

The personal is political: Volodymyr Zelensky in the spotlight of the international mainstream media

by Alla Marchenko

abstract

In this article, I focus on the mainstream media coverage of the background of Volodymyr Zelensky, candidate for the position of President of Ukraine and, subsequently, the sixth President of Ukraine. The elections provoked a splash of international interest in Ukraine because of the unexpected candidate, a comedy actor with no prior political experience. This research shows that not only the professional, but also the ethnic background of Volodymyr Zelensky became an important topic in the international media during the presidential campaign and the elections of the President of Ukraine in 2019. Mentions of Zelensky's Jewish background were supported by references to certain stereotypical views about the history of Ukraine, and his elections were covered as an unexpected breakthrough – either from the Soviet or from the anti-Semitic past.

KEYWORDS: Volodymyr Zelensky, international mainstream media, media and elections, media image of Ukraine, personal background of a politician.

How is it possible to accept information about the world and about society as information about reality when one knows how it is produced?

Introduction

Global societal change become particularly visible in political transformations. Ukrainian society can be regarded as a model for understanding what “liquid modernity”,² in the sense of unpredictability and rapid changes, looks like in the political field. Until spring 2019, an observer of Ukrainian political life could count five presidents, two mass uprisings (known as the Orange Revolution of 2004 and Euromaidan from 2013 to 2014), as well as a long period of resistance to Russian hybrid aggression since 2014.³ The sixth President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, was elected by 73.22% of the voters on April 21, 2019 – after being known as a public actor in the genre of comedy. The phenomenon of Zelensky's campaign was built on the image of his hero in a TV

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky speaks to the media after he voted at the polling station during the parliamentary election on July 21, 2019.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



show called “Servant of the People”, an ex-teacher of the History of Ukraine, Vasyly Holoborod’ko, who was elected President of Ukraine. Due to the show’s format, which involves guessing the real names of politicians played by actors, and where the names of organizations and political events are explicitly given, it became “life-imitating art”.⁴ His electoral campaign (called the *Ze*-campaign, where *Ze* referred to the two first letters of his surname) and the rapid victory of an unexpected candidate with no prior political experience provoked a new splash of international interest in Ukraine. Some Ukrainian public intellectuals, for example, Oksana Zabuzhko, expressed their concerns internationally about Zelensky being a product of imitation and new media technologies rather than being a proper politician with a real agenda.⁵ However, it is difficult to call this phenomenon unique if you take into account that the three “Cs” that stand for *consumerism*, *celebrity* and *cynicism* have become a distinctive feature of contemporary politics, downplaying the traditional forms of associating politics with ideology.⁶ Examples of the most resonant outcomes of such politics are Donald Trump becoming the US’ president and the Brexit campaign for the exit of UK from the EU.

The rapid growth of Volodymyr Zelensky’s rating in 2019 could be explained by the dissatisfaction among Ukrainian citizens about the politics of his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, fueled by the different campaign strategies of two candidates – a traditional strategy by Poroshenko and a “mediatized” strategy by Zelensky, who used social media and emotional appeals to the need for a total system change.⁷ The announcement about his participation in the presidential elections was made by Zelensky himself a few minutes before midnight on New Year’s Eve 2019 on the “1+1” TV channel, during the time for traditional presidential speeches on Ukrainian TV.⁸

THE COMPLEX POLITICAL SITUATION in Ukraine before the presidential elections in 2019 cannot, however, be fully understood without its religious element. The latter has undergone major shifts in the most prominent religious denomination called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)⁹ and significant losses in the minority communities, namely, the Crimean Tatars and the Jews, due to the annexation of Crimea and the military activities in Donbas.¹⁰ It was Poroshenko’s idea to finally separate the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church in the “story of the Tomos” and receive the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church under the protectorate of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018.¹¹ Religious tensions have also divided the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Moscow Patriarchate among those who stood for and against the idea of Ukrainian ecclesiastical independence.¹²

Petro Poroshenko based his presidential campaign in Ukraine

on three identity markers: “Army, Language, Faith”, stressing the army’s role in the fight with Russia and directing sentiments in line with ethnic identity. Euromaidan is suggested in a study in 2018 to be the turning point from ethnic to civic nationalism¹³ wherein “civic identity is gaining ground at the expense of ethno-nationalist identity”.¹⁴ However, this re-orientation of the societal understanding of the nation is not reflected in the politics of history. The list of publications of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance from 2018 to 2019 shows that most of the published material deals with Communist repression and Russian military aggression, with a few publications on Holodomor (the famine of 1932-1933) and Babyn Yar as the main Holocaust symbols in Ukraine.¹⁵ However, this re-orientation was not acknowledged by Poroshenko, who chose to base his electoral campaign on exclusivist ethno-nationalist identity markers. It is suggested here that those limitations and his narrow focus on “Army, Language, Faith” did not give him more than minor support and led to him losing the election.

In this article, I refer to questions of collective memory rather than history, defining collective memory as references and dis-

courses about events, processes and people associated with the historical past, strongly influenced by the present-day narratives.¹⁶ By default, collective memory in the mass media is restricted, as any topics associated with collective memory illustrate the news of the present.¹⁷ Some scholars even speak of the construction of a “reversed memory” in the mass media, meaning a narrative that commemorates past events by

referring to present-day events.¹⁸ At the same time, it is difficult not to notice a visible trend of mediatization of the memory “as the principal shaper of 21st century remembering through the medial gathering and splintering of individual, social, and cultural imaginaries”.¹⁹ Mediatization has become a tool for reconsidering the role and influence of media in contemporary society²⁰ and media are one of the most powerful shapers of memory. Astrid Erl emphasizes that the role of the mass media in triggering collective remembrance is particularly effective when combined with narratives and images.²¹ Overall, Zelensky’s electoral campaign was based on messages in various social media – Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, which turned out to be effective in challenging the markers of identity offered by Poroshenko as being not too important in a country that requires radical change.²²

THERE IS A TENDENCY to shape collective memory using the most influential mass media that represent the stereotypes of Western culture, and neglect local nuances – this may be called the “cannibalization of memory”.²³ This trend may also be approached from a different perspective by tracing the aspects of history

“THE COMPLEX POLITICAL SITUATION IN UKRAINE BEFORE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2019 CANNOT BE FULLY UNDERSTOOD WITHOUT ITS RELIGIOUS ELEMENT.”

that are repeatedly mentioned from a certain perspective and what they say about the international media image of Ukraine. To this extent, my focus on the international media coverage of Zelensky and references to the history of Ukraine in connection with him will shed light on how the international media shapes their readers' image of Ukraine.

2019 was not the first time that Ukraine came to the attention of the international media. Earlier global themes concerned the war in Donbas (2014–2015) and the implementation of reforms after Euromaidan (2015–2016).²⁴ Both topics gradually disappeared from the mass media news, due to their enduring nature. In this text, I analyze the ways in which the international mass media construct an image of Ukraine, connecting the elections of a new president to the collective memory of Ukraine. Interestingly, some questions that were central for the international media – Zelensky's Jewish origins and discussions about Ukraine's past – were not evident in the Ukrainian media during Zelensky's presidential campaign, as the latter was based not so much on his agenda, but on criticism of Poroshenko's politics.²⁵

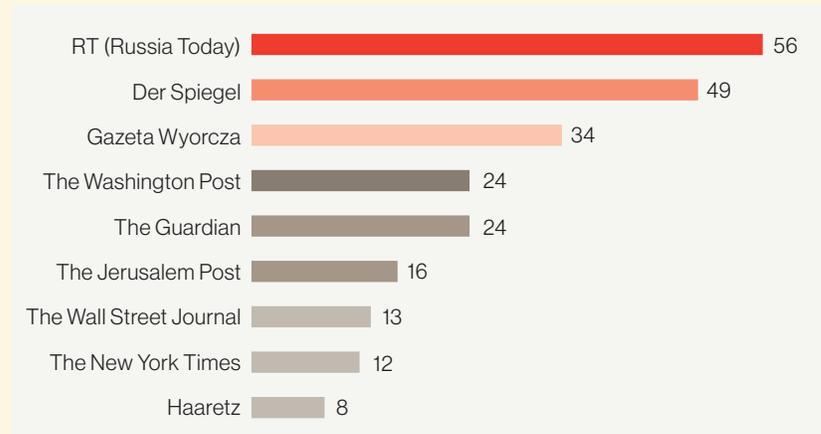
My main research question touches upon the formation of discourse on Volodymyr Zelensky in the influential international media during and after his presidential campaign. I am particularly interested in his background coverage by the media, and the way in which it is intertwined with the topics associated with the collective memory of Ukraine in mass media messages.

Methodology

The idea beyond selecting the newspapers was to take the media giants that shape the international context of events,²⁶ as well as the powerful media voices of the countries neighboring Ukraine. Thus, I have selected media messages from the following sources: *The New York Times* (US), *The Wall Street Journal* (US), *The Washington Post* (US), *The Guardian* (Great Britain), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Poland), *RT*, former *Russia Today* (Russian Federation), *Haaretz* (Israel), *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), *Der Spiegel* (Germany). They are selected for the reasons of popularity and symbolic power of these sources in their countries and abroad. However, I need to emphasize that The sources are not representative of all mass media on the topic. This research is rather an attempt to analyze a general framework of discussions about Volodymyr Zelensky from an international perspective.

SOME OF THESE MEDIA were produced in foreign countries directly involved in the current conflict in Ukraine or in the countries that have tensions with Ukrainian memory politics. By the former I mean media generated by Russia and its participation in a hybrid war using information as one of its significant weapons.²⁷ By the latter I mean the media in Poland, in which memory politics diverges dramatically from the official Ukrainian memory

Figure 1. **Distribution of articles per media**



politics of World War II²⁸ in relation to the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Volhynia, Western Ukraine.²⁹ Germany and Israel also have a special position in framing their international memory debates in connection with the history of World War II. Moreover, both countries have a different relationship vis-à-vis the Eastern European nations. Israel's collective memory envisages Eastern Europe as the main site of the Holocaust with a complex relationship to the local population that could have collaborated with the Nazis,³⁰ while for Germany, Eastern Europe was an occupied territory and the Eastern European nations were consequently victims of the Nazi regime during World War II.³¹

I USED THE ONLINE RT (the most powerful international media voice of Russian mainstream politics in English), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the most popular newspaper in Poland, also representing a critical view of Polish contemporary politics, including the politics of memory), *Der Spiegel* (as the most popular weekly magazine containing political news in Germany), *Haaretz* and *The Jerusalem Post* as two important newspapers in Israel representing more liberal (*Haaretz*)³² and less liberal views (*The Jerusalem Post*)³³. Most sources in the analysis are in English. The Polish newspaper and the German newspaper are published in Polish and German, respectively, and I analyzed their original texts using my own translation in this article.

I analyzed all articles that mentioned Volodymyr Zelensky from March to May, 2019. This was the period of the active presidential campaign in Ukraine, which included two rounds of presidential elections (March 31 and April 21, 2019) and the inauguration of Volodymyr Zelensky as President of Ukraine (May 20, 2019), provoking reflections in the mainstream media. This period could be characterized as a turning point in terms of rhetoric about a new and unexpected candidate, subsequently – the President of Ukraine – in the international media. Articles were selected according to the keyword “Zelensky”.³⁴ Number of articles in the analysis: 236 (their distribution per media can be seen in Figure 1).

In my analysis I have included opinion articles together with news articles, because they add to the image of Ukraine among its readers, and there were not enough of them to form a separate group (less than five). I concede that the authorship of many texts in the American and European media belonged to special correspondents in the region: namely, Georgi Kantchev in *The Wall Street Journal*, Anton Troianowski in *The Washington Post*, Andrew Roth and Shaun Walker in *The Guardian*, Andrew Higgins in *The New York Times*, Piotr Andrusieczko in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and Christian Esch and Christina Hebel in *Der Spiegel*. Articles in *The Jerusalem Post*, *Haaretz* and *RT* had numerous authors, including news agencies.

I conducted a qualitative content analysis using MaxQDA software. This method allowed me to count the frequencies of certain words and phrases in their context and thereby make conclusions about the establishment of rhetoric on Volodymyr Zelensky as a “dark horse” – an unexpected and unknown player – in the national politics of Ukraine.

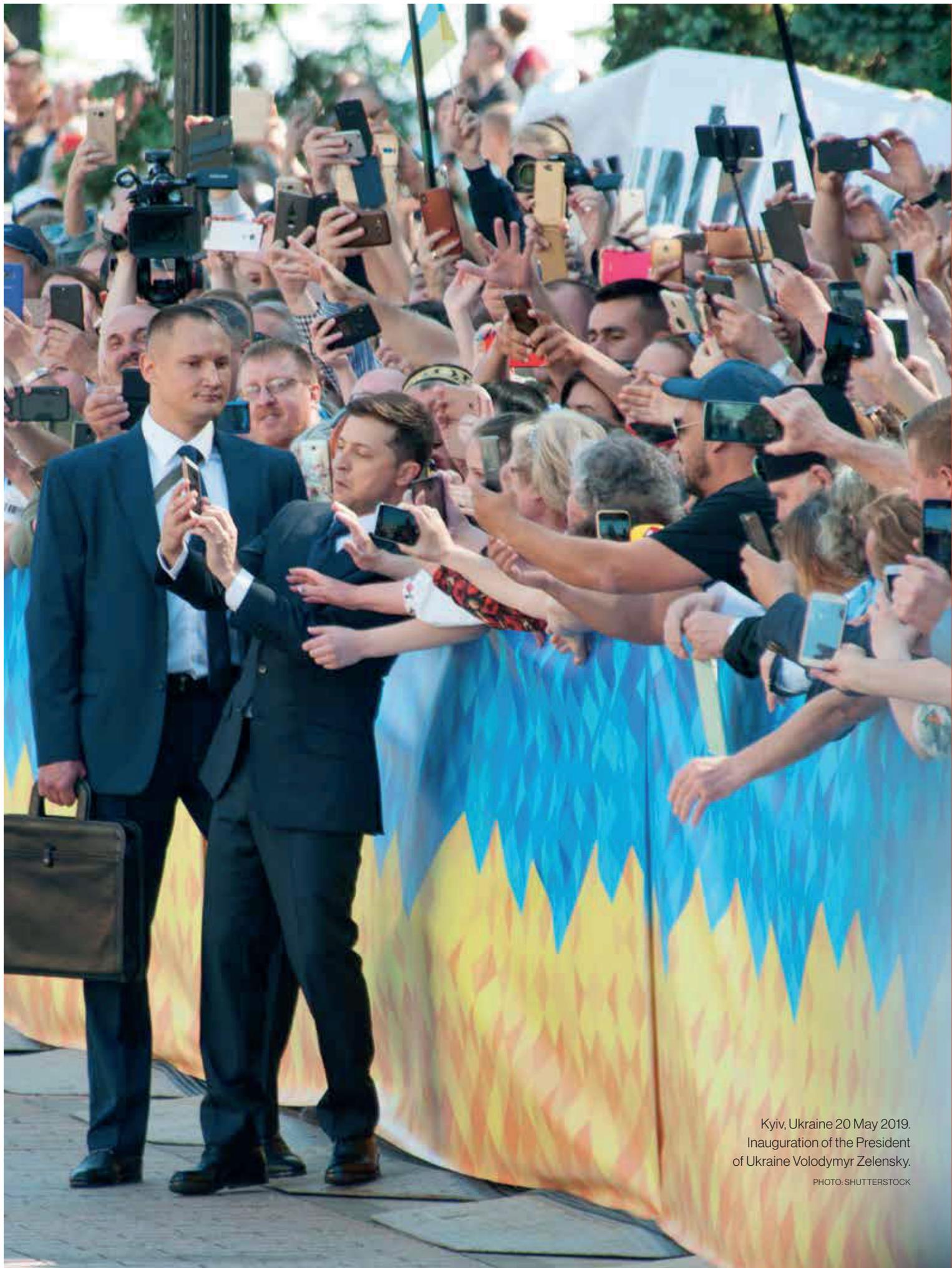
The limitations of this research are in the selection of source material. As previously mentioned, my goal was to define general popular trends associated with the representation of Zelensky at the very beginning of his political career and the connotations of such representation to the existing image of Ukraine – not to analyze specific details and representations of each country’s media profile.

Primary characteristics of Volodymyr Zelensky

A short official biography of Volodymyr Zelensky provides limited information on his place of birth, citizenship, marital status and education, and slightly more information about his career as an actor.³⁵ It should be noted that the international media attributes Zelensky’s acting career in comedy as being his main characteristic: comedian or comic actor, or actor and comedian (Figure 2). The second most frequent characteristic is from the same area – popularity (as a result of his celebrity status). However, the third most frequent characteristic refers to his being Jewish – and this dimension shows the biggest difference in the number of articles and references (181 references in 28 articles). In other words, the average number of mentions of “Jewish” is 6.46 in 28 articles, meaning that such a dimension (ethnic origin) is used in a different way from other dimensions – not just random usage, but an important focus that I will analyze later.

IN THE MEANTIME, I would like to stress that other characteristics used for Zelensky by the mainstream media refer to his language (“Russian-speaking”) and age (“young”). Additional characteristics such as “clever” or “smart” were found only four times, meaning they were probably not so interesting and “sensational” for an “unexpected” presidential candidate. While discussing an unexpected candidate, it is obvious that a newspaper focuses on the characteristics that make him/her different from the social expectations of the more “expected” candidate (in this case – “Ukrainian-speaking” and “experienced” – both of which used to describe Petro Poroshenko).





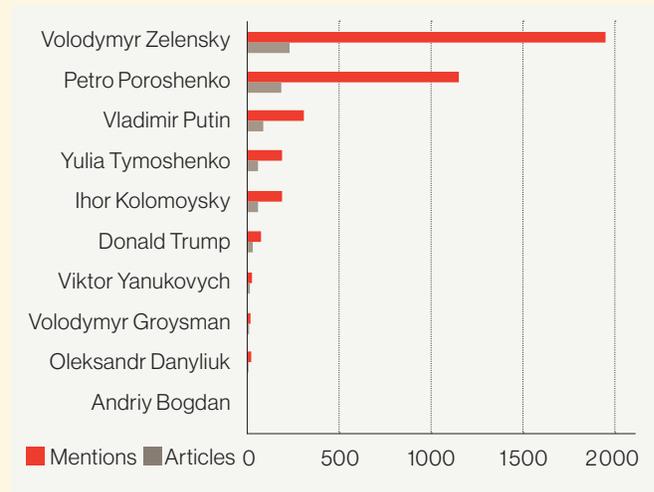
Kyiv, Ukraine 20 May 2019.
Inauguration of the President
of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Figure 2. **Characteristics of Zelensky in the analyzed sources, N (number of articles) = 236.**



Figure 3. **Frequency of references, by name, N = 236.**



In light of the abovementioned, it is surprising that there were only two vague references to Zelensky with Ronald Reagan and eight references to Barack Obama who, to some degree, was also an unexpected candidate, or rather, an unexpected winner. At the same time, a lot more analogies (16) were made to Donald Trump becoming a national leader of the USA in 2016. Such analogies could be found in the newspapers of every country in the analysis. Moreover, two Israeli newspapers used the word combination “Ukrainian Donald Trump”, emphasizing that this is a popular comparison in Ukraine.³⁶

In general, the main personality of media interest relating to Ukraine in this period is Zelensky himself (1,947 mentions), followed by Petro Poroshenko (1,155 references) and Vladimir Putin (318 references). The fourth place regarding mainstream media interest belongs to Yuliya Tymoshenko (192 references), another likely candidate for the President of Ukraine in the first round, and to Ihor Kolomoisky (191 references), an oligarch who had business interests with Zelensky. Kolomoisky was mentioned only once in the Israeli mainstream media, which is rather surprising given the fact that he is an Israeli citizen and lived in Israel at the time because of the conflict with Petro Poroshenko.³⁷ Such a distribution of interest in personalities raises an important consideration: while Petro Poroshenko was the expected “other” in most articles about Zelensky, the interest in Ihor Kolomoisky is not that straightforward. In Ukraine, Kolomoisky’s personality was in focus because of his support for Zelensky’s candidacy and the alleged dependency of Zelensky on Kolomoisky (channel “1+1”, controlled by Kolomoisky, hosted the show with Zelensky

as the main character. This boosted his ratings, as previously mentioned). However, on the international stage, such attention to Kolomoisky’s personality could be provoked by the vacuum

of opinions and the absence of an official team for Zelensky at the time of the elections (the names Oleksandr Danyliuk and Andriy Bogdan, who belonged to his team at the time of the elections, can be noted in the lower part of Figure 3 – with just a few references, not visible against the background of other “big” names).³⁸ Thus, the media were filling the vacuum with some already known personalities who could attract the readers’ interest. The oligarch who

was in a conflict with another oligarch and President Poroshenko could easily play the role of attractor.

Frequent references to Vladimir Putin are expected and can be explained by the focus of the international media on the military conflict and violations of Ukraine’s borders since 2014. Moreover, Putin was mentioned in discussions on the potential opportunities of a new Ukrainian president to improve the critical situation in Ukraine.

The Jewish background of Volodymyr Zelensky

As previously mentioned, 12% of all articles mentioning Zelensky in spring 2019 were associated with his Jewish background (see Table 1).

The Jewish background of Zelensky was specifically discussed in American and Israeli newspapers, it was occasionally mentioned in Polish and German sources and it was totally ignored in RT. I would say that such a trend could be explained by multiple

“THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF ZELENSKY WAS PRIMARILY PRESENTED FROM A SECULAR ETHNIC PERSPECTIVE WITH NO VISIBLE LINK TO JUDAISM.”

Table 1. Distribution of articles in the mainstream media mentioning Volodymyr Zelensky's Jewish origins

The Jerusalem Post	Haaretz	The Washington Post	The Wall Street Journal	The New York Times	The Guardian	Der Spiegel	Gazeta Wyborcza	RT	Total
10	6	4	3	2	1	1	1	0	28

Articles in *The Jerusalem Post* and *The Washington Post*, mentioning Volodymyr Zelensky's Jewish origins in the headline.

factors, including a general understanding of human rights connected with the absence of discrimination on the basis of origin. 40 years ago, Jonathan Sarna stated: “In America, even a Jew can be president. That, at least, has been the claim for two long centuries. It hasn’t yet happened, nor does anyone look for it to happen in 1980. Still, the myth of the Jewish president remains pervasive”.³⁹ Taking into account the specificity of the question of ethnicity in the USA, it is not surprising that the American media paid attention to what can be interpreted as a universal sign of political freedom. The absence of interest in RT could be explained by the popular trope about “Ukrainian fascists” used by the Russian media in the information war against Ukraine. This trope is considered especially powerful⁴⁰ due to the importance of the historical memory of victory against fascism in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Russia. An emphasis on Zelensky’s Jewish origins would look absurd as the allegedly “fascist” country could not have a Jewish candidate in the highest state position. However, I need to emphasize that the trope of Ukraine as a “fascist country” was not found in the analyzed set of articles in RT. However, it was widely used in other sources (even in the headlines⁴¹). At the same time, RT had published material about Kolomoisky as a Jewish oligarch standing behind Zelensky, which does not corroborate this explanation⁴² and which reflects to a larger degree the attitudes about Kolomoisky in Ukraine, as discussed above.

It is important to note that the Jewish background of Zelensky was primarily presented from a secular ethnic perspective with no visible link to Judaism. It was not raised in his interviews or political agenda, and this was stressed in the media: “Religion for me is the most intimate question,” he said in a December interview. “I am not ready to share it with anyone”.⁴³ In general, such a position contrasts the religious appeal of Poroshenko and his campaign connected to the idea of the Tomos mentioned at the beginning.

A distinctive trait of the Israeli press only was to use the word “Jewish” widely: “a Jewish comedian”, “a Jewish President”, while *Der Spiegel* mentions the “Jewish roots” of Zelensky.⁴⁴ “Jewish origin”⁴⁵ or “Jewish background”⁴⁶ can be found in the American media, or “Jewish heritage” in a British newspaper,⁴⁷ or in some Israeli articles that already used the one-word characteristic, “Jewish”.⁴⁸ It should be noted that the Israeli press (particularly *Haaretz*) was a source of citations in other mainstream media resources. In my opinion, all of the mentioned formulations signify both the complicated fate of being a descendant of a family of secular Jews in the Post-Soviet realm and the inability to find a proper word while defining the ethnic and religious background of the sixth President of Ukraine.

Part of the international media introduced a motif of Ukraine as the only country in the world, except Israel, in which the President and the Prime Minister are Jewish. This motif was found in most Israeli and American sources. Taking into account that there was a reference in *The Washington Post* to *Haaretz*⁴⁹ we can assume that this idea was appropriated from Israel (the first mention of the motif in the dataset is from the *Haaretz* article, dated April 21, 2019⁵⁰). At the same time, an important finding of this research is that a reference to the Jewish background of Zelensky was not used without a contextual explanation of its importance, and this contextual importance was illustrated by references to certain often stereotypical views about the history of Ukraine.

A historical breakthrough in Ukraine?

During the analysis, I noticed media emphasis on Zelensky’s elections as a “historical shift” or a turning point in history (see Table 2). It is worth noting that the trope of “historical shift” is indeed popular in all media descriptions of Zelensky becoming president (except for RT). This shift was particularly contrasted with the Soviet past and with the Russian authoritarian regime

Table 2. Distribution of articles referring to topics in the mainstream media

	Jerusalem Post	Haaretz	The Washington Post	NYT	The Guardian	Der Spiegel	WSJ	RT	Gazeta Wyborcza	Total
Historical shift	1	1	4	2	2	5	1		2	18
WWII	1	1	1	2		1			1	7
The Holocaust		1	2	1		1			1	6
Euromaidan					1	1	1	2		5
Anti-Semitism	2					1			1	4
Bandera	1	1	1							3
WWI				2					1	3
1917				2					1	3
Holodomor			1			1				2

of today. Thus, the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote of the “historical choice of Ukraine” (two references) in the context of further distancing from Moscow: “The country made a historical choice: to break its ties with Russia and arrive in the European harbor, developing cooperation with NATO. The fact that Ukraine’s authorities have changed democratically is the best confirmation of this”⁵¹. It is also typical of the German *Der Spiegel* to define the elections as taking Ukraine out of the Soviet past. Such phrases as “from the historical tank”⁵² or “historical electoral victory”⁵³ are used in four articles. The same stance can be traced in the British *The Guardian*, which reads: “When you read the headlines about Ukraine, think about history”, in which the author meant “civilizational rupture” with the legacy of the Soviet Union⁵⁴. What was also emphasized in almost all the media was that the elections in Ukraine took a democratic path with an implicit comparison with elections in Russia or many other post-Soviet countries.

Another article in *The Guardian* describes this “historical shift” as an unusual presidential campaign due to Zelensky’s professional background: “It is Ukraine’s most unorthodox presidential campaign in history”⁵⁵. In general, references to “historical shift” in the articles cited (eight articles) were divided into those that did not coincide with the references to the Jewish origin of Zelensky and those that were strongly linked with the discussions about this origin and Ukraine as an historically anti-Semitic country (for example, there were typical expressions such as “scarred history”,⁵⁶ “history of anti-Semitism”,⁵⁷ “bad pages of history”).⁵⁸

The history of Ukraine through the lens of the mainstream media

I should emphasize that the references to World War II were often given with mentions of the Holocaust (see Table 2). Moreover, the term “World War II” was often used as a substitute for “Holocaust”, meaning a time marker of war atrocities towards the Jews. A typical example of these mentions (see Table 2) is the

collaboration with the Nazis, in which the collaborators were in the “Ukrainian nationalist movement”,⁵⁹ while some of them were called heroes in the recent memory politics of Ukraine⁶⁰.

The topics of Euromaidan and Holodomor could be interpreted as those that introduced Ukraine to a curious reader⁶¹, while several references to World War I and 1917 put Ukraine into the general context of turning points in the history of the 20th century.

At the same time, references to World War II and the Holocaust were used in connection with the Jewish background of Zelensky, and this usage was linked to the articulated hopes for the shift of the politics of memory in Ukraine. The one (and only) article in *Der Spiegel*⁶² cites *Haaretz* and is focused on anti-Semitism in Ukraine, politics of memory that ignore the participation of local collaborators in the Holocaust, and that Zelensky could provide some hope.⁶³ This shows the existence of the “reversed memory” trend mentioned in the beginning, when interpretations of the present relate to the instrumentalization of the past.

Ukrainian nationalism in focus

As the reader can note from Table 2, the mainstream media also used the concepts “anti-Semitism” and “Bandera” when discussing the Ukrainian elections. “Bandera” is a trope that represents a stereotypical personification of the collective image of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism, usually with various negative connotations.⁶⁴ I must mention that the idea of “Ukrainian ultra-nationalism” is widely used in Russian information warfare and that the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology has included this dimension in the index of Russian propaganda surveys about Ukraine.⁶⁵ For instance, there were four similar examples in *RT* of the phrases “extreme nationalists”,⁶⁶ “staunch nationalist”⁶⁷ and “fervent nationalist propaganda”⁶⁸ about the years following the Euromaidan events in Ukraine. The idea behind the usage of ideologically loaded terms is similar to that of the term “fascist” discussed above.⁶⁹

There were also other attempts to portray Ukraine’s present through references to its past (a total of eight articles). For

example, an opinion article by Ziemowit Szczerek⁷⁰ in *Gazeta Wyborcza* stated: “It is not enough that he is a Jew, which is often a reason to mock him, he is a Russian-speaking Jew”.⁷¹ In this example, the Jewish heritage of Zelensky is linked to the Russian language, thereby creating a combination that would probably be disliked by certain Ukrainian nationalists, according to the author. Generally, such discussions did not move to a more nuanced analysis of the situation in the country,⁷² illustrating the “cannibalization of memory” as an ideological instrument used by the mainstream media. It is important to remember that both the Ukrainian and the Russian language continued to function in the sphere of communication in Ukraine after Euromaidan.⁷³

A contrasting example about current nationalism in Ukraine can be found in *The New York Times*: “A few far-right nationalists have tried, in vain, to make an issue of the fact that Mr. Zelensky is Jewish. But the near total silence on his Jewish background has demolished a favorite trope of Russian propaganda – that Ukraine is awash with neo-Nazis intent on creating a Slavic version of the Third Reich”⁷⁴.

In the articles that question the continuity of the trope of “Ukraine’s anti-Semitic past” until the present day, it is typical to rely on the results of surveys, most often surveys by the Pew Research Center.⁷⁵ Such references often lead to conclusions: “Despite a difficult history, today Ukraine may be one of the least anti-Semitic countries in Central or Eastern Europe”.⁷⁶ It means that despite a dominating mainstream media vision of Ukraine as a nationalist and anti-Semitic contemporary state, some international journalists critically approach stereotypes or at least provide alternative data.

Conclusion

The research has shown an interesting twist in mainstream media writing about the unexpected politician: while trying to explain “unusual” and “unconventional” facts about him, the authors of the narratives referred to the negative characteristics of the Ukrainian past. The alleged anti-Semitism and nationalism served as a contrast that highlighted the new candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky. As a result, among many other dimensions to his background (education, profession, age, language, etc.), it was his Jewish origins that led to particularly complex discussions.

Many of these discussions involved disputes about the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust. It is important to note that topics such as Euromaidan, Holodomor or World War I were mostly used to provide some context for the international reader.

MATERIALS THAT DO NOT discuss the Jewish background of Zelensky contain information about the democratic elections in Ukraine as a sign of distancing itself from the authoritarian legacy. There are also articles that try to differentiate between the

past and the present, and a trope about the only country in the world, except Israel, with two Jewish leaders was introduced to reinforce this differentiation. Such results help explain the characteristics of the international image of Zelensky as the newly elected sixth Ukrainian president. The result also shows the need for professional research articles in the international mainstream media, which would question, investigate or corroborate

the stereotypical views of Ukraine that were mentioned. References to history in connection with the coverage of Zelensky’s Jewish background emphasized the contrast between expectations and reality, between Ukraine’s past and present.

Surprisingly, the professional background of the sixth President of Ukraine did not become a point of debate; it was used in the headlines as clickbait instead. The situation may look totally different after one year of

Zelensky’s presidency, taking into account many factors that demanded diplomatic skills from him and his team in both domestic and international arenas. Regarding the latter, the most infamous scandal was the result of Zelensky’s indirect involvement in the process of the impeachment of Donald Trump, after revealing that the US President had tried to influence Zelensky in order to neutralize his own political rival, Joe Biden.⁷⁷ In Ukraine, a great deal of tension between Zelensky’s team and his opponents has been connected with his ambiguous political actions towards such sensitive themes in Ukraine as the war in Donbas, status of the occupied territories, land market opening, etc.⁷⁸ However, the dynamics of Zelensky’s media coverage about his position as the President of Ukraine is worthy of separate research. ❌

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Acknowledgements: This text is the result of discussions during the CBEES Workshop “Religion, Politics and Memory in Eastern Europe: the Case of Ukraine” at Södertörn University on September 27, 2019. I am grateful to the organizers and participants of the workshop for their valuable comments and insightful questions. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees, whose comments and suggestions have significantly influenced the final version of this text.

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