Standard Article

Leadership

The return of the hero-leader? Volodymyr Zelensky's international image and the global response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This article focuses on the notion of heroic leadership as it has been applied as an analytical framework to Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It presents an overview of Zelensky's leadership strategies and their domestic and international reception and puts them in the wider context of the ways in which power is exercised in the global arena. It is argued that the authority and influence of Zelensky – the hero-leader – is the result of a reciprocal relationship between leader and followers, constructed out of the fear and desperation of warfare. One of the fundamental analytical tools in International Relations studies – the notion of soft and hard power – has been applied to Zelensky's way of affecting the behaviors of others in order to shape their preferences and obtain his desired options. The perception of him as heroic has become the main instrument of the country's power of attraction, which in turn enabled the president to expand his leadership. In this context the article reveals the mechanisms employed to build international recognition for Ukraine and build support for its resistance to the Russian invasion.

Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Zelensky, leadership, heroic leadership, processual leadership

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Introduction: Heroism and its discontents

"While hard military power will decide the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine, the power of values, persuasion, and attraction are hardly irrelevant" (Nye, 2022).

The differentiation between the soft (power of attraction) and hard (coercion and punishment) power has gained a good deal of traction amongst international relations scholars over recent decades, being used to explain how governments strengthen their influence and attain their strategic goals (Nye, 1990). The mythologisation of the nation's struggle and president Zelensky's heroic leadership has become the major vehicle for exercising Ukrainian soft power during the Russian aggression that started in February 2022. This article touches upon two major issues: the role of perception in exercising war leadership and the practical ways in which heroism-based soft power shapes the international reactions to war and thus influences its results.

Heroism has long presented a firm point of reference in the leadership field. The Great Man approach has been a foundation for leadership studies which have examined the ways in which charismatic presidents and visionary statesmen are brought to the forefront of political scenes. They have been the extraordinary, history-making people, lifted to their position of prominence by followers recognising their divine calling. While the original idea of the Hero leader proposed by Thomas Carlyle in 1840 has been rejected (Frieze and Wheatley 2011; Spector, 2016) as not being sufficiently rigorous theoretically, the heritage of the Great Man framing the national and global mythologies is hard to overlook. It provides an interpretative key for many types of influences and indicates a hierarchical relationship between a virtuous hero and his (or sometimes her) imperfect people. The heroic influence has always been strongly rooted in the vision of leaders as dynamic agents of change and followers as passive and reactive; it has described a top-down influencing process, drawing a line of separation between leaders and followers. The fundamental prerequisite of every leadership relationship is leader recognition – a shared assumption that the person in charge is worthy of being followed. This legitimisation of the leadership role is socially constructed on the basis of formal position and/or the leader's charisma. Traditional systems of power were built on the recognition of the sacredness of the person of power (Otto, 1956) and this concept also resonates in contemporary studies (Grint, 2010; Samuels, 1993; Tourish, 2013). The nature of politics and its major protagonists – people of power shaping the course of events – has revealed the potency of the figurative meaning of sacredness as it is connected to making history.

The origins of the democratic political models provided by Machiavelli (1981) and Weber (1978) explain why the pages of history books in every country are filled with descriptions of heroic figures and their great stories. They picture individuals from the highest levels of the political hierarchy exercising authoritative leadership, reproducing beliefs about their moral duties and their unique qualities (Spoelstra and Ten Bos, 2011). Authority can have different sources, but the leader's extraordinary achievements, especially when combined with the archetypal image of a moral crusader, makes for a focal point for admiration and persistent influence. Thus, while people 'in authority' are recognised as legitimate decision-makers, their achievements, strategies and unusual qualities at times make them leaders. Recognition then is based on inherent qualities that are sources of trust, admiration and public respect, as is the case with every other socially constructed phenomena – heroism is in the eye of beholder. As Stacey et al. observed: 'heroic leaders do less than we think they do, but they act as symbols of a cause' (2000: 170). Judgements of moral character are made on the basis of the leader's appearance, message and behaviour, which are often deliberately shaped to create a sense of alignment.

Critically-oriented scholarship has long questioned the value of describing leaders in heroic terms, revealing how these widely reproduced and rationalised orthodoxies neglect the role of culture, context and the organisational settings of leadership processes (Fairhurst, 2007; Grint, 1997; Jones, 2006; Tourish, 2013). Individual hero-leaders and the pedestals upon which they had been placed were thrown into the category of myth-making, and therefore were not useful in attempts to expand knowledge about the role and nature of leadership. It has been noted that descriptions of heroic leadership rarely convey any ambiguity of meaning, contradiction, doubt or tension rooted in the competing demands and limitations that frame the leader's own actions. As Bert Spector (2022) comments: "the construction of heroic leadership raises concern within the framework of critical leadership given the often-accompanying characteristics of worshipful acquiescence, hyper-masculinity, and an overly individualized view of causation." As a result, the world in which leaders operate is increasingly dynamic, both in politics and business; however, the leaders' actions are often described as straightforward, firm and determinate, so the heroic image does not in any way reflect the nature of the surrounding social world.

As a consequence of these realizations, the "post-heroic perspective" shifted the analytical focus to the relational, collectivist, and participatory nature of leadership (Conger et al., 2000; Dutton, 1996; Schweiger et al., 2020). The processual perspective in leadership studies, in contrast to the hero-centred perspective, understands leadership as an ongoing social interaction involving the participation of a variety of actors (Tourish, 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Although questioned and contested within leadership studies, heroic notions of leadership are widespread in popular culture. National mythologies and public imaginaries are filled with images of the heroic, macho characters of leaders who have answers to all the problems of this world. This myth plays a role both in building unity amongst followers and supporting beliefs about courage, morality and the distinction between the ordinary and the unique. In all sorts of settings – social, business and political – there is a constant search for a hero, a saviour who could provide assurance, remove anxiety and indicate the right direction in which to move. Given the scale of the international mobilisation for the Ukrainian cause and the general tone of media and diplomatic discourse, President Zelensky responded to this popular need, which was strongly amplified by the sense of uncertainty brought by the eruption of an unexpected war in Europe. This article, however, is not aimed at revealing actual and potential inconsistences with regard to Zelensky's image as hero-leader. It is rather focused on examining the perception of him as a hero-leader and how it has become a tool in the building of Ukraine's position on the international scene.

War changes everything. The making of a hero-leader

Before Russia invaded Ukraine on 25 February 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky had been widely understood as an example of a celebrity populist (Baysha, 2022; Yanchenko, 2022) who reached for power without offering any vision of transformation – an actor and comedian, an example of a political *pariah* who used his public familiarity for electoral leverage. Although his campaign rhetoric was concentrated around the necessity of dealing with the alliance between oligarchy and politics in Ukraine, his credentials were unknown as Zelensky avoided serious interviews and discussions about policy. However, in the 2019 elections he won with two thirds of the vote, while his party (named after his sitcom – Servant of the Nation) gained a majority in parliament, becoming the first in Ukraine's history to control both the legislature and the executive branch. Apparently disappointed with the long-term pattern of close ties between the oligarchs and the people in power, Ukrainians decided to vote for the prospect of an entertaining myth. The result of three series and 51 episodes of Zelensky's hit TV series grounded in the nation's mind the picture of the ideal national

leader. However, the tone of the post-election commentaries was rather pessimistic: 'If you expect nothing, you won't be disappointed!'.

The history and political culture of Ukraine provided a favourable ground for political apathy, disillusionment and indifference. In recent decades, two revolutions and a territorial partition have occurred in Ukraine, which only became an independent country in 1991. Although 92.3% of Ukrainians voted in a referendum that they would prefer the country to be independent rather than remain tied to the collapsing Soviet Union, the Russian political appetite was an important factor in the state's instability. The Maidan Revolution in 2013 forced the pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovych, to flee the country, leaving behind a polarised society in which around 50% of voters accepted the idea of joining Western political institutions, while more than 20% were oriented towards some form of political union with Russia1. During this period of turmoil, irony and humour were deployed as instruments of group protection against tensions and aggression, building Zelensky as a figure enjoying social trust, who "stood side-by-side with the shocked and desperate public, voicing the most pressing concerns of Ukrainian audiences and offering much-needed solace at a time of disruptive political change, mortal danger, and a gloomy outlook for the future" (Kaminskij, 2022).

In the initial period of Zelensky's presidency, both his personal charm and his lack of experience in politics worked in favour of his administration. But when the political honeymoon was over and the reforms did not progress, the clarity of the intention of the president and his cabinet began to be questioned. By September 2020, the Servant of the People party recorded only 34% of popular support. Zelensky's personal popularity waned from 73.2% to 31.8% (Temnycky, 2020). The president's decline in popularity was an effect of the Pandora Papers scandal that revealed the lack of transparency around his investments in tax havens and his practice of appointing loyalists and friends to major governmental positions. As a *New York Times* analyst observed just days before the invasion: "After almost 3 years in office, it is clear that the problem is Mr. Zelensky's tendency to treat everything as a show. For him, gestures are more important than consequences. The words you use don't matter, as long as they are entertaining" (Rudenko, 2022). The activities of the pro-Russian rebels fuelling conflict in eastern Ukraine, rising gas prices and a lack of COVID vaccines also had an impact on the president's image. Zelensky's presidency was founded on unstable ground, so confidence in the new president soon evaporated and support was replaced by distrust. In February 2022, only one-in-five citizens declared an intention to vote for Zelensky in future elections (Roshchina, 2022). The transition from show business to complex matters of the statehood proved to be not so easy to negotiate. It could never have been, given the fact that Ukraine had been torn by conflict in the eastern regions of Lugansk and Donetsk since 2014, resulting in a death toll of 13,000. The country was also identified as the poorest in Europe by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as being one of the most corrupt, according to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, and as the lowest when it came to trust in political institutions (Bikus, 2019).

However, the nature of the challenge faced by the leader has been completely transformed since Russia finally began its invasion in February 2022, after a long period of military build-up on the Ukrainian border and many assurances that this would not lead to aggression on its part. Zelensky accepted the challenge of history and overnight rebuilt his authority and united the nation in a huge, unexpected scale of resistance by embracing a leadership style that has been globally recognised as heroic: "He has been constructed, particularly in the Western press, as kind of larger-than-life hero, displaying physical courage, resilience, and a brilliant use of communication skills to help mobilize world opinion" (Spector, 2022). Both, message and media have served Ukrainians as a tool of war, along with tanks, drones and rockets.

Message: since the very beginning of the conflict, Zelensky recognised his role as the communicator in chief. The way in which he framed the situation – highlighting specific information and using selection and silence while shaping relations with the audience – has been a primary grounding of the public understanding of this war. He has been conveying the position of Ukraine in the war ("We are on our land. We don't fear anything or anyone. We don't owe anything to anyone. And we won't give anything up" [Zelensky, 2022]) and the broader meaning of the conflict ("The security of Ukraine is tied to the security of our neighbours. This is why we are now talking about the security of all Europe [Zelensky 2022c]). The narrative has been grounded in the mythical story of David and Goliath, gradually reinforcing the belief amongst Ukrainians and global decision-makers that David can and would win. Ukraine was presented as the country that takes responsibility for European safety and as the one offering relief to others when the danger appeared. Furthermore, David's victory has been pictured as necessary in keeping the image of the Western world intact.

Zelensky struck a heroic *tone* using references to the symbols and struggles firmly embedded in the political imaginary of the specific nations he addressed. He cited Shakespeare in the House of Commons ("The question for us now is to be or not to be" [Zelensky, 2022b]), mentioned liberty, equality and fraternity in the French parliament, recalled Martin Luther King in the US Congress and echoed Winston Churchill in his rhetoric of freedom and resilience ("We will not give up, we will not lose. We will fight to the end. We will fight on land, at sea and in the air. We will continue to fight for our land whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the coasts, in the streets…" [Zelensky, 2022b]). Every time he stresses the gravity of the situation, Zelensky seeks for common denominators and ways to build affinity ("Imagine if European citizens today had to live for weeks on end in basements to save their lives from bombing and missiles. It is April 2022, but it seems like April 1937, when the whole world knew the name of a Spanish town, Guernica" [Zelensky, 2022d]). By recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks or the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear atrocities, he shapes the understanding of the war as another event that is turning the wheels of history (Zelensky, 2022, 2022a, 2022d, 2022e).

Yet the essence of Zelensky's heroic leadership is located in his articulation of the common Western identity which is rooted in shared moral qualities. The status of the war hero, being 'the No. 1 target' for the Russians, messaging from a besieged Kyiv, placed him in the position of a moral arbiter not afraid to challenge the mighty and powerful ("Do prove that you are with us"; "Don't be a resort for murderers" [Zelensky, 2022e, 2022f]), or chiding them for what he sees as their failure to act, to defend principles and provide enough help. President's message is being conveyed not only by words but by his attitude and appearance: "he was seated in a simple chair and appearing to be speaking from an artificially lit room that suggests an operations centre, or a bunker, thus, there are no visual clues that could give away his whereabouts" (Buncmbe, 2022).

The bestiality of war is covered with the classic narrative of 'right and wrong' and 'civilized' vs 'barbarian', reinforcing the idea that is was the moral duty of the Western states to stop the war ("We have a desire to see our children alive. I think it's a fair one." [Zelensky, 2022e]). This moral component makes the vision of the purely rational Western civilization complete by adding to it a spiritual part that goes beyond the quantifiable, intangible factors.

Key insights gained from these extracts of Zelensky's communication concern the constructs of power hierarchies, right and wrong, and just and unjust, all of which take on various manifestations. His leadership message is oriented towards the mobilization of the identities to which other leaders subscribe. The war in Ukraine is located in the context of wider social relations: all societies are

linked to the conflict, which is seen as a space of moral struggle and a turning point in history. Reaction to the Russian invasion was introduced as a point of reference in answering the questions of what it means to belong to the Western world and what it means to be a community. The message played a more significant role here than just responding to a need for the allocation of attention in the situation of conflicted interests of the actors in the system (March and Olsen, 1979). It served as a platform for the conceptual construction of the international reality, which was necessary to develop performance scripts in transformed circumstances.

Medium: in the era of cyber-media and the dominance of 24h news channels, the frequency and style of media coverage directly shapes the position of political leaders. Communication systems play a critical role in creating high-impact messages. Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001) highlights the importance of storytelling within the local network activated to generate collective civic action. Ukraine's media-war strategy is based on the same premise – the global engagement of the public and decision makers is generated on the basis of stories yet mediated through macro-level communication networks. Access to storytelling resources has proven to be a critical factor in the global political engagement in a local war. Since early February 2022, Zelensky has been present in world newspapers, television channels and, most remarkably, in social media every day. These platforms have become the main storytelling systems deployed, reproducing his heroic image and spreading the Ukrainian cause.

Zelensky's efforts have relied heavily upon direct, real-time access to decision-makers and ordinary people. At the beginning of the invasion, he addressed ten parliaments in two weeks, receiving standing ovations everywhere; he appeared at anti-war protests, high-profile international summits like Davos and G7, and he spoke at the opening night of the Cannes Film Festival, the Grammy Awards and Glastonbury Festival. 'The Economist' (2022) suggests that "the invasion of Ukraine is not the first social media war, but it is the most viral", and has had an enormous impact on public opinion and awareness.

Digital storytelling has resulted in a high level of popular engagement and a sense of alertness: violent war images have flooded social media and TV screens, provoking the audience to speculate about the dawning of a new Cold War, a heightened nuclear threat, and the devastating potential effects of energy and food crises. Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are widely used for both information and image-creation purposes – daily life inside the conflict zone is documented and accompanied with heroic labels. The hashtag #braveukraine has led to the creation of content attracting over eleven million views on TikTok and nearly 18,000 posts on Instagram (Serafin, 2022: 462). Zelensky's Instagram account, with a total of 16.8 million followers, is one of the most-followed amongst world leaders. Indian, Indonesian and American presidents have obtained greater audiences (Narenda Modi - 66.8 million; Joko Widowo - 46.1 million; Joe Biden - 17.7 million), but the size of the population and international relevance of the Ukraine cannot be compared to the countries these leaders represent.

The global status of the war in Ukraine has been confirmed by the fact that major international news media institutions have developed new sections to highlight their coverage. The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, CNN, the BBC and others mark the events in Ukraine as a priority. The traditional gate-keepers of the information industry, united with millions of lower level supporters engaged in sharing content and reinforcing the message, resulted in record-breaking levels of audience engagement during the first few weeks of the war (Kersley, 2022). The attractiveness of the heroic message, combined with its high profile presence in the global communication infrastructure, activated a sense of affinity with

> Ukrainians and the need to reproduce their story. Expanding the range of the 'storytelling global community' in this way is a form of leader-followers interaction (Block, 2009).

A heroic story and the capacity to create a global storytelling network have been proven to be driving forces behind the rise of the international perception of Zelensky. His ability to 'make things happen' has grown exponentially as a result of media coverage and the public interest he has generated. Zelensky's message was a leadership claim, and the traction it has gained indicates the extent to which this claim was recognized and responded to by others. This co-constructive complicity characterises Zelensky's 'leadership moment', and can be defined as "an event which occurs when context, purpose, followers and leaders align" (Ladkin, 2010, 2017). The term 'moment' doesn't express here a temporal quality of the situation but refers to its phenomenological understanding as something that exists only through the confluence of other phenomena (Ladkin, 2017). This leadership moment has been produced collectively and arose through the alignment of the conflict-connected strategy of Zelensky, and the dynamics that exist between him and his followers and other political leaders. The emergence of an existential threat generated a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect, a sudden and substantial increase in the public approval of the political leader. Zelensky came to be perceived as an "anthropomorphic symbol of national unity – a kind of living flag" (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003: 37). By displaying decisiveness in a crisis situation he triggered the multilevel transformation of the Ukrainian society. The political contours of this country as a part of Europe have been clearly defined and accepted internationally, while ordinary people were transformed from citizens to freedom fighters. Ordinary people quickly built the legend of a heroic resistance standing their ground and became an indispensable element of the heroic mythology promoted by their leader. Ukrainians undertook the necessary duties required in a society under attack; they became massively involved in the production of petrol bombs, returning from abroad to lend their support, standing in the way of tanks and destroying columns of armoured Russian vehicles. This scale of determination in responding to the aggression both expanded Zelensky's moral authority and legitimized the narrative he has been presenting to the world (Sanders, 2022). As the Financial Times summarised the situation, granting him the title of the 'Person of the Year' (Roula et al., 2022): "The president of Ukraine embodies the resilience of his people and has become a standard bearer for liberal democracy". The very real successes of the Ukrainian nation have been a pillar of the rise of the 'Zelensky-the-hero' phenomenon, which in turn has become a driving force in shaping the response of international leaders to the crisis. The 'leadership moment' of the Russian invasion can be thus captured in terms of the reciprocal relationship between Zelensky and his internal and international publics. Heroism here cannot be limited to Zelensky's personal qualities as it becomes an ideational and emotional platform of interaction and mobilization.

The confluence of factors that enabled Zelensky's leadership to extend beyond the borders of the Ukrainian state includes hero worship, about which critical leadership studies advises to be so cautious about. Yet Zelensky's 'power of attraction' is being translated into international support. In these specific historical circumstances both internal divisions among the Ukrainians and critical voices towards the president have been silenced so as to magnify the reach of the Zelensky hero myth. This myth has become the major instrument of Ukraine's soft power, so it has to remain intact. I now expand on the notion of heroism as an instrument of soft power.

Heroism as an instrument of soft power

The term "soft power" was coined in 1990 to refer to the ability to get others to do want what you want through allure and persuasion; its exercise "co-opts people rather than coerces them"

([Nye, 1990](#)). This strategy soon made its way into the toolkits of political leaders as 'the power of attraction', which is complementary to the traditional instruments of influence like military or economic means. Forms of soft power range from the effectiveness of political messages or the appeal of cultural frameworks to humanitarian aid, science diplomacy or economic assistance. U.S. jazz diplomacy, the Marshall Plan, the British Royal Family, cultural heritage sites, Hollywood and pizza – all these phenomena belong to the soft-power domain. The emergence of the concept has helped to capture the nature, conditions and influence of power in the globalized world, in which the absolute value of the traditional military and economic power of states have been challenged.

In 2003, Joseph Nye expanded the initial idea to the concept of smart power, which is understood as the ability to combine hard and soft power into a synergistic strategy. Putting the Ukrainian struggle in the context of smart power, [Nye (2022)](#) indicates that the progress of the conflict in the first months of 2022 involved a balance of hard and soft power. Before the invasion, any long-term resistance of the Ukrainian forces was seen as highly unlikely, given the economic and military dominance of the aggressor. However, the war that was expected to be a Russian blitzkrieg turned into a saga of resistance as ordinary Ukrainians and reservists joined military efforts in the first phase of the war. It would have been much harder for President Zelensky to mobilise the scale of the military assistance that eventually reached the country without demonstrating that Ukrainians are capable of living up to the mission that he has championed. As Nye confirms: "The short-run battle has of course been dominated by hard military power. Russian troops swept into the country from Belarus in the north and from Crimea in the south. Ukraine's ability to protect its capital, Kyiv, and to thwart the invasion from the north was determined by its military effectiveness and by the invader's mistakes" (2022). However, the following chapters in the confrontation were shaped by a combination of factors in which the Ukrainian military successes (hard power) were determined by the effectiveness of capturing the global public imagination and "getting others to do what you want" ([Nye, 1990](#)).

Machiavelli famously said that it is better for leaders to be feared than to be loved. Zelensky figured out that he had to be loved first to get to the point where he could be feared. His strategy, oriented towards maximising Ukraine's chances through foreign assistance, has been conditioned by preserving of the narrative of the Invictus nation. Material and ideational resources in this case had to be combined to enable Zelensky's engagement in the power relationship with others and produce preferred outcomes. As his political and economic bargaining power was weak, he relied on ideational resources: a vision and a myth. Moral messaging and calling for the revival of the Western alliance link directly with the general transformation of the global political map as a result of the rise of China and India, as well as the slide toward authoritarianism in many countries. In the moment of crisis, Zelensky declared a commitment to universal liberal values, fundamental human rights, and democratic institutions, so his nation's defence against Russia has grown symbolically to become perceived as the defence of democracy in the world. Such a framing has been confirmed by the stance of the major Western power – the United States. Joe Biden stressed in March 2022 that "Ukraine is fighting for the *values* of freedom and *democracy*" ([Biden, 2022](#)). He also legitimised Zelensky's narrative by placing the Ukrainian case in historical perspective: "Today's fighting in Kyiv and Mariupol and Kharkiv are the latest battle in a long struggle: Hungary, 1956; Poland, 1956 then again 1981; Czechoslovakia, 1968" ([Biden, 2022](#)). The US Secretary of Defense declared a full alignment of American and Ukrainians goals: "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine" (Austin, cited in the New York Times, 2022). The very name of the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022, under which US provides support to Ukraine highlights the importance of today's struggle.

This relationship between a weak, peripheral country and global power can be understood twofold: it can be read as the sign of Americans subscribing to the vision rhetorically evoked by Zelensky, or as the illustration of the effective use of the hero-leader image to support American own political strategy. Zelensky' s story fits well into scripts of American political culture, appealing to the domestic public as well as to an international audience. By providing military support to Ukraine the US reinforces its image as the defender of democracy. However the risks associated with this strategy are real, so getting to this point of making the US want what he wants, is an unequivocal success of Zelensky's campaign. It worth remembering that at the beginning of the war political intuition dictated to many Western leaders to keep 'business as usual'; Germany, Hungary, and Italy took an ambiguous stance on the sanctions on Russia, before they joined others in qualifying the event as a historical 'turning point' (Sanders, 2022). Zelensky's international reception and strong US backing were decisive in the process through which unprecedented penalties were imposed on the invader. The strength of this impulse induced even traditionally neutral states to act, as well as safe havens that have historically served as a place to hide for malefactors and their money. The power of the response has been especially visible in Switzerland and Germany. Switzerland broke from its tradition of neutrality to support sanctions, while Germany abandoned its post-World War II pacifistic stance. Furthermore, Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO, and the alliance developed a new strategy described by its Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, as the "biggest overhaul of our collective defence deterrence since the end of the Cold War" (Wright, 2022).

Zelensky's heroic image has become a platform for the revival of Western idealism. Tymothy Snyder (2022) puts it this way: "If Zelensky had not stayed in Kyiv, if Ukrainians had not chosen to resist, we would all be impoverished by that. We've been given this time as a gift to speak about who we are and what kind of future we might have. If Zelensky had fled, if the Ukrainians had not fought, we would all be that much more cynical, that much more narrow, that much less capable of talking about how the world ought to be." As the consultations unfolded and the war tension arose, the most prominent global power centres started to follow the recommendations of the former comedian. Support for Ukraine has grown to be included in the shared subjective understanding of the only way to protect European security and values (Adler, 1997: 327). However, it is hard to ignore the fact that US support for Ukraine has played a major role in mobilizing other Western countries. The historical turn in German orientations that generated a tectonic shift in the scale of the economic sanctions began after chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Washington. From this perspective Zelensky's heroic image served as a vehicle of the American-led revival of the Western ethos; in a sense Zelensky the hero has been absorbed into the soft power infrastructure of the United States. While Zelensky's message expressed values embedded in American ethos, the involvement of the American government made his words performative – it provided the resources necessary to create the reality the Ukrainian leader envisioned (Spicer et al., 2009).

While US engagement secured Zelensky's performativity on the battlefield, his message initiated a process of performance in other spheres. The invasion, which followed the 2-year pandemic crisis, severely impacted the sense of security of people around the world and triggered a new surge of anxiety in Western Europe. The severity of the crisis created space for pathos and made people more susceptible to heroic images. Zelensky's storytelling provided context, an interpretation of events and a sense of urgency. The notion of the 'people's war' has gained a new dimension, as civilians from around the world play a larger role in shaping the narratives and realities of conflict than ever before. The orientations of the public – their support for or reluctance – arguably determine the degree of unity in supporting Ukraine that can be upheld.

The importance of public pressure is not limited to politics, as corporate boards of directors, public relation departments and executives are also exposed to the judgments of their consumer

bases and other market powers. The scale of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia created unprecedented pressure on the private sector and foreign companies to pull their operations out of the country. Business has witnessed a completely new level of political engagement: the leading aviation companies Airbus and Boeing announced their refusal to deliver spare parts to Russian civil aviation. Facebook and Google decided that Russian official information channels cannot be part of their platforms. Elon Musk, in response to a tweet provided Ukraine with Starlink satellites to secure communication. The biggest brands in the energy industry, commodities and foods cancelled their investments in Russia and withdrew from the country. Consumers across the world were advised on how to use barcodes on products to distinguish their country of origin and boycott those of Russian origin. The war provoked a surge of volunteer hackers, or hacktivists, battling on the digital frontline with Moscow: the community of fact-checkers increased efforts to detect and tackle disinformation, while organized collectives like International Anonymous, Polish Squad303 or Belarusian Cyber Partisan declared electronic war against Russia. As part of conducting cyberattacks on public institutions, companies and media, their activities involved ordinary people, developing a system that allows anyone to send messages to Russian cell phone numbers in order to raise awareness of the reality of the conflict. War has been extended beyond traditional armies.

Shared knowledge and imagination have produced the unexpected scale of support for the Ukraine, for which Zelensky has been credited. In Nye's view (2022) soft power "emerged as a key feature of Ukraine's defense". In this case, soft power gained Ukrainians access to the hard power necessary on the battlefield, which remains the prime example of trying to get the enemy to do what Ukrainians want. However, before they could force Russian troops to cease the Kyiv offensive or pull back from Kherson, they first "got others to want the same thing they do" (Nye, 2003).

This case also bears exploratory potential for the domain of International Relations, where the assumption that structures or impersonal forces (class struggle, geographic and climatic determinism, economic and technological developments) shape global realities is still dominant, thereby leaving too little space for the influence of leader (Zachara-Szymańska, 2022). The leadership factor, although recognised, remains understudied and underappreciated. The essay of the contemporary realist Robert Jervis, directly addressing the question 'Do Leaders Matter?' (2013), provides a good illustration of this view. After elaborating on the nature of the international game, Jervis gives a negative response to the question posed in the title, denying leaders a role in shaping the international scene. In opposition to Jervis's view, Byman and Pollack (2001) decided to '…praise the great man', 'bringing the statesman back in'. Their analysis uses a list of influential leaders, arguing that their ambitions, visions and intentions cannot be erased from the picture of the historical transformations of their times. It is impossible to tell the history of Europe following the French Revolution without Napoleon, just as the picture of the politics of the Middle East would never be accurate without Saddam Husain or Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As Keith Grint (2022: 608) confirms: "it remains the case that individuals make a difference. It would be difficult, for example, to assume that Germany would have taken the same trajectory without Hitler, that Russia would have invaded Ukraine against the wishes of Putin or that the Ukrainian resistance would have been quite so effective without Zelensky at the helm".

Conclusion

The scale of the resistance mounted by the Ukrainians against the Russian invasion proved to be a decisive factor in the formulation of a new direction for the Ukrainian state, which also led to the redefining of the scripts of Western politics. A turning point in the history of the region can be marked both in terms of the Ukrainian crisis and the depth of the national and international reactions

to it. The figure of President Zelensky links these two elements, as he provided the narratives used in making sense of the situation. His persona has been internationally identified with a mental construct of heroism, used as a soft power platform enabling the projection of power around the world. In exercising heroic leadership on the world stage, Zelensky has achieved an overwhelming 'soft power victory' for Ukraine, building recognition of the country in a context of bravery and ideals of freedom. Additionally, Ukraine's political priorities have been effectively merged with the core identities of the Western countries. The combination of Zelensky's charisma with the use of international military support proved to be key for a 'smart power approach' oriented at building military domination and expanding Ukraine's presence in the international realm. This approach has rested on three main factors:

- resilience and a coherent response to the war, which enabled the unification of Zelensky's figure with the Ukrainian society as a whole – the tensions and differences in internal debates were not visible outside the country;
- the military and political support of the United States. The American government incorporated Zelensky's heroic image so to reinforce its own 'power of attraction', evoking the narrative of the defense of democracy and standing on the right side of history;
- the personalization of heroism and villainy in this conflict. The Russian invasion was broadly seen as a violation of international norms and humanitarian standards. Positioning himself in opposition to Vladimir Putin, Zelensky has exercised his moral authority, arguing that a broader, existential war for freedom, democracy and human dignity is already underway.

President Zelensky's leadership style is viewed as heroic not only because his behaviour fits the description of heroism but also because he addresses the vital need of a public longing for a noble cause. The soft power this leadership results in represents a relational phenomenon reproduced through social interaction. His agency cannot be seen as absolute. In this sense, it is more collective heroism emerging from the relation between Zelensky and his followers than just the individual condition of a single man. It emerges from the variety of the parties involved in social exchanges as interactions guarantee the recognition and reinforcement of the heroic strategies. At first sight, the magnitude of the change brought by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the pivotal role played by Zelensky is likely to reinforce the heroic bias in both leadership studies and the popular approach to the phenomenon of leadership itself. However, in fact it represents a processual, post-heroic model in which leadership is continuously co-created between mutually dependent sides of an interaction.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Note

1. See: Minakov, M, Rojansky, M. (2018). Democracy in Ukraine: Are We There Yet? Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_30_-_rojansky_minakov.pdf (accessed 02.02.2023). See also: Snyder, T. (2022). The Making of Modern Ukraine. Lecture series available on YouTube.

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