has been making the headlines, opening the news, inaugurating the Cannes Film Festival, haranguing parliaments, congratulating and admonishing his colleagues at the head of states ten times more powerful than he is, with a zest and tactical intuition that no film actor or political leader before him had ever known.

How can you not be spellbound by this improbable Mr. Bean who, after conquering the public with his grimaces and extravagances (walking naked in a shop and mimicking a pianist playing with his genitals, for example), was able to swap his antics and gravelly puns for a grey-green T-shirt, a beard of a week and serious words in order to galvanise his troops who were attacked by the evil Russian bear?

Career as a comedian

Since 24 February, Volodymyr Zelensky has unquestionably proved himself to be an exceptionally talented artist in international politics. Those who had followed his career as a comedian were not surprised because they knew his innate sense of improvisation, his pantomimic abilities

and his audacity in acting. The way he campaigned and even defeated tough opponents like former president Poroshenko in a few weeks between 31 December 2018 and 21 April 2019, mobilising his production team and generous oligarch donors, had already proved the extent of his talents. Now it was only a matter of making something of this success. This has now happened.

Talent for double-dealing

However, as is often the case, the front rarely looks like the backdrop. The spotlight conceals more than it shows. And here, as we unfortunately have to realise, the picture is less than stellar: both his achievements as head of state and his performance as defender of democracy leave a lot to be desired.

Shortly after his selection, Zelensky demonstrated his talent for double-dealings. We recall that he was elected with a score of 73.2 percent of the votes, promising to put an end to corruption, to lead Ukraine on the path of progress and civilisation, and above all to make peace with the Russian-speaking population in Donbass. As soon as he was elected, he betrayed all his promises with such untimely zeal that his popularity rating fell to 23% in January 2022, to the point of being outdistanced even by his two main opponents.

From May 2019, to satisfy his oligarch sponsors, the newly elected president launched a massive land privatisation programme covering 40 million hectares of good agricultural land under the pretext that the moratorium on land sales would have cost the country's GDP billions of dollars. In the wake of the "de-communisation" and "de-Russification" programmes begun since the pro-US coup of February 2014, he launched a vast operation of privatisation of state assets, fiscal austerity, deregulation of labour laws and dismantling of trade unions, thus angering a majority of Ukrainians who had not understood what their candidate meant by "progress", "westernisation" and "normalisation" of the Ukrainian economy. In a country that, in 2020, had a per capita income of 3,726 dollars against 10,126 dollars in

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Russia, while in 1991 the average income in Ukraine exceeded that in Russia, the comparison is not flattering. And it is understandable that the Ukrainians did not applaud this umpteenth neo-liberal reform.

As for the march towards the west, it took the form of another decree which, on 19 May 2021, ensures the domination of the Ukrainian language and bans Russian from all spheres of public life, administrations, schools and businesses, much to the satisfaction of the nationalists and the astonishment of the Russian-speaking people in the south-east of the country.

A runaway sponsor

The record on corruption is no better. In 2015, the *Guardian* estimated that Ukraine was the most corrupt country in Europe. In 2021, *Transparency International*, a western NGO based in Berlin, ranked Ukraine 122nd in the world for corruption, close to despised Russia (136th). Not brilliant for a country that passes for a paragon of virtue in the face of Russian barbarians. According to the Kyiv Post!, corruption is everywhere; in ministries, administrations, public companies, parliament, the police, and even in the High Court of Anti-Corruption. It is not uncommon to see judges driving around in Porsches, the newspapers observe.

Joe Biden's son Hunter

Zelensky's main sponsor, *Ihor Kolomoyskyi*, who lives in Geneva where he owns luxurious offices, is not the least of these oligarchs who profit from the prevailing corruption: on 5 March 2021, *Anthony Blinken*, who probably had no choice, announced that the State Department had frozen his assets and banned him from the United States because of "involvement in significant corruption".

Kolomoyskyi was accused of embezzling \$5.5 billion from the state-owned *Privatbank*. Coincidentally, the good Ihor was also the main shareholder of the oil holding company *Burisma*, which employed *Joe Biden's* son *Hunter* for a modest compensation of \$50,000 a month and which is now under investigation by the Delaware prosecutor. A wise precaution: according to some witnesses, Kolomoyskyi, who has become persona non grata in Israel and escaped to Georgia thus avoids the risk of having to testify.

This is the same Kolomoyskyi, who was a key figure in Ukraine's progress, and who shaped

Zelensky's entire career as an actor and who is implicated in the "Pandora Papers" affair revealed by the press in October 2021. These papers revealed that since 2012, the *TV channel 1+1* belonging to the sulphurous oligarch had paid no less than 40 million dollars to its star Zelensky and that the latter, shortly before being elected president and with the help of his close guard from Kryvyi Rih – the two *Shefir* brothers, one of whom is the author of Zelensky's scripts and the other the head of the State Security Service, and the producer and owner of their joint production company *Kvartal 95* – had prudently transferred considerable sums to offshore accounts opened in his wife's name, while acquiring three undeclared flats in London for the sum of \$7.5 million.

This taste of the "servant of the people" (that's the name of his TV series and his political party) for non-proletarian comfort is confirmed by a photo that briefly appeared on social networks and was immediately deleted by anti-conspiracy fact-checkers, which showed him making himself comfortable in a tropical palace at a few tens of thousands of dollars a night, when he was supposed to be spending his winter holidays in a modest ski resort in the Carpathians.

Tatoos on arms, necks and back

The art of tax optimisation and the assiduous association with controversial oligarchs do not argue in favour of an unconditional presidential commitment to fighting corruption. Nor does the fact that he tried to eliminate the troublesome president of the Constitutional Court, *Oleksandr Tupytskyi*.

And he appointed an unknown man called *Denys Chmyrnal* as Prime minister after his predecessor, *Oleksyi Goncharuk*, left office due to scandal. Chmyrnal had the merit of running one of the factories of the richest man in the country, *Rinat Akhmetov*, owner of the famous *Azovstal factory*, the last refuge of the freedom fighters of the Azov battalion. Fighters who sported tatoos on their arms, necks, backs or chests glorifying the *Wolfsangel of the SS Division "Das Reich"*, phrases from *Adolf Hitler* or swastikas, as seen on the countless videos released by the Russians after their surrender.

Hostage of Azov battalions

For the rapprochement of the flamboyant Volodymyr with the most extreme representat-

ives of the Ukrainian nationalist right is not the least of Dr Zelensky's oddities. This complicity was immediately denied with the greatest virulence by the Western press, which judged it scandalous because of the president's suddenly rediscovered Jewish origins. How could a Jewish president sympathise with neo-Nazis, who are presented as a tiny minority of fringe people? One should not give credit to *Vladimir Putin's* "denazification" operation ...

And yet the facts are unchangeable and far from trivial.

It is certain that Zelensky personally has never been close to neo-Nazi ideology or even to the Ukrainian nationalist far right. His Jewish ancestry, even if relatively remote and never claimed before February 2022, obviously excludes any antisemitism on his part. This rapprochement therefore does not betray an affinity but is a matter of banal *raison d'état* and a well-understood mixture of pragmatism and the instinct for physical and political survival.

One has to go back to October 2019 to understand the nature of the relationship between Zelensky and the far right. And you have to understand that these far-right formations, even if they only weigh 2 percent of the electorate, still represent nearly a million highly motivated and well-organised people who are spread across numerous groupings and movements, of which the Azov regiment (co-founded and financed as early as 2014 by Kolomoyskyi –him again! – is only the best known. To it must be added the organisations *Aidar, Dnipro, Safari, Svoboda, Pravy Sektor, C14* and *National Corps* for reason of completeness.

Zelensky's "veterans"

C14, named after the number of words in the American neo-Nazi *David Lane's* phrase ("We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children"), is one of the least known abroad but most feared for its racist violence in Ukraine.

All of these groups were more or less merged into the Ukrainian army and National Guard at the initiative of their leader, former interior minister *Arsen Avakov*, who ruled the Ukrainian security apparatus unchallenged from 2014 to 2021. They are the ones Zelensky calls "veterans" since autumn 2019.

A few months after his election, the young president went to Donbass to try to fulfil his

election promise and enforce the *Minsk agreements* signed by his predecessor. The far-right forces, who have been shelling the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk since 2014 at the cost of ten thousand deaths, welcome him with the greatest circumspection because they are suspicious of this "pacifist" president. They are waging a merciless campaign against peace under the slogan "No surrender".

In one video, a pale Zelensky pleads with them: "I am the president of this country. I am 41 years old. I am not a loser. I'm coming to you and say: withdraw the guns." The video was released on social networks and Zelensky immediately became the target of a hate campaign. This was the end of his desire for peace and the implementation of the *Minsk agreements*.

Shortly after this incident, a minor withdrawal of the extremist forces took place, and then the bombing resumed in earnest.

Nationalist crusade

The problem is that not only has Zelensky given in to their blackmail but he joined them in their nationalist crusade. After his failed expedition in November 2019, he received several far-right leaders, including *Yehven Taras*, the leader of C14, while his prime minister stands by *Andryi Medvedko*, a neo-Nazi figure suspected of murder. He also supports the footballer *Zolzulya* against Spanish fans who accuse him of being a Nazi because of his proclaimed support for *Stepan Bandera*, the nationalist leader who collaborated with Nazi Germany during the war (and with the CIA after the war) and participated in the Jewish holocaust.

Collaboration with nationalist radicals is well established. In November last year, Zelensky appointed the ultra-nationalist *Dmytro Yarosh* from Pravy Sektor as special adviser to the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army and, since February 2022, as head of the Volunteer Army, which is waging terror in the rear.

At the same time, he appointed *Oleksander Poklad*, nicknamed "the strangler" because of his taste for torture, as head of the SBU's counter-intelligence unit. In December, two months before the war, it was the turn of another Pravy Sektor leader, Commander *Dmytro Kotsuybaylo*, to be rewarded with the title of "Hero of Ukraine" while, a week after the start of hostilities, Zelensky had the regional governor of Odessa replaced by *Maksym Marchenko*, com-

mander of the ultranationalist *Aidar* battalion, the very same one with whom Bernard-Henri Lévy would make a point of marching.

Was the far right appeased by giving them positions? Shared ultra-patriotism? Or a simple convergence of interests between a neo-liberal, Atlanticist, pro-Western right and a nationalist far right that dreams of smashing Russians and “leading the white races of the world in a final crusade against the Untermenschen guided by the Semites”, in the words of former deputy *Andryi Biletsky*, leader of the National Corps? It is not clear, as no journalist has ventured to ask Zelensky this question.

Intimidation, abduction, executions

What remains beyond doubt, however, is the increasingly authoritarian, even criminal, drift of the Ukrainian regime. So much so that its zealots should think twice before nominating their idol for the Nobel Peace Prize. While the media look the other way, a real campaign of intimidation, kidnappings and executions is underway against local and national elected officials suspected of being Russian agents or of connivance with the enemy because they want to avoid an escalation of the conflict.

“One less traitor in Ukraine! He was found killed and was tried by the people’s court!” This is how the adviser to the Interior Minister, *Anton Gerashenko*, announced on his *Telegram* account the murder of *Volodymyr Strok*, mayor and former deputy of the small town of Kremnina. Suspected of having collaborated with the Russians, he was kidnapped and tortured before being executed. On 7 March, the mayor of Gostomel was killed because he had tried to negotiate a humanitarian corridor with the Russian military. On 24 March, the mayor of Kupyansk asked Zelensky to release his daughter, who had been kidnapped by SBU agents. At the same time, one of the Ukrainian negotiators was found dead after being accused of treason by the nationalist media. No less than eleven mayors have been reported missing to date, including in regions never occupied by the Russians...

Prohibited opposition parties

But the repression does not stop there. It hit the critical media, which were all closed down, and the opposition parties, which were all dissolved.

In February 2021, Zelensky closed down three opposition channels deemed to be pro-Russian

and supposedly owned by the oligarch *Viktor Medvedchuk*, *News One*, *Zik* and *112 Ukraine*. The State Department hails this attack on press freedom, stating that “the US supports Ukrainian efforts to counter Russia’s malign influence ...”. In January 2022, a month before the war, Nash was shut down. After the war began, the regime started harassing for left-wing journalists, bloggers and commentators. At the beginning of April, two right-wing channels were also affected. *Channel 5* and *Pryamiy*. A presidential decree obliges all channels to broadcast a single, pro-government tone of voice.

Recently the witch-hunt even extended to the country’s most popular critical blogger, Ukraine’s *Navalny*, *Anatoliy Shariy*, who was arrested on 4 May by the Spanish authorities at the request of the Ukrainian political police. Attacks on the press at least equivalent to those of the autocrat Putin, but never heard of in the Western media ...

The purge was even more severe for political parties. It decimated Zelensky’s main opponents. In the spring of 2021, the home of the main opponent, Medvedchuk, reputedly close to Putin, was ransacked and its owner placed under house arrest. On 12 April, the oligarch parliamentarian was forcibly interned in an undisclosed location, visibly drugged, deprived of visits before being shown on TV and offered in exchange for the release of the Azovstal defenders, in defiance of all the Geneva conventions. His lawyers, threatened, had to give up defending him in favour of someone close to the services.

Last December, it was *Petro Poroshenko*, rising in the polls again, who was accused of treason. On 20 December 2021, at 3.07 pm, the official SBU website listed him as a suspect for crimes of treason and support for terrorist activities. The former president was accused of “making Ukraine energy dependent on Russia and the leaders of the Russian-controlled pseudo-republics.”

On 3 March, activists of the *Lizvizia* Left were raided by the SBU and imprisoned by the dozen. Then on 19 March, repression hit the whole of the Ukrainian left. By decree, eleven left-wing parties were banned: Party for Life, Left Opposition, Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, Socialist Party of Ukraine, Union of Left Forces, Socialists, Shariy Party, Ours, State, Opposition Bloc Volodymyr Saldo.

Other activists, bloggers and human rights defenders are arrested and tortured, journalist *Yan Taksyur*, activist *Elena Brezhnaya*, MMA boxer *Maxim Ryndovskiy* or lawyer *Elena Viacheslavova*, whose father was charred to death in the pogrom of 2 May 2014 at the Odessa House of Trade Unions.

Russian men as cockroaches

To complete this list, we should mention the men and women stripped naked and whipped in public by the nationalists in the streets of Kiev, the Russian prisoners beaten and shot in the legs before being executed, the soldier whose eye was pierced before being killed, the members of the Georgian Legion who executed Russian prisoners in a village near Kiev, while their leader boasted that he never takes prisoners. On the *Ukraine 24* channel, it was the head of the army's medical service who said he had given the order "to castrate all Russian men because they are subhuman and worse than cockroaches". Finally, Ukraine is making extensive use of facial recognition technology from the company *Clearview* to identify dead Russians and broadcast their photos on Russian social networks, ridiculing them ...

An Oscar-winning actor

The examples could be multiplied, as there are so many quotes and videos of atrocities committed by the troops of the defender of democracy and human rights who presides over the destiny of Ukraine. But this would be tedious and counterproductive with a public opinion convinced that these barbaric behaviours are solely due to the Russians.

This is why no NGO is alarmed, the *Council of Europe* is silent, the *International Criminal Court* is not investigating, and press freedom organisations are silent. They have not listened well to what the kindly Volodymyr told them during a visit to Butcha at the beginning of April: "If we do not find a civilised way out, you know our people, they will find an uncivilised way out."

Ukraine's problem is that its president, willingly or unwillingly, has ceded power to extremists internally and to the NATO military externally in order to indulge in the pleasure of being worshipped by crowds around the world. Was it not he who told a French journalist on 5 March, ten days after the Russian invasion: "Today, my life is beautiful. I believe I am wanted. I feel that this is the most important meaning of my life: to be wanted. To feel that you are not just breathing, walking and eating something. You are living!"

We told you: *Zelenski is a great actor*. Like his predecessor as *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*¹ in 1932, he deserves to win the Oscar for best male role of the decade. But when he is faced with the task of rebuilding his country after a war, he could have prevented in 2019, the return to reality may be difficult.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ "The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" is a short story by the Scottish writer *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1850–1894) published in 1886. The central motif deals with a dual personality.

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