

The Real Zelensky: From Celebrity Populist to Unpopular Pinochet-style Neoliberal

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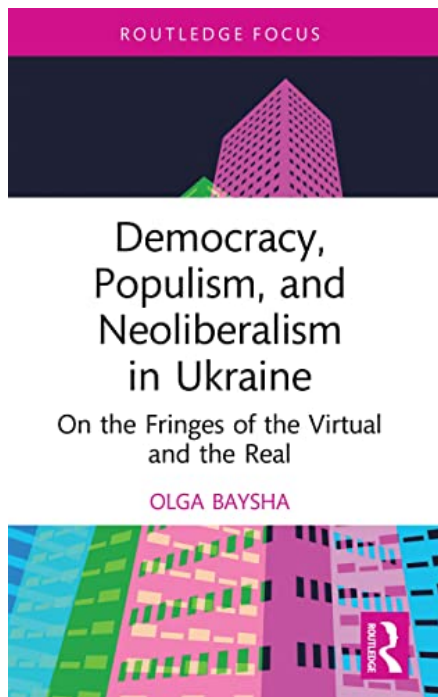
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Ukrainian academic Olga Baysha details Volodymyr Zelensky’s embrace of widely loathed neoliberal policies, his repression of rivals, and how his actions fueled the current war with Russia.

A comedic actor who rose to the country’s highest office in 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was virtually unknown to the average American, except perhaps as a [bit player](#) in the Trump impeachment theater. But when Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Zelensky was suddenly transformed to an A-list celebrity in US media. American news consumers were bombarded with images of a man who [appeared](#) overcome by the tragic events, possibly in over his head, but ultimately sympathetic. It didn’t take long for that image to evolve into the khaki-clad, tireless hero governing over a scrappy little democracy and single-handedly staving off the barbarians of autocracy from the east.

But beyond that carefully crafted Western media image is something much more complicated and less flattering. Zelensky was elected by [73 percent](#) of the vote on a promise to pursue peace while the rest of his platform was vague. On the eve of the invasion, however, his approval rating had sunk to [31 percent](#) due to the pursuit of deeply unpopular policies.



Ukrainian academic, Olga Baysha, author of *Democracy, Populism, and Neoliberalism in Ukraine: On the Fringes of the Virtual and the Real*, has studied Zelensky's rise to power and how he has wielded that power since becoming president.

In the interview below, Baysha discusses Zelensky's embrace of neoliberalism and increasing authoritarianism, how his actions contributed to the current war; his counterproductive and self-absorbed leadership throughout the war, the complex cultural and political views and identities of Ukrainians, the partnership between neoliberals and the radical right during and after Maidan, and whether a Russian takeover of the entire Donbass region might be less popular among the local population than it would have been in 2014.

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Natylie Baldwin: Tell us a bit about your background. Where are you from and how did you become interested in your current area of study?

Olga Baysha: I am an ethnic Ukrainian born in Kharkov, a Ukrainian city on the borderline with Russia, where my dad and other relatives are still living. Before the current war, Kharkov was one of Ukraine's leading educational and scientific centers. The city's residents pride themselves on living in the "intellectual capital" of Ukraine. In 1990, the first television company free from party control was established there; soon, its first news program went on air. By that time, I had already graduated from Kharkov University, and one day, I was invited to work as a journalist in this program by a university friend. Next day, without prior experience, I started reporting. In a couple of months, I was a news presenter. My meteoric career was not an exception.

New uncontrolled media, the number of which was increasing at a huge rate daily, demanded more and more media workers. In the overwhelming majority of cases, they were young ambitious people without any journalistic education or life experience. What united us was the desire to westernize, a lack of understanding of societal contradictions characterizing the post-Soviet transition, and deafness to the concerns of working people who opposed reforms. In our eyes, the latter were "retrograde": they did not understand what civilization was about. We saw [our]selves as a revolutionary vanguard and chosen

progressive reformers. It is we—media workers—who created a favorable environment for Ukraine’s neoliberalization, presented as westernization and civilization, with all disastrous consequences for society they brought. Only years after, I realized this.

Later, while supervising the production of historical documentaries in a Kiev television company, I recognized that the mythology of unidirectional historical progress and inevitability of westernization for “barbarians” provided an ideological ground for neoliberal experiments not only in the former Soviet states but around the globe. It is this interest in the global hegemony of the ideology of westernization that led me first to the doctoral program in critical media studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and then to the research I am doing now.

NB: According to the academic [work](#) of some Ukrainian sociologists, polling showed in the recent past that most Ukrainians were not very interested in the issue of identity but were more concerned with issues like jobs, wages, and prices. Your work focuses a lot on the Neoliberal reforms that were enacted in Ukraine since 2019 – against the popular sentiment. Can you talk about what the view is on economic issues for most Ukrainians and why?

OB: In the social milieus [in which] I lived — the east of Ukraine, Crimea, and Kiev — there were very few people concerned with the issue of ethnic identity. I do not in vain emphasize “my social milieus.” Ukraine is a complex and divided country with its far east and far west holding diametrically different views on all socially significant issues. Since the declaration of Ukraine’s independence in 1991, two ideas of national identity have been competing in Ukraine: “ethnic Ukrainian” versus “eastern Slavic.” The ethnic Ukrainian national idea, based on the notion that Ukrainian culture, language, and ethnicity-centered history should be the dominant integrating forces in the Ukrainian nation-state, has been much more popular in the west of Ukraine. The eastern Slavic idea, which envisages the Ukrainian nation as founded on two primary ethnic groups, languages, and cultures — Ukrainian and Russian — has been accepted as normal in the Ukrainian southeast. However, in general, I can agree that most Ukrainians are much more concerned with economic issues, which has always been the case.

As a matter of fact, Ukraine’s independence of 1991 was to a big extent also a matter of economic concerns. Many Ukrainians supported the idea of political divorce from Russia because of an expectation that Ukraine would be better off economically — this is what propagandistic leaflets promised us. This economic hope was not realized. In many ways, the collapse of the Soviet Union radically changed people’s lives for the worse because of Ukraine’s neoliberalization — the marketization of the social sphere and ruination of the Soviet welfare state.

What about neoliberal reforms initiated by Zelensky? You can judge on their popularity by opinion polls – up to 72% of Ukrainians did not support his land reform, the flagship of Zelensky’s neoliberal program. After his party approved it despite people’s indignation, Zelensky’s rating fell from 73 percent in Spring 2019 to 23 percent in January 2022. The reason is simple: a deep sense of betrayal. In his unofficial election platform — the show “Servant of the People” — Zelesnky-Holoborodko [Holoborodko was Zelensky’s character in the television show – NB] promised that if he could rule the country for just one week, he would “make the teacher live as the president, and the president live as the teacher.” To put it mildly, this promise was not fulfilled. People realized that they were duped once again—the reforms have been carried out in the interests of not Ukrainians but global capital.

NB: To what extent do you think that prioritizing of economic security versus identity issues has changed with the Russian invasion? How do you think that will work out for the political fortunes of the nationalists/ultranationalists versus moderates or leftists?

OB: That is an interesting question. On the one hand, people's priority now is to survive, which makes security their primary concern. To save their lives, millions of Ukrainians, including my mom and my sister with children, have left Ukraine for Europe. Many of them are ready to stay there forever, to learn foreign languages, and to adopt to a foreign way of life—all these developments can hardly prioritize identity concerns. On the other hand, however, the intensification of ethnic sentiments and the consolidation of the nation in the face of the invasion is also evident. I can judge on this from public discussions in social media—some Kharkovites whom I know personally even started making posts in Ukrainian [language], which they had never used before, to highlight their national identity and signal that they are against any foreign invasion.

This is another tragic aspect of this war. The Maidan revolution of 2014, which many people in the southeast did not support, transformed these people into “slaves,” “sovki” and “vatniki”—derogatory terms to denote their backwardness and barbarism. This is how Maidan revolutionaries, who considered themselves the progressive force of history, saw anti-Maidan “others” because of their adherence to Russian language and culture. Never ever could this pro-Russian population imagine Russia to shell their cities and ruin their lives. The tragedy of these people is twofold: first, their world was ruined symbolically by the Maidan, now, it is being destroyed physically by Russia.

The outcomes of these developments are unclear so far as it is unclear how the war will end. If the southeastern regions remain in Ukraine, the ruination of everything resisting aggressive nationalism will most likely be completed. This will be probably the end of this unique borderline culture that has never wanted to be either completely Ukrainized or Russified. If Russia establishes control over these regions, as it boasts now, I can hardly predict how it will be dealing with mass resentment—at least, in the cities that are damaged significantly, as in Kharkov.

NB: Moving to Zelensky specifically - one thing you point out in your book is how Zelensky served as this sort of Pied Piper figure in that he used his celebrity and acting skills to get people to support him on behalf of this vague, feel-good agenda (peace, democracy, progress, anticorruption) but that really obscured another agenda that would not have been popular, specifically a Neoliberal economic agenda. Can you talk about how he did that - how did he run his campaign and what were his priorities after he got into office?

OB: The basic argument presented in my recent book is that the astonishing victory of Zelensky and his party, later transformed into a parliamentary machine to churn out and rubber-stamp neoliberal reforms (in a “turbo regime,” as they called it), cannot be explained apart from the success of his television series, which, as many observers believe, served as Zelensky's informal election platform. Unlike his official platform, which ran only 1,601 words in length and contained few policy specifics, the 51 half-hour episodes of his show provided Ukrainians with a detailed vision of what should be done so that Ukraine could progress.

The message delivered by Zelensky to Ukrainians through his show is clearly populist. The people of Ukraine are portrayed in it as an unproblematic totality devoid of internal splits,

from which only oligarchs and corrupted politicians/officials are excluded. The country becomes healthy only after getting rid of both oligarchs and their puppets. Some of them are imprisoned or flee the country; their property is confiscated without any regard to legality. Later, Zelensky-the-president will do the same towards his political rivals.

Interestingly, the show ignores the theme of the Donbass war, which erupted in 2014, a year before the series started being broadcast. As the Maidan and Russia-Ukraine relations are very divisive issues in Ukrainian society, Zelensky ignored them so as not to jeopardize the unity of his virtual nation, his viewers, and ultimately his voters.

Zelensky's election promises, made on the fringes of the virtual and the real, were predominantly about Ukraine's "progress," understood as "modernization," "Westernization," "civilization," and "normalization." It is this progressive modernizing discourse that allowed Zelensky to camouflage his plans for neoliberal reforms, launched just three days after the new government came to power. Throughout the campaign, the idea of "progress" highlighted by Zelensky was never linked to privatization, land sales, budget cuts, etc. Only after Zelensky had consolidated his presidential power by establishing full control over the legislative and executive branches of power did he make it clear that the "normalization" and "civilization" of Ukraine meant the privatization of land and state/public property, the deregulation of labor relations, a reduction of power for trade unions, an increase in utility tariffs, and so on.

NB: You've pointed out that many foreigners were appointed to important economic and social posts after the 2014 coup and before Zelensky's term. Similarly, many of Zelensky's officials have close ties to global neoliberal institutions and you've suggested there is evidence that they manipulate Zelensky who has an unsophisticated understanding of economics/finance. Can you discuss that aspect of the ramifications of the pro-Western change of government in 2014? What are the larger interests at play here and do they have the interests of the general Ukrainian population in mind at all?

OB: Yes, the Maidan change of power in 2014 marked the beginning of a completely new era in the history of Ukraine in terms of Western influence on its sovereign decisions. To be sure, since Ukraine declared its independence in 1991, this influence has always existed. American Chamber of Commerce, Center for US-Ukraine relations, US-Ukraine Business Council, European Business Association, IMF, EBDR, WTO, the EU—all these lobbying and regulating institutions have been significantly affect[ing] Ukrainian political decisions.

However, never in the pre-Maidan history of Ukraine had the country appointed foreign citizens to top ministerial posts—this became possible only after the Maidan. In 2014, Natalie Jaresko—a citizen of the US—was appointed Ukraine's Minister of Finance, Aivaras Abromavičius—a citizen of Lithuania—became Ukraine's Minister of Economy and Trade, Alexander Kvitashvili—a citizen of Georgia—the Minister of Healthcare. In 2016, Ulana Suprun—a citizen of the US—was appointed the acting Minister of Healthcare. Other foreigners assumed offices of lower ranks. Needless to say, all these appointments resulted not from the will of Ukrainians but from the recommendations of the global neoliberal institutions, which is not surprising given that the Maidan itself was not supported by half of Ukraine's population.

As already mentioned, the majority of these anti-Maidan "others" reside in the southeastern regions. The farther east one looked, the stronger and more unified a rejection of the Maidan with its European agenda one would find. More than 75 percent of those living in the

Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (two eastern regions of Ukraine predominantly populated by Russian-speakers) did not support the Maidan, while only 20 percent of people living in Crimea supported it.

These statistical figures, provided by Kiev Institute of Sociology in April 2014, did not prevent Western institutions of power from arguing that the Maidan was the uprising of “Ukrainian people” presented as an unproblematic totality—a very powerful ideological trick. When visiting the Maidan Square and encouraging its revolutionaries to protest, members of the “international community” disrespected millions of Ukrainians who held anti-Maidan views, thus contributing to the escalation of the civil conflict, which at the end of the day led to the disaster that we are helplessly observing today.

What about foreign interests invested in Ukraine’s neoliberalization, carried out in the name of the Ukrainian people? [T]hey are diverse, but behind the land reform, which I have been analyzing carefully, there were financial lobbies in the West. Western pension funds and investment funds wanted to invest money that was depreciating. Looking for assets to invest in, they enlisted support of the IMF, the World Bank, EBRD, and various lobbying groups to promote their interests and lay out all necessary groundwork. This has nothing to do with the interests of Ukrainians, of course.

NB: How has Zelensky’s record been on democracy – freedom of speech and press, political pluralism and treatment of different political parties? How does it compare to past presidents of post-Soviet Ukraine?

OB: I agree with Jodi Dean who argues that democracy is a neoliberal fantasy in a sense that it cannot exist in neoliberal systems of government controlled not by people but by supranational institutions. As mentioned earlier, this became especially evident after the Maidan when foreign ministers were appointed by these institutions to present their interests in Ukraine. However, in his reforming zeal, Zelensky went further. In early February 2021, first three oppositional television channels—*NewsOne*, *Zik*, and *112 Ukraine*—were shut down. Another oppositional channel *Nash* was banned in the beginning of 2022, before the beginning of the war. After the war broke out, in March, dozens of independent journalists, bloggers, and analysts were arrested; most of them are of leftist views. In April, television channels of right-wing leaning—*Channel 5* and *Pryamiy*—were shut down as well. Moreover, Zelensky signed a decree obliging all Ukrainian channels to broadcast a single telethon, presenting only one pro-governmental view on the war.

All these developments are unprecedented for the history of independent Ukraine. Zelensky’s proponents argue that all the arrests and media bans should be written off for military expediency, ignoring the fact that the first media closures happened one year before the Russian invasion. As for me, Zelensky only uses this war to strengthen dictatorial tendencies within his regime of government, which started being formed right after Zelensky came to power—when he created a party machine to control the parliament and rubber-stamp neoliberal reforms without regard to public mood.

NB: The National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) was used by Zelensky in 2021 to sanction certain people – mostly political rivals. Can you explain what the NSDC is and why Zelensky was doing it and whether it was legal or not.

OB: After his popular support plummeted in 2021, Zelensky launched the unconstitutional process of extrajudicial sanctions against his political opponents, imposed by National

Security and Defense Council (NSDC). These sanctions involved the extrajudicial seizure of property without any evidence of illegal activities of the relevant individuals and legal entities. Among the first to be sanctioned by the NSDC were two parliamentary deputies from the Opposition Platform “For Life” (OPZZh)—Victor Medvedchuk (later arrested and shown on TV with his face beaten up after interrogation) and Taras Kozak (managed to escape from Ukraine), as well as members of their families. This happened in February 2021; in March 2022, 11 oppositional parties were banned. The decisions to ban oppositional parties and sanction oppositional leaders were taken by NSDC; they were put into effect by presidential decrees.

The Constitution of Ukraine states that The Council of National Security and Defense is a coordinating body: it “co-ordinates and controls the activity of bodies of executive power in the sphere of national security and defense.” This has nothing to do with prosecuting political opponents and confiscating their property—something NSDC has been doing since 2021. It goes without saying that this know-how of Zelensky’s regime is unconstitutional—only courts may decide on who is guilty or not and confiscate property. But the problem is that Ukrainian courts turned out to be unprepared to serve as Zelensky’s puppets. After the head of Ukraine’s Constitutional Court Oleksandr Tupytskyi called Zelensky’s unconstitutional reforms a “coup,” Zelensky had nothing to do but to rely on NSDC to push forward his unpopular policies. What about the “dissident” Tupytskyi? On March 27, 2021—also in violation of the Ukrainian Constitution—Zelensky signed a decree canceling his appointment as a judge of the court.

Under Stalin’s rule, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) created “troikas” to issue sentences to people after simplified, speedy investigations and without a public and fair trial. What we observe in the case of NSDC is a very similar development, only NSDC unconstitutional trials have a bigger number of participants—all the key figures of the state, including the president, the prime minister, the head of Ukrainian security service, prosecutor general of Ukraine, etc. One NSDC meeting can decide destinies of hundreds of people. In June 2021 alone, Zelensky put into effect a NSDC decision to impose sanctions against 538 individuals and 540 companies.

NB: I’d like to ask you about the “Peacemaker” (Myrotvorets) list that is reportedly [affiliated](#) with the Ukrainian government and SBU intelligence service. My understanding is that this is a list of “enemies of the state” and publishes said enemies’ personal information. Several of those who appeared on it have been subsequently murdered. Can you talk about this list, how do people end up on it, and how does it fit into a government that we’ve been told is democratic?

OB: The nationalistic *Myrotvorets* website was launched in 2015 “by a people’s deputy holding a position of adviser to the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine”—this is how the UN report describes this. The name of this people’s deputy is Anton Gerashchenko, a former advisor to the former Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov. It is under Avakov’s patronage in 2014 [that] nationalistic punitive battalions were created to be sent to Donbass for suppressing people’s resistance against the Maidan. *Myrotvorets* has been part of the general strategy of intimidating the opponents of the coup. Any “enemy of the people”—anybody who dares to express publicly anti-Maidan views or challenge Ukraine’s nationalistic agenda—may occur on this website. The addresses of Oles Buzina, a famous publicist [journalist], shot dead by nationalists near his apartment building in Kyiv, and Oleg Kalashnikov, an oppositional deputy killed by nationalists in his house, were also on *Myrotvorets*, which helped the killers to find their victims. The names of the murderers are well known; however, they are not

imprisoned because in contemporary Ukraine, whose political life is controlled by radicals, they are considered heroes.

The site was not shut down even after an international scandal when *Myrotvorets* published the personal data of well-known foreign politicians, including the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. But, in contrast to Mr. Schröder residing in Germany, thousands of Ukrainians whose data are on *Myrotvorets*, cannot feel safe. All those arrested in March 2022 had been on *Myrotvorets* as well. Some of them I know personally – Yuri Tkachev, the editor of Odessa newspaper *Timer* and Dmitry Dzhangirov, the editor of *Capital*, a YouTube channel.

Many of those whose names are on *Myrotvorets*, managed to flee Ukraine after the Maidan; some were able to do it after mass arrests this March. One of them is Tarik Nezalezhko, Dzhangirov's colleague. On April 12, 2022, already being safe outside of Ukraine, he made a post on YouTube, calling Ukraine's Security Service "Gestapo" and giving advice to his viewers on how to avoid being captured by its agents.

That said, Ukraine is not a democratic country. The more I observe what is going on there, the more I think about the modernization path of Augusto Pinochet, who, as a matter of fact, is admired by our neoliberals. For a long period of time, the crimes of Pinochet's regime had not been investigated. But in the end, humanity discovered the truth. I only hope that in Ukraine this will happen earlier.

NB: Ukrainian academic Volodymyr Ishchenko said in a recent [interview](#) with NLR that, unlike in Western Europe, there is more of a partnership between nationalism and Neoliberalism in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. This was even observed in the Donbass among the more affluent. Do you agree with that? If so, can you explain how that combination evolved?

OB: I agree with Volodymyr. What we observe in Ukraine is an alliance of nationalists and liberals based on their common intolerance to Russia and, respectively, to all who advocate for cooperation with it. In the light of the current war, this unity of liberals and nationalists may appear as justified. However, the alliance was created long before this war—in 2013, during the formation of the Maidan movement. By liberals, the Association Agreement with the European Union, advocated by the Maidan, was seen predominantly in terms of democratization, modernization, and civilization—it was imagined as a means of bringing Ukraine up to European standards of government. In contrast, the Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia, was associated with civilizational regression to Soviet statism and Asian despotism. It is here that the positions of liberals and nationalists converged: The latter actively supported the Maidan not because of democratization, but due to its clear anti-Russia stance.

From the first days of the protests, radical nationalists were the most active Maidan fighters. The unity between liberals associating the Euromaidan with progress, modernization, human rights, etc., and radicals co-opting the movement for their nationalistic agenda was an important prerequisite for the transformation of the civic protest into an armed struggle resulting in an unconstitutional overturning of power. The decisive role of radicals in the revolution also became a crucial factor in the formation of a mass anti-Maidan movement in the east of Ukraine against the "coup d'état," as the hegemonic anti-Maidan discourse dubbed the change of power in Kyiv. At least partly, what we observe today, is a tragic outcome of this shortsighted and unfortunate alliance, formed during the Maidan.

NB: Can you explain what Zelensky's relationship has been with the far-right in Ukraine?

OB: Zelensky himself has never expressed far-right views. In his series "Servant of the People," which was used as an unofficial election platform, Ukrainian nationalists are portrayed negatively: they appear as nothing else but stupid oligarchs' marionettes. As a presidential candidate, Zelensky criticized the language law signed by his predecessor Poroshenko, which made the knowledge of Ukrainian language a mandatory requirement for civil servants, soldiers, doctors, and teachers. "We must initiate and adopt laws and decisions that consolidate society, and not vice versa," Zelensky-the-candidate claimed in 2019.

However, after assuming the presidential office, Zelensky turned to the nationalistic agenda of his predecessor. On May 19, 2021, his government approved an action plan for the promotion of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life strictly in line with Poroshenko's language law, to the delight of nationalists and dismay of Russophones. Zelensky has done nothing to prosecute radicals for all their crimes against political opponents and the people of Donbass. The symbol of Zelensky's right-wing transformation was his endorsement by nationalist Medvedko—one of those accused of murdering Buzina—who publicly approved Zelensky's ban of Russian-language oppositional channels in 2021.

The question is why? Why did Zelensky make a U-turn to nationalism despite people's hopes that he would pursue the politics of reconciliation? As many analysts believe, this is because radicals, although representing the minority of the Ukrainian population, do not hesitate to use force against politicians, courts, law enforcement agencies, media workers, and so forth—in other words, they are simply good at intimidating society, including all the branches of power. Propagandists may repeat the mantra "Zelensky is a Jew, so he cannot be a Nazi" as often as they want, but the truth is that radicals control the political process in Ukraine through violence against those who dare confront their nationalistic and supremacist agendas. [The case of Anatoliy Shariy](#) — one of the most popular bloggers in Ukraine living in exile—is a good example to illustrate this point. Not only does he, along with his family members, permanently receive death threats, radicals constantly intimidate the activists of his party (banned by Zelensky in March 2022), beating and humiliating them. This is what Ukrainian radicals call "political safari."

NB: Right now, Zelensky is the most influential figure on the world stage with respect to a conflict that has grave implications if it escalates. I'm concerned that he's using those same manipulative show biz skills to rally support behind this image of some personal incarnation of democracy and righteousness against the forces of evil and autocracy. It's like a movie based on a Marvel comic book world. It's precisely the kind of framing that seems antithetical to diplomacy. Do you think Zelensky is playing a constructive role as the wartime leader of Ukraine or not?

OB: I follow Zelensky's war speeches on a regular basis, and I can confidently say that the way he frames the conflict can hardly lead to any diplomatic resolution as he permanently repeats that the forces of good are attacked by the forces of evil. Clearly, there can be no political solution for such an Armageddon. What falls out of this mythical frame of reference for the war is the broader context of the situation: the fact that for years Ukraine has been refusing to implement the Minsk peace agreements, which were signed in 2015 after the defeat of the Ukrainian army in the Donbass war. According to these agreements, Donbass had to receive a political autonomy within Ukraine—a point inconceivable and unacceptable

for radicals. Instead of implementing the document, which was ratified by the UN, Kiev has been fighting with Donbass along the line of demarcation for eight long years. The life of Ukrainians living in these territories has been transformed into a nightmare. For radicals, whose battalions have been fighting there, Donbass people—imagined as *sovki* and *vatniki*—do not deserve mercy and indulgence.

The current war is a prolongation of the war of 2014, which started when Kiev sent troops to Donbass to suppress anti-Maidan rebellion under the premise of the so-called “anti-terrorist operation.” The acknowledgement of this broader context does not presuppose the approval of Russia’s “military operation,” but it implies the acknowledgement that Ukraine is also responsible for what is going on. Framing the issue of the current war in terms of a fight of civilization against barbarism or democracy against autocracy is nothing else but manipulation, and this is essential for understanding the situation. Bush’s formula “you are either with us or with terrorists,” propagated by Zelensky in his appeals to the “civilized world,” has turned out to be very convenient in terms of avoiding personal responsibility for the ongoing disaster.

In terms of selling this one-dimensional story to the world, Zelensky’s artistic skills appear invaluable. He is finally on the global stage, and the world is applauding. The former comedian does not even try to hide his satisfaction. Answering the question of a French reporter on March 5, 2022 — the tenth day of the Russian invasion — on how his life had changed with the beginning of the war, Zelensky replied with a smile of delight: “Today, [my life is beautiful](#). I believe that I am needed. I feel it is the most important meaning in life – to be needed. To feel that you are not just an emptiness that is just breathing, walking, and eating something. You live.”

For me, this construction is alarming: it implies that Zelensky enjoys the unique opportunity to perform on a global stage provided by the war. It made his life beautiful; he lives. In contrast to millions of Ukrainians whose life is not nice at all and thousands of those who are not alive any longer.

“My life today is wonderful, I believe that I am needed... That’s the most important sense of life, that you are needed, that you are not just an emptiness that breathes and walks and eats something.”

— Pres. Zelenskyy, via translator, asked about his living conditions in Ukraine
pic.twitter.com/Qtv48yuB1W

— The Recount (@therecount) [March 3, 2022](#)

NB: Alexander Gabuev has [suggested](#) that the Russian leadership has a lack of expertise about the country that was a contributing factor to this conflict. I have also heard Russian commentators suggest that Ukraine has a superior attitude with regard to being pro-Western versus pro-Russian. Do you think this is a significant contributing factor for either side?

OB: I am inclined to agree with the claim regarding the lack of an adequate understanding on the part of Russian leadership of social processes that have been going on in Ukraine since the Maidan. Indeed, half of Ukraine’s population did not welcome it, and millions living in the southeast wanted Russia to intervene. I know this for sure as all my relatives and old

friends reside in these territories. However, what was true in 2014 may not be necessarily the case now. Eight years have passed; a new generation of young people, raised within a new social environment, has grown; and many people simply accustomed themselves to new realities. Finally, even if most of them despise radicals and the politics of Ukrainization, they hate the war even more. The reality on the ground has turned out to be more complex than decision-makers expected.

NB: What about the sense of superiority among those Ukrainians who identify themselves with Westerners rather than with Russians?

OB: This is true, and, as for me, this is the most tragic part of the whole post-Maidan story, because it is exactly this sense of superiority that prevented the “progressive” pro-Maidan forces from finding common language with their “backward” pro-Russian compatriots. This led to the Donbass uprising, the “anti-terrorist operation” of the Ukrainian army against Donbass, Russia’s intervention, Minsk peace agreements, their non-fulfillment, and, finally, the current war.

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