



Serhii Rudenko

ZELENSKY

A Biography

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Abbreviations](#)

[Map](#)

[Preface: Zelensky's Political Oscar](#)

[Episode 1 Ten Assassination Attempts on President Zelensky](#)

[Episode 2 The Campaign for President](#)

[Episode 3 "Let It Be the Stadium Then!"](#)

[Episode 4 Zelensky and Forty-Two Million Presidents](#)

[Episode 5 Devirtualization of Servant of the People](#)

[Episode 6 A Mad Printer for the President](#)

[Episode 7 Trump's Impeachment](#)

[Episode 8 Vice-President Bohdan](#)

[Episode 9 The Cosmic Year of 1978](#)

[Episode 10 The Irreplaceable Yuliya Mendel](#)

[Episode 11 Look into the Eyes of Putin and ...](#)

[Episode 12 The Amateur on an Electric Scooter](#)

[Episode 13 A Little Bell for Maslyakov](#)

[Episode 14 Godfather Rodnyansky](#)

[Episode 15 A Scandal in Jurmala](#)

[Episode 16 The Family of Kvartal 95](#)

[Episode 17 The Kadyrov Ordeal](#)

[Episode 18 Ebony Rods](#)

[Episode 19 Zelensky's Double](#)

[Episode 20 Zelensky's Ceremonial General](#)
[Episode 21 Zelensky's Shefir Brothers](#)
[Episode 22 Kolomoisky's Knife](#)
[Episode 23 Poroshenko on His Knees](#)
[Episode 24 The Zelensky Collective](#)
[Episode 25 Zelensky's Idol Syvokho](#)
[Episode 26 The Polygraph for "Servants of the People"](#)
[Episode 27 Who Turned Zelensky into an Addict?](#)
[Episode 28 Zelensky under Yermak](#)
[Episode 29 Zelensky's Dream Team](#)
[Episode 30 Zelensky's Architect](#)
[Episode 31 The Magic Number 95](#)
[Episode 32 He Who Burdened Zelensky with the Presidency](#)
[Episode 33 A Gagarin for Zelensky](#)
[Episode 34 A Black Mirror for a Hero](#)
[Episode 35 Zvirobiv, Fedyna, and a Victim](#)
[Episode 36 Wagnergate: A Story with Many Unknowns](#)
[Episode 37 How the Oligarch Akhmetov Prepared a Coup for Zelensky](#)
[Episode 38 The Bucha Massacre](#)
[Epilogue: The President of War](#)
[Chronology](#)
[End User License Agreement](#)

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A Biography

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Abbreviations

ATO

(Anti-Terrorist Operation)

BPP

(Petro Poroshenko Bloc)

BRDO

(Better Regulation Delivery Office)

CJSC

(Closed Joint-Stock Company)

CPSU

(Communist Party of the Soviet Union)

CPU

(Communist Party of Ukraine)

DBR

(State Bureau of Investigation)

DPI

(Donetsk Polytechnic Institute)

DPR

(Donetsk People's Republic)

HPU

(Office of the Prosecutor General)

HUR MO

(Chief Office of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense)

KVK

(Club of the Cheerful and Quick-Witted - Ukrainian)

KVN

(Club of the Cheerful and Quick-Witted - Russian)

LKSMU

(Leninist Communist Union of Ukrainian Youth)

LPR

(Luhansk People's Republic)

NABU

(National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine)

NAZK

(National Agency on Corruption Prevention)

NBU

(National Bank of Ukraine)

NSK

(National Sports Complex)

ODA

(Regional State Administration)

ORDLO

(the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine)

OSCE

(Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe)

PVK

(Private Military Company)

RNBO

(National Security and Defense Council)

SAP

(Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office)

SBU

(Security Service of Ukraine)

SDPU(o)

(Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (united))

SZR

(Foreign Intelligence Service)

TCG

(Trilateral Contact Group)

TsBK

(Central Election Commission)



Preface

Zelensky's Political Oscar

On April 21, 2019, at 8:00 p.m., Volodymyr Zelensky and members of his team appeared before journalists to the sounds of the song "I Love My Country" from the soundtrack to the film (and TV series) *Servant of the People*.

At that moment, it seemed that this simple song was being sung not only by the victorious candidate himself, but also by the 73 percent of the electorate who had voted for him.

Ukrainian and foreign journalists, who flooded the capital's Parkovy Convention and Exhibition Center, were looking forward to the victory speech of the newly elected president. Zelensky was radiant. And so were those who had led him to victory: Andriy Bohdan, Dmytro Razumkov, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, Andriy Yermak, Oleksandr Danyliuk, and Zelensky's wife Olena. Confetti was flying all around them, the hall was buzzing, the staff were ready to dance for joy.

"We did it together ... ," Zelensky began his speech, with his characteristic intonation. First, as befits an actor at the Oscars, he thanked his team, family, relatives, his wife Olena, and even two cleaning ladies, Oksana and Lyuba, who kept the headquarters neat and tidy. He also mentioned the symbolic 73rd section at the Olympic Stadium, where he and his team shot the famous video *Stadion tak Stadion* ("Let It Be the Stadium Then!").

Zelensky was still in the character of Vasyl Holoborodko – the protagonist of the film and TV series – and tried to joke, to toss barbs at the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine), which, according to him, kept him on his toes at all times,

and to show optimism. It seems that, in saying goodbye to his acting career, Zelensky was counting on the same raucous applause as he entered the political arena. Sure enough, he was used to being loved by the public and to hearing shouts of “Bravo” and “Encore!” It was no small wonder. He had received ovations in grand concert halls and theaters in Moscow, Kyiv, Odesa, Jurmala, Minsk, and other cities of the former Soviet Union; he became a rising star in 1997 after appearing in Aleksandr Maslyakov’s game show *KVN* (Club of the Cheerful and Quick-Witted).¹ This was when television fame anointed the 19-year-old actor. Prior to his presidency, Volodymyr Zelensky was a popular actor beloved by many Ukrainians.

But, on the evening of April 21, 2019, having won a landslide victory in the presidential election, could he have imagined that, only about six months later, he would, after addressing a crowd, be hearing: “Shame!” and “Away with Zelya!”?² And not only from the supporters of his main opponent Petro Poroshenko, but also from volunteers, the military, and politicians.

A few months after the inauguration, Zelensky started dismissing those who had led him to victory. The first to go was the secretary of the RNBO (National Security and Defense Council) Oleksandr Danyliuk, who allegedly took offense at Zelensky for not making him prime minister. The second member to leave the team was the head of the Office of the President Andriy Bohdan, who had been with him since his first steps in bigtime politics. Then, Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk and Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka both lost their posts.

All these people were part of the Zelensky collective, elected by the country on April 21, 2019. Because right through to the end of the presidential campaign there was no such thing as Zelensky the politician. At all. He was a

talented comedian, manager of the Inter TV channel and Kvartal 95 Studio. An actor who played the high-school teacher Vasyl Holoborodko, who, in the TV series, became head of state. Zelensky's presidential image was constructed by those around him.

In 2019, Ukraine's sixth president announced: "I promise I will never let you all down." Since then, we have seen Zelensky in various situations. He and his team have been criticized for being unprofessional. They have been accused of corruption, arrogance, and even treason. However, starting from February 24, 2022, the beginning of Russia's large-scale invasion of the Ukrainian state, we have discovered a completely different Zelensky. A man who was not afraid to accept Putin's challenge and become the leader of popular resistance to Russian aggression. A president who managed to unite in this fight his supporters and opponents, corrupt officials and fighters against corruption, adults and children, people of different nationalities and faiths. A head of state who is greeted with applause in European parliaments and the US Congress.

Each episode in the life of the sixth president of Ukraine as presented in this book forms a piece in the mosaic of the portrait of Volodymyr Zelensky. A man who, without political experience and relevant knowledge, promised Ukrainians he would change the state. A man trusted by 13.5 million voters.

There will be no moralizing, prejudice, or manipulation in this book. Just facts. I will try to recreate the portrait of the sixth president of Ukraine devoid of actor's greasepaint.

How successful I have been will be for you, kind readers, to judge.

1. A competitive comedy skit game show *Klub veselykh i nakhodchivvykh* filmed in Moscow.

[2.](#) Pejorative nickname for Zelensky.

Episode 1

Ten Assassination Attempts on President Zelensky

On February 24, 2022, at 4:50 a.m., Russia launched the first missile strikes on Ukrainian territory. At the same time as Russian television was broadcasting Vladimir Putin's address to his people, the first ballistic missiles were falling on Ukrainians in their capital city Kyiv, as well as in Kharkiv, Odesa, Mariupol, Dnipro, and other cities. A few kilometers from my house in Kyiv, in Brovary and Boryspil, the ground shook with explosions. Sleepy cities were recovering from the first shock. Sirens of ambulances, fire engines, and rescue vehicles pierced the winter air. My conscious mind refused to accept the fact that Russia was bombing a free and independent state in the center of Europe. It seemed like a nightmare that might end with the first rays of the sun.

However, this was not a bad dream. It was a new reality into which Ukrainians had awakened.

An hour and a half after the first strikes, Zelensky addressed the people and confirmed the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine. And as dawn broke, news emerged about the first victims of the Kremlin's attack - those who were at military sites hit by missiles. Thus the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation began, something no one wanted to believe until the very last moment. This included Volodymyr Zelensky. A month before the war, despite warnings from American and British

intelligence about a possible Russian attack, the president insisted that everything was under his complete control and that foreigners were simply spreading unjustified panic.

During the night of February 24, just a few hours before the war began, the Ukrainian president publicly addressed the Russians. He sincerely hoped he could stop Putin - even though, after the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of part of the Donbas in 2014, it was clear that the master of the Kremlin could only be stopped by the complete surrender of Ukraine or by a bullet in his forehead. Putin tried to convince everyone that Ukrainian statehood began with Vladimir Lenin, and that Ukrainians were a people invented by Count Potocki. Incidentally, he repeated this before the attack on Ukraine, despite the fact that the Ukrainian capital was founded when the site of modern Moscow consisted of nothing but swampland. Putin's public desire to defend the so-called "independence" of the pseudo-republics of the LPR (Luhansk People's Republic) and the DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) was the only reason given for his attempt to destroy the Ukrainian state.

President Zelensky faced Putin's challenge with dignity. Despite numerous proposals from the United States and ten assassination attempts (this at least was the number indicated in March by Mykhailo Podoliak, an advisor to the Office of the President), he did not abandon Kyiv. Putin wanted Zelensky dead, if not physically, then at least politically. And the fact that this did not happen shows the weakness of the master of the Kremlin. Zelensky's office in the center of the Ukrainian capital has become one of the important symbols of the invincibility of the Ukrainian people. The unembellished courage with which he, as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, entered the war with Russia truly impressed Ukrainians, and in particular his opponents. He received

standing ovations in European parliaments and became the center of world attention. Volodymyr Zelensky's current popularity in the West can only be compared to that of former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

The blitzkrieg that Vladimir Putin was counting on in Ukraine failed. Russia encountered fierce resistance from the Ukrainian people, led by Zelensky. The Kremlin seemed unprepared for the fact that the war unleashed by Russia would be seen as a real war by the Ukrainian people. The Russian aggressors were met with fire - not only from the military, but also from ordinary citizens. For the first time in Ukraine's recent history, we have seen the people unite against an external enemy.

In time, historians will no doubt write about Zelensky's role and his victory in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Films will be made and books will be written about him; streets, avenues, and universities will be named after him. Zelensky will be associated with the period in Ukrainian history that will be called "the final rupture between Ukraine and Russia."

For centuries, Ukrainians have fought against Moscow for the right to be free and independent. Millions of people sacrificed their lives in bloody resistance. It seemed that there would be no end to the wars between Ukrainians and Russia. Until recently, the Kremlin had hoped to be able to keep Ukraine in its orbit. And its miscalculation stems from just this. Vladimir Putin, in particular, got it wrong when he spoke disparagingly about Volodymyr Zelensky. Ironically, the one person whom the Russian president refused to accept as an equal has become the undertaker of the modern Russian regime.

Episode 2

The Campaign for President

It's December 31, 2018. Five minutes to midnight. Ukrainians are about to see in the New Year with champagne glasses in their hands. There's the countdown, in anticipation of the president's speech. For Petro Poroshenko, this New Year's greeting is his final one as head of state.

Political science is merciless. Only 11.6 percent of the electorate, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, is ready to vote for the incumbent president. The favorite in the race is Poroshenko's longtime opponent Yuliya Tymoshenko, with a projected 21.2 percent of the vote. The third most likely presidential candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky, artistic director of Kvartal 95 Studio, with a projected 14.6 percent of the vote, has not yet said a word about his intention to run for office.

The traditional New Year's performance of Kvartal 95 on the 1+1 TV channel is interrupted for congratulations from the president. But instead of Poroshenko, Volodymyr Zelensky appears on the screen. In a white shirt with rolled up sleeves, he comes out from backstage. "Good evening, friends ... ," he begins in Russian, and fifteen seconds later switches to Ukrainian.

He talks about three paths that Ukrainians can choose.

The first is to live as before.

The second is to pack up and go abroad.

And the third is to try to change things in Ukraine.

“And I choose the third path for myself. People have been asking me for a long time – are you running or not? You know, unlike our great politicians, I didn’t want to offer you empty promises. But now, a few minutes before the New Year, I am promising you something and will do so right away. Dear Ukrainians, I’m promising you I will run for president. And I’m doing it right away. I’m running for president,” Zelensky announced.

I am sure that most people sitting at their festive New Year’s tables did not realize just what had happened at that moment. All this looked like part of a Kvartal 95 show.

It was like a concert backstage. Dimmed light. A smiling Zelensky. The Paddington Bear voice that he used when dubbing the cartoon movie. Well, what the hell kind of damn presidential candidate is he? Where’s the tie? Where’s his suit? Where are the traditional words filled with pathos? Where is all this? And where is Petro Poroshenko? Supporters of the fifth president, seeing Zelensky instead of Poroshenko on their screens, were raging on social networks. “Who? This clown?,” “Who is he to run for president?,” “What insolence!” Subscribers didn’t hold anything back in their comments about Zelensky, the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky who controls 1+1, and Oleksandr Tkachenko, the channel’s general director, who would later become a people’s deputy in the Servant of the People Party and, later, Ukraine’s minister of culture.

Apparently, the statement of the artistic director of Kvartal 95 Studio was perceived as a bad joke in many election headquarters.

However, on New Year’s Eve, Zelensky was more serious than ever.

Those who took the actor's performance to be a famous comedian's joke had no idea that Zelensky had already decided, a long time before, to run for president. His team had been preparing for the election for quite a while. Throughout the summer of 2018, Zelensky kept the intrigue going, trolling the popular frontman of the Okean Elzy band Svyatoslav Vakarchuk: "Slava, are you going to run or not? Because if you are, so am I. So, if your answer is an ironclad 'yes' or a definite 'no,' then so is mine. Because everyone keeps asking, well, what about me? And what about me? As far as I am concerned, everything is clear. What about you? Because if it's you and me, then it's us. Do you understand? And if it's 'we,' then - everyone."

According to the politician Roman Bezsmertny, he met with Svyatoslav Vakarchuk and asked him not to run for president and to convince Volodymyr Zelensky of the same. As Bezsmertny once told me:

I said, "Slava, I respect you as an artist, but please meet with Zelensky and agree that neither you nor Zelensky will run. Because if you do both run, you will simply break Ukraine and it will be very difficult to know what will happen next." I don't know whether Vakarchuk listened to me or to someone else, but he acted very wisely: he did not run. Instead, he missed his chance during the parliamentary campaign. And I understand this perfectly, because I knew for sure that neither of them was able to shoulder the problems facing Ukraine, the key one being war.

Nevertheless, in fall 2018, the headquarters of the presidential candidate were formed, joined by political strategist Dmytro Razumkov - almost the only media figure at the time (other than, of course, the frontman of Kvartal 95).

Zelensky's team was preparing for the election. During the winter of 2018-19, they paid for advertising on the radio and on billboards with the slogan "I'm not kidding." It was during this period that the première of the third season of the series *Servant of the People* was postponed. In it, the current president of Ukraine played the role of the teacher Vasyl Holoborodko, who suddenly, surprising even himself, becomes president.

But hardly anyone in Zelensky's team was counting on victory then. And Zelensky himself, according to the former head of the Office of the President Andriy Bohdan, didn't make the final decision to participate in the presidential campaign until December 31, 2018.

It is clear that, for Zelensky and his associates, it was a great opportunity to promote the Servant of the People Party, which had been registered in April 2016 before the upcoming parliamentary campaign.

For Ihor Kolomoisky, who had strained relations with Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky became a bargaining chip for both Ukraine's fifth president and his lifelong opponent Yuliya Tymoshenko.

However, according to political strategist Serhiy Haidai, Zelensky's team perceived the presidential election as a kind of game. As he explained to me:

I had a conversation with people who talked to the Shefir brothers, his business partners. Even when the campaign was in full swing, they did not believe he would win. They thought it could not happen, that Volodymyr was just playing. But when he won, they were even more confused. They didn't know what to do, because they understood what a responsibility it was and that their old life was over. That there would be no more Kvartal 95, along with all their production companies ... They found themselves in a completely different reality, in which they would have to be completely different people. And they were at a loss; they tried to consult someone. But it's just about them. Because everything was already different for Zelensky himself. I think Bohdan was already telling him: "Now, don't worry, I know what to do, how to do it, we need to move forward." At that time, nobody liked Bohdan very much, because he was too conspicuous next to the president, and it was obvious that he was the driver of this process.

Anyway, the step taken by Volodymyr Zelensky that New Year's Eve would change not only the leisurely paced life of a celebrity. This step would change the rules of the game in Ukrainian politics.

As it happened, on March 22, 2019, one of the participants in the presidential race, the politician Roman Bezsmertny, tried to stop Zelensky and publicly urged him to withdraw from the race. "Remove your documents from the TsBK [Central Election Commission] because it would be an embarrassment and humiliation for the nation," he said.

However, this call remained unheeded.

The result?

Petro Poroshenko would receive a loud slap in the face from voters.

Yuliya Tymoshenko would not be waiting in the wings for her turn to be president.

Oleh Lyashko would get a strong competitor on the political scene and, a few months later, his Radical Party would lose the parliamentary elections.

Colonel Anatoliy Hrytsenko would retire from politics.

Ukraine would get what it wanted - Volodymyr Zelensky.

Episode 3

“Let It Be the Stadium Then!”

On April 19, 2019, the atmosphere in the largest stadium in Ukraine – NSK (National Sports Complex) Olympic Stadium – was frenetic.

Twenty thousand spectators were waiting for the debate between Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky. For the first time in the history of Ukraine’s presidential race, the candidates tried to drive each other into a tight corner – accompanied by a roar from the stands. This show was being filmed and broadcast by 150 TV channels.

Throughout almost the entire presidential campaign, Poroshenko’s team had allowed themselves to disparage Volodymyr Zelensky. “Hologram,” “clown,” “Kolomoisky’s puppet,” “the hand of the Kremlin” – this is a far from complete list of the verbal insults that were repeated by Poroshenko almost every day. He and his political strategists were convinced that candidate Zelensky was an utter waste of time.

According to Poroshenko’s team, there would be enough public debate to prove this. Indeed, this would be one of those political all-around competitions in which the then president seemed already to have the upper hand. And Zelensky? What could be expected from a comedian? Memorized speeches? Prompts from advisors? “Yes, I’ll run rings round him,” Poroshenko must have thought. But he was very wrong about that. As it turned out, Zelensky had