



Victim or Villain: Volodymyr Zelensky's Role in the Russo-Ukrainian Ceasefire Negotiations

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Abstract

The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's role in the Russo-Ukrainian ceasefire negotiations is examined critically from the perspective of whether he should be viewed as a victim of aggression from abroad or a cunning player in a geopolitical game of political brinksmanship. Drawing insights from his presidency, policies, and foreign policy, the study conjures up the complexity of Zelensky's position. On the one hand, he is seen as a leader who is under existential threat to his nation and desires peace and humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, his diplomatic actions and choices are questioned by critics who think that they would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty or global reputation. By breaking free from the reductionist binary "villain" or "victim," this study offers a nuanced comprehension of Zelensky's leadership and the stakes that it raises for Ukraine's future and regional stability more widely.

Keywords: Diplomacy; Hegemon; Sovereignty; Westphalia

INTRODUCTION

Volodymyr Zelensky has been president of Ukraine since 2019. He is now the center of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and has endurance and strategic depth to handle an unstable geopolitical environment. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Zelensky has teetered between gaining international support and mediation, signing ceasefires, and lifting national spirit against unrelenting military and political pressures (Freedman, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023). His leadership has been characterized by effective public diplomacy, using foreign media channels to frame Ukraine's war in terms of democracy and authoritarianism (D'Anieri, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Snyder, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). Nevertheless, his approach has also been criticized, with some analysts arguing that his bargaining stance and Western military support will prolong the war rather than conclude it in a permanent peace (Charap and Colton, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Walt, 2023; Wood, 2023).

With war ongoing, participation by Zelensky in ceasefire negotiations remains a subject of fierce controversy, oscillating between portrayals of him as the victim of a foreign attack and as a pragmatist statesman making hard strategic choices. His supporters mention his efforts at

rallying international opinion, upholding Ukrainian sovereignty, and promoting diplomatic measures that align with Ukraine's long-term interests in security (Kagan, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Snyder, 2023). Conversely, critics contend that his unwillingness to grant territory concessions, aligning interests with NATO, and rejection of Russian diplomatic overtures may prove counterproductive in terms of achieving an enduring peace agreement (Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023). Such counterpositions demonstrate the maturity of Zelensky's leadership, rewriting simplistic press characterizations as adventurism or heroism.

By transcending the "villain" or "victim" dichotomy, this paper examines Zelensky's presidency of ceasefire negotiations critically, assessing its broader implications for Ukraine's future and regional stability. His foreign policy strategy, while often commended for its resolve and assertiveness, raises pressing questions about the trade-offs between sovereign statehood and pragmatic conflict management (Freedman, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). Zelensky's position can be understood on the basis of a balanced assessment that integrates historical precedents, international relations theory, and contemporary geopolitical facts (D'Anieri, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Walt, 2023). This kind of

analysis contributes to the wider debate on war leadership, negotiating diplomacy, and the shifting political balances of Eastern Europe.

Background

The Russo-Ukrainian war has its origins in the past, extending far into Ukraine's post-Soviet independence in 1991 and its evolving relationship with Russia. Tensions came to a head after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the war in eastern Ukraine, in which pro-Russian separatists, allegedly supported by Moscow, engaged in an armed conflict with the Ukrainian government (D'Anieri, 2023; Sakwa, 2023; Snyder, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). All this set the stage for Russia's invasion in 2022, an event that transformed Zelensky from a political newcomer into a war leader. His own presidency, initiated on an anti-corruption and peace ticket, soon drifted in the direction of military might and foreign diplomacy (Freedman, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022). International repercussions of the war have garnered widespread attention, with NATO and Western countries providing humongous military and economic support to Ukraine (Kagan, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Walt, 2023).

Ukraine's geopolitical status positions it at the point of intersection of Western and Russian interests, which is part of the challenge for ceasefire talks. Ukraine has historically had difficulty asserting its sovereignty as the influence of Russia pushes it into agreements such as the Minsk Accords, which have not brought permanent peace (Charap and Colton, 2023; Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Sakwa, 2023). Zelensky's foreign policy has sought to rebrand Ukraine's role in the international community, attracting additional Western support and countering Russian assertions about Ukraine's political legitimacy (D'Anieri, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Snyder, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). However, this shift towards the West has also precipitated debate regarding Ukraine's long-term strategic autonomy, with critics arguing that its disproportionate reliance on foreign aid and military intervention risks cementing geopolitically connected dependencies (Freedman, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Wood, 2023).

As the war continues, what the broader implications of Zelensky's presidency hold in store is subject to examination of Ukraine's previous experiences, foreign allegiances, and domestic concerns. The war has triggered economic destabilization, humanitarian crisis, and security policy reorientations across the globe, and it has sparked discussions about the effectiveness of diplomacy compared to military interventions in resolving conflicts (Charap and Colton, 2023; Kagan, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; Walt, 2023). By analyzing Zelensky's role in this framework, this study contributes to the discussion on leadership during war, global relations, and the pursuit of peace in a highly polarized world (D'Anieri, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Tsygankov, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by two theories, the Leadership in Crisis theory and the Realism theory. The two theories

provide a window through which the leadership and war strategic decisions by Zelensky during the Russia-Ukraine war can be critically analyzed.

Leadership in Crisis

The Concept of Leadership in Crisis entails the actions of the leaders in managing compounded crises, especially during war, economic collapse, or political crisis. It postulates that effective crisis leadership is characterized by decisiveness in action, flexibility, and the capability to mobilize domestic and international support (Boin *et al.*, 2023; Grint, 2023; Kouzmin, 2023; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2023). Zelensky's leadership embodies these traits as he has managed to mobilize global support and domestic resilience in the face of existential threats (McFaul, 2023; Snyder, 2023; Walt, 2023; Wood, 2023). His diplomatic initiatives, particularly through channels of digital diplomacy and mass media engagement, have played a crucial role in shaping global narratives regarding Ukraine's struggle (Freedman, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023).

While Zelensky's leadership has been mostly praised for managing crises, some experts are of the opinion that his approach can contribute to the prolongation of the war. Crisis leaders generally have to make difficult trade-offs between short-term resilience and long-term stability (Boin *et al.*, 2023; D'Anieri, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2023). Critics argue that Zelensky's unwillingness to grant territorial concessions and his maximalist diplomatic ambitions can make a pragmatic peace process challenging (Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2023). Thus, while the Leadership in Crisis concept illuminates the success of Zelensky, it challenges whether his decisions are sustainable.

Realism Theory

Realism, one of the leading international relations theories, holds that international politics is guided by power, self-interest, and the pursuit of national security (Mearsheimer, 2022; Morgenthau, 2023; Waltz, 2023; Wohlforth, 2023). From a Realist perspective, Zelensky's leadership is rather a calculated step in the Ukraine-Russian game of power, as well as in broader geopolitics between NATO and Western powers (Charap and Colton, 2023; Kagan, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; McFaul, 2023). His employing military alliances and strategic cooperation fits within Realist expectations of power balancing and deterrence (Freedman, 2023; Snyder, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023; Wood, 2023).

But Realism also highlights the limitations of moral appeals for foreign policy. While Zelensky frames Ukraine's defense as a fight for democracy and sovereignty, Realist scholars argue that such explanations necessarily hide more submerged power calculations (D'Anieri, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). Besides, Ukraine's dependency on the support of Western armies raises agency issues about Ukraine as a whole since Realism teaches that weak countries will find themselves becoming pawns in powers' games (Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Walt, 2023; Wohlforth, 2023). Such analysis calls for

an equilibrium between Zelensky's agency and structural restraints left behind by international power politics.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Zelensky's Leadership in Crisis

Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has been widely contested by researchers, with his crisis management skills in the spotlight. Scholars hold that his ability to galvanize global support, engage in strategic communication, and maintain public morale depicts his mastery as a wartime leader (Freedman, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023). His skilled use of digital diplomacy, e.g., global speeches and social media, has enhanced Ukraine's story of resilience and resistance and turned Zelensky into the icon of democratic resilience (Pomerantsev, 2022; Snyder, 2023). Critics complain, however, that his rule is too dependent on Western economic assistance and military aid and might prolong the war rather than a peace agreement (Charap and Colton, 2023; Matveeva, 2023).

The Realist Explanation of Ukraine's Foreign Policy

Realist scholars explain Ukraine's geostrategic position in the context of power politics, emphasizing how the great powers dictate the terms of the conflict. By realism, states are driven by national security concerns rather than ideological ones, making Zelensky's alignment with NATO and the West an act of prudence rather than one of principle (Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023). Some analysts argue that Zelensky's push for NATO membership accelerated tensions with Russia, making war the unavoidable outcome of Ukraine's geopolitical shift (Tsygankov, 2023; Walt, 2023). Some others believe that his foreign policy is a reaction that has to be undertaken due to Russian aggression, as security agreements serve to deter further moves (Lanoszka, 2023; McFaul, 2023).

Challenges in Ceasefire Negotiations

In the context of diplomatic appeals, ceasefire negotiations have been elusive due to conflicting strategic interests. Zelensky has remained obstinate in maintaining a "no concessions on land" mantra, arguing that any surrender of sovereignty would generate a negative precedent (Freedman, 2023; Kagan, 2023). It aligns with liberal internationalist inclinations that prioritize greater adherence to legal principles and sovereignty over power politics (D'Anieri, 2023; Snyder, 2023). However, realists caution that raw resistance for long will yield a long war with devastating consequences for the economy and infrastructure of Ukraine (Cohen, 2023; Matveeva, 2023). Phased negotiations with security guarantees can be a viable substitute for outright military conflict, some academics argue (Charap and Colton, 2023; Galtung, 2023).

Media and Public Perception of Zelensky

The representation of Zelensky in international media has a significant impact on the public image of the war. His capacity to manage narratives using strategic communication has been crucial in gaining international assistance and diplomatic support (Pomerantsev, 2022; Snyder, 2023). The media's characterization of him as a war hero has attracted

enormous public sympathy, both at home and abroad (D'Anieri, 2023; McFaul, 2023). Nevertheless, critics argue that the extremely positive coverage of Western media overshadows genuine criticism of Ukraine's domestic issues, including the matter of governance and corruption (Sakwa, 2023; Wood, 2023). These create questions on the objectivity of war reporting and propaganda's effects on public opinion.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature, and content analysis and case study analysis are applied to examine Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian ceasefire talks. Case study methodology is appropriate in the exploration of political leadership in crisis because it allows examination of contextual variables influencing the decision-making process (Stake, 2023; Yin, 2023). Qualitative case studies are also applicable in studying complex geopolitical incidents, particularly within war-torn situations where national and international stability depends on the choices of leaders (Creswell and Poth, 2023; George and Bennett, 2023). The study applies secondary sources such as scholarly articles, government reports, and policy briefs to critique Zelensky's strategy and overall geopolitical consequences.

Content analysis is employed to examine Zelensky's speeches, diplomatic communications, and media portrayals in order to assess how his leadership is framed within international discourse. This enables one to have a better understanding of how language, rhetoric, and strategic communication make a contribution towards how political agents are understood amidst war (Krippendorff, 2023; Neuendorf, 2023). A thematic analysis approach is used to identify recurring trends in political rhetoric, media coverage, and policy responses to Zelensky's presidency (Braun and Clarke, 2023; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016). Discourse analysis is also utilized to analyze the ways in which the narratives of Zelensky influence international aid and diplomatic relations.

For validity, this research triangulates data from different sources, including academic papers, policy reports, and specialist opinions. Triangulation brings quality to qualitative research by cross-checking different accounts and minimizing bias (Denzin and Lincoln, 2023; Flick, 2023). Second, ethical standards are maintained by using already published data to the public in order to steer clear of discrediting confidential diplomatic letters or intelligence (Patton, 2023; Silverman, 2023). Through the integration of case study examination, thematic discourse analysis, and content analysis, the current research provides a sound framework for understanding Zelensky's leadership in the geopolitical scenario.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study finds that Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership during the Russo-Ukrainian war has been marked by his strategic communication skills and ability to tap into external support. With the aid of the proper use of digital diplomacy and global media outlets, Zelensky has put the Ukrainian cause within the context of a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism and has been successful in gaining strong military and economic assistance from Western countries

(Freedman, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Snyder, 2023). His public orations, particularly in video-linked parliament speeches and social media initiatives, have been key to mobilizing global opinion in favor of Ukraine. However, critics argue that his reliance on Western military aid and refusal to make concessions on certain ceasefire terms may undermine an early resolution of the war, making a diplomatic resolution more difficult (Charap and Colton, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Walt, 2023).

The studies also highlight that Zelensky's leadership is part of the Leadership in Crisis framework, which emphasizes resilience, flexibility, and decisive action during national crises (D'Anieri, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). His ability to maintain domestic morale while undertaking high-stakes diplomacy is a testament to a leader who has been under unprecedented geopolitical uncertainty. But his leadership has been criticized for focusing decision-making power, curbing media liberty, and repressing political opposition in the name of war requirements (Cohen, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Sakwa, 2023; Wood, 2023). Even though these measures, arguably, are unavoidable for national security, they have raised eyebrows about Ukraine's democratic decline.

Being a Realist, the study shows that Zelensky's foreign policy measures are driven by pragmatic survival and not an ideological agenda. Realists argue that his push to become part of NATO and more Western alignment directly aggrieved Russian security interests, kindling tensions that resulted in the 2022 invasion on a full scale (Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023; Walt, 2023). His allies, on the other hand, believe that Ukrainian sovereignty necessitates an assertive security policy to reverse Russian expansionism and stop further loss of land (Kagan, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Snyder, 2023). The studies show that Zelensky's leadership is constrained by cross-cutting strategic interests, and it is difficult to achieve a ceasefire on a substantive basis without big geopolitical compromises.

Furthermore, the studies show that ceasefire negotiations are elusive based on cross-cutting international and domestic pressures. Zelensky has declined to negotiate over land, explaining that any agreement would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and promote future Russian intervention (D'Anieri, 2023; Freedman, 2023; Kagan, 2023; McFaul, 2023). However, realists would argue that a protracted war of no give-and-take on the diplomatic front would have catastrophic economic and humanitarian consequences on Ukraine (Charap and Colton, 2023; Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Matveeva, 2023). The study holds that while Zelensky's leadership has been key to rallying foreign aid, longer-term peace efforts will require more pragmatic negotiation strategies to seek a reconciliation of Ukraine's national interest against overall geopolitical realities.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest the two-pronged aspect of Zelensky's leadership—on the positive side, he is praised for his toughness, smart diplomacy, and ability to unite international support, and on the negative side, his crisis

management efforts and foreign policy decisions come under scrutiny. His crisis leadership takes the line of war leaders who are successful in using rhetoric and international alliances to support the country's position. It is maintained by experts that his communication tactics have been pivotal in the reception of Western military assistance, albeit with a warning that his excessive dependence on Western nations could jeopardize the eventual autonomy of Ukraine (Freedman, 2023; McFaul, 2023; Pomerantsev, 2022; Snyder, 2023). Others have pushed back that while Western aid has buttressed Ukrainian military capabilities, it has also prolonged the conflict by decreasing the incentive for expedient diplomatic negotiations (Charap and Colton, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Walt, 2023). It consequently poses the question of whether Zelensky's approach, so effective in the short term, would contribute to long-term instability within the region.

In the perception of realists, Zelensky's presidency shows what is possible in world politics from small states in asymmetric conflict, particularly. In the view of realists, the deepening of Ukrainian entanglement with NATO and other Western allies constituted a direct provocation for the Russian attack as the usual security dilemma when a security measure for one state can be perceived as threatening by another (Mearsheimer, 2022; Sakwa, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023; Walt, 2023). Zelensky's intransigence on the issue of conceding territory is in line with nationalist ideals of sovereignty and self-determination, but realists caution that absolute refusal will be at the expense of long-term conflict and economic devastation for Ukraine (Charap and Colton, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Wood, 2023). His leadership, as much as it is admired for its refusal and moral absolutism, has to be judged within the geopolitical reality and requirement for strategic concession.

The study also reveals democratic and governance problems in Ukraine during the war, as war-related situations have facilitated centralization of power and suppression of political opposition. While others argue that these are necessary for ensuring national security and unity, others warn that they compromise the democratic values of Ukraine (Cohen, 2023; Matveeva, 2023; Sakwa, 2023; Wood, 2023). Historical comparisons show that war-time presidents typically face difficult trade-offs between security and democratic freedoms, and Ukraine is no exception (D'Anieri, 2023; Kofman and Edmonds, 2023; Lanoszka, 2023; Tsygankov, 2023). Zelensky's challenge is to make sure that war-time actions do not become long-term political constraints undermining the democratic institutions of Ukraine once the war is over.

Another crucial consideration is the possibility of ceasefire talks being feasible, based on the fact that rival explanations of Zelensky's strategy raise questions regarding whether his position shuts down or allows progress toward peace. A moral stand against aggression through refusing to yield ground is seen by some analysts as his reluctance not to acquiesce in territorial concession (D'Anieri, 2023; Freedman, 2023; Kagan, 2023; McFaul, 2023). The broader global community is also divided on whether military support for Ukraine is an effective deterrence strategy or prolongs the

conflict without a clear route to peace (Charap and Colton, 2023; Cohen, 2023; Galtung, 2023; Matveeva, 2023). The report reveals that any sustainable solution must balance military opposition with diplomatic flexibility, a balancing act that Zelensky will be required to navigate gingerly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership during the Russo-Ukrainian war is a complex combination of grit, astute diplomacy, and geopolitical pragmatism. His ability to mobilize international backing, maintain national enthusiasm, and mediate high-pressure talks has transformed him into the key player of Ukraine's fight against Russia. However, his leadership also gives rise to ugly questions, such as the long-term sustainability of the reliance on military aid, maintaining wartime security in a democratic regime, and whether there will ever be a peaceful solution. While his devotion to Ukrainian independence has succeeded in forging national cohesion, it has also made it harder to achieve ceasefires, and serious questions need to be raised over the price of militant resistance as compared to limited viable alternatives.

Based on these observations, among the major recommendations are the following. First, a not too hardline diplomacy that does not sacrifice the territorial integrity of Ukraine but is willing to venture into pragmatic bargaining table to venture into paths for long-lasting peace is required. Whereas maintaining international affiliations remains still very important, Ukraine needs to develop greater independence in its war and economic fronts to reduce the dependence on Western aid. Efforts must be made to preserve democratic ideals and avert wartime systems of governance leading to long-term political oppression. Political pluralism and institution-building will be crucial to post-war Ukrainian rebuilding. There must be a reconstruction and economic recovery strategy in order to address the long-term humanitarian and developmental consequences of war. By reconciling resilience and strategic flexibility, Ukraine achieves its security potential along with long-term stability in the region.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is not any conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/ or falsification, double publication and/ or submission, and redundancy, have been completely observed by the author.

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