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**Is Volodymyr Zelensky the  
necessary hero or not?***Is Volodymyr Zelensky the necessary hero or not?***Abstract:**

*History teaches us that it is not infrequently war that constitutes a nation, and that it can take on the function of a founding myth or origin myth for a people, becoming the first chapter of a story of its own that gives identity to those who until then had no identity at all.*

*Original myths need heroic archetypes with names and surnames to give a human face to the national enterprise that is born. In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky is one such necessary hero. The grandeur of myth bestows a heroic aura on specific individuals in whom the value of the glory of collective effort is concentrated. However, to maintain unceasingly and at great cost to Ukraine the uniqueness of the constitutive moment without allowing the stability of a possible peace to be achieved could undermine its heroic status.*

**Keywords:**

*Volodymyr Zelensky, war, Ukraine, hero, myth, public opinion, Ukraine.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## ¿Es Volodímír Zelenski el héroe necesario o no?

### Resumen:

La historia nos enseña que en no pocas ocasiones la guerra es quien constituye una nación, pudiendo adoptar la función de mito fundacional o mito originario para un pueblo, convirtiéndose en el primer capítulo de un relato propio que otorga identidad a quienes hasta entonces no la tenían del todo.

Los mitos originarios requieren arquetipos heroicos con nombres y apellidos para dotar de rostro humano a la empresa nacional que nace. En Ucrania el presidente Volodímír Zelenski es uno de esos héroes necesarios. La grandiosidad del mito concede un aurea heroica a personas concretas en las que se concentra el valor glorioso del esfuerzo colectivo. Ahora bien, mantener incesantemente y con un alto coste para Ucrania la singularidad del momento constitutivo sin permitir alcanzar la estabilidad de una paz posible podría desvirtuar su condición heroica.

### Palabras clave:

Volodímír Zelensky, guerra, Ucrania, héroe, mito, opinión pública, Ucrania.

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## The exceptionality of war

Any military action, at any point along the spectrum of conflict, generates effects in the cognitive domain. A serious aggression against national territory, such as the one Ukraine is currently suffering, undoubtedly has such a strong impact as to change everything. The war has completely reshaped people's feelings, perceptions and assessments.

The relationship between state-building and war is not a new field of analysis. In the Renaissance, and looking back to classical antiquity, Machiavelli would reinstate war as the state's principal and exclusive activity for the prince. Hobbes would understand the state as a contract between men to avoid permanent war between them. Carl Schmitt, in his concept of the political, would establish that its essence is the friend-enemy duality and thus the foundation of the state. Both Hobbes and Schmitt discover in war or its possibility, be it internal or external, the final cause of the political and therefore of the state.

Through his studies and publications, the prominent American sociologist Charles Tilly has argued that preparation for war has been the determining factor in state-building in the West.<sup>1</sup> His is the famous quote, "War made the state and the state made war".<sup>2</sup> A paradoxical assertion, which he would develop by explaining how war wove the European network of nation states and, later, how the preparation for war created the internal structures of states.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, his proposal has been much discussed and nuanced in many ways, and it may be interesting to keep in mind at this point.

History teaches us that not infrequently war is what constitutes a nation, and that it can take on the function of a founding or origin myth for a people, becoming the first chapter of an own story that provides those who previously had none with an identity.

Analysts in the West have already begun to identify the consequences of the many shortcomings of the "special military operation" launched by Russia. The war, which for more than a few Ukrainians and Russians began in 2014, has begun to forge a strong

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<sup>1</sup> TILLY, Charles (1975). "The formation of national states in Western Europe" Princeton University Press. Princeton.

<sup>2</sup> "War made the state, and the state made war."

<sup>3</sup> TILLY, Charles (1990). "Coercion, Capital, and European States". Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

national identity. The 2022 military escalation with the invasion of Russian forces may finally forge the national consciousness of the Ukrainian people.

### **The hero free before his will or the hero slave to his duty.**

In parallel, the Russian aggression has transformed President Volodymyr Zelensky into a heroic political leader. Zelensky can be a hero exemplifying his will to power or a hero bound by the obligation to serve his people in the position he occupies. For the first hero, the routine of the presidency is an empty time with no possibility of transcendence. In this scenario, the misfortune of war would become an opportunity, a dramatic framework within which time presents the opportunity to stand out by freely exercising one's will to impose oneself. The hero of freedom can only fill time with the courage of his determination in a space of exception. The second type of hero has no choice, but rather tries to escape the tragedy, while finding himself unable to do so because his dignity, subjected to his previous choices, forces him otherwise. This type of hero can choose whatever he wants to do but, once the decision is made, he cannot choose the will imposed by the consequences of his commitment.<sup>4</sup>

Volodymyr Zelensky will have to choose what kind of hero he wants to be. He can be the hero rebelling against all imposition, subject only to his will to withstand all impediments that seek to domesticate his self-assertion. Or, contrarily, he can be the hero who is capable of self-doubt, a new prince of Denmark who deliberates on his destiny to question whether or not to be in the midst of doom. A hero capable of linking his destiny with an ethical conscience capable of curbing the immoral autocratic inclination of generals lost in their labyrinths.

Zelensky won the election by galloping into an unequal fight against the alliance between oligarchy and politics in Ukraine. The reality of everyday life caused him to backslide, but the war now gives him a new opportunity to once again assert himself as a knight-errant, acting to assert himself as powerful. This Zelensky would be like Achilles, a hero who only owes himself and responds only to the mirror of his glorious destiny. The hero is pure

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<sup>4</sup> SAVATER, Fernando (2009). "The hero's task". Ariel, Barcelona.

will; his mission cannot be precisely defined, perhaps embedded in a narrative that can be uncompromisingly altered when necessary.

The other possibility is that Zelensky prefers to be a hero slave to his duty to be so, although this option does not sit well with the aspirations of a divo. What the character's true profile is remains unknown, but what we have seen is his ability to unite the Ukrainians' will to resist and fight.

Original myths need heroic archetypes with names and surnames to give the national enterprise that is being born a human face. In this case, President Volodymir Zelensky is one of these necessary heroes. The grandeur of the myth bestows a heroic aura on specific individuals in whom the value of the glory of collective effort is condensed. However, maintaining incessantly and at great cost to Ukraine the uniqueness of the constitutive moment without allowing the stability of a possible peace to be achieved could undermine his heroic status.

### **Public opinion and its relationship with the hero**

Surveys by the independent Ukrainian sociological group "Rating", which specialises in social research<sup>5</sup>, reveal the significant effects of the war on Ukrainians' perceptions.

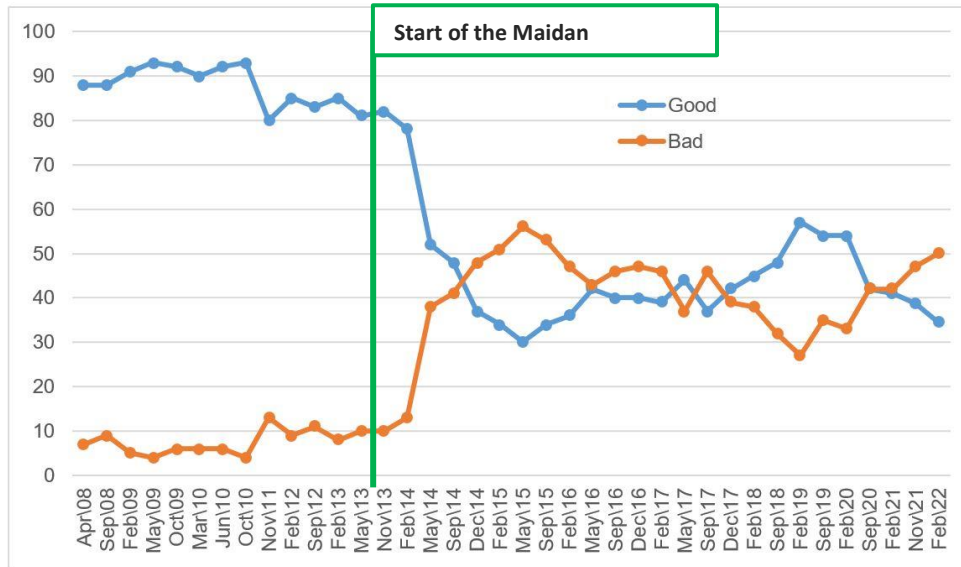
According to Rating data, in August 2021 41% of the population agreed that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people". By March 2022, the proportion had fallen to 21% and by early April it had dropped to 8%. We cannot assess the extent to which these data are accurate, but they do point to a trend that is reinforced by the coherence of the shifts in opinion revealed by a full sociological analysis of the entire set of questions in the Rating survey.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Social research in accordance with international standards approved by ESOMAR and WAPOR codes.

<sup>6</sup>[https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/vosmoy\\_obschenacionalnyy\\_opros\\_ukraina\\_v\\_usloviyah\\_voyny\\_6\\_aprelya\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/vosmoy_obschenacionalnyy_opros_ukraina_v_usloviyah_voyny_6_aprelya_2022.html)

## Ukrainian opinion on Russia



Source: The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

<https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1102&page=1>

The facts and the will to keep fighting are the best indicators in the surveys. Undoubtedly, Ukrainians today are prouder to be Ukrainians than prior to the invasion and are further than before from feeling part of the Russian people.

The day after the Russian invasion began on 25 February when, given the gravity of the situation, many were doubting the continuity of the government, President Zelensky confirmed in a video posted on his Twitter profile that he would remain in the capital, recording his words in front of the presidential palace. "We are here. We are protecting Ukraine".<sup>7</sup> The next day, amid the utter confusion caused by the proximity of Russian troops, the United States offered a possible evacuation. Also broadcast on Twitter, President Zelensky rejected the offer with a courageous phrase: "I do not need shelter, I need ammunition".<sup>8</sup> After the first blow on 8 March, the message was very clear: "We are not going to give up and we are not going to lose".<sup>9</sup>

The political trajectory of Ukraine's new hero looks like something out of a TV series. This is largely due to his fame as the lead in a TV series called "Servant of the People", in

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.eldebate.com/internacional/20220321/10-mejores-frases-presidente-zelenski.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

which Zelensky played the role of the President of Ukraine. Very few political leaders have had the opportunity to play the role of their country's president for three seasons and 51 episodes.<sup>10</sup>

The actor, screenwriter, film and TV producer and director turned fiction into reality. On 31 December 2018, while the series was still airing, Zelensky announced his candidacy for the presidential elections, in which he would win nearly three out of four votes in the second round, and so the vast majority of constituencies. His party had been formed barely a year before the elections and the name chosen for it was none other than the name of the series that made him famous, "Servant of the People".

Zelensky's electoral success is not due to his political experience but precisely to his lack of it. Someone new, who from the outside promised to break the rule of the oligarchs and end rampant corruption, was what Ukrainians needed. But the initial euphoria and confidence in the new president soon evaporated. By mid-2020 more Ukrainians distrusted Zelensky than supported him. These figures persisted until the beginning of February 2022, when only one in five citizens showed their intention to vote for the president if there were elections.<sup>11</sup> However, with such poor results and despite the attrition, Volodymyr Zelensky was still the politician with the most support. The determining factor remained the rejection of the system of power-sharing among the oligarchs and the associated problems of corruption.

The cause of the president's greatest erosion was the Pandora papers, which exposed Zelensky's and his entourage's investments in companies based in tax havens. Another event that generated political tensions was the removal of Dmytro Razumkov from his post as speaker of the Verkhovna Rada. Razumkov was the party's official leader in the parliamentary elections, number one on the electoral list, and one of Zelensky's most valuable political assets. For the first time in Ukraine, the People's Servant party won an absolute majority with 254 seats in a 450-seat chamber. Dmytro Razumkov received the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.elindependiente.com/tendencias/2022/04/14/servidor-del-pueblo-la-serie-que-encumbro-a-zelenski-y-cambio-ucrania-para-siempre/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/16/7324188/>

"Between 5 and 13 February 2022, Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers conducted a comprehensive survey on the ranking of several likely candidates for the first round of the presidential elections and compared the results with data from January 2021. Volodymyr Zelensky continues to enjoy the strongest support, with 19.1% of all respondents and 25.1% of those who voted. Petro Poroshenko came second with 16.6% of all respondents and 21.8% of those who voted." Compared to the 2021 data, Zelensky was still falling and Poroshenko was rising, with the gap dangerously narrowing.

support of 382 MPs to head the Rada but was ousted two years later by many of his party's MPs.<sup>12</sup>

Razumkov's dismissal was linked to his defence of legality vis-à-vis the dubious procedures used against some pro-Russian opponents. Razumkov stressed that he stood by the principles he had campaigned on, accusing Zelensky of having forgotten them by signing a decree sanctioning pro-Russian opposition MP Taras Kozak and banning broadcasts from three major TV channels he owned. The government considered the channels to be a platform for Russian propaganda in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

Victor Medvedchuk, chairman of the political council of the Opposition Platform for Life, the main opposition party with 44 seats, accused President Zelensky of aiming for absolute domination of the media. Two months later, in May 2021, a Ukrainian court imposed house arrest on Medvedchuk without the need for a letter supplicatory.<sup>14</sup>

Zelensky's fall in popularity was linked to his investments in tax havens and Razumkov's dismissal, but also to his inability to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine with pro-Russian rebels, rising gas prices, lack of COVID vaccines and restrictions on the use of the Russian language.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/just-all-others-end-zelensky-alternative>

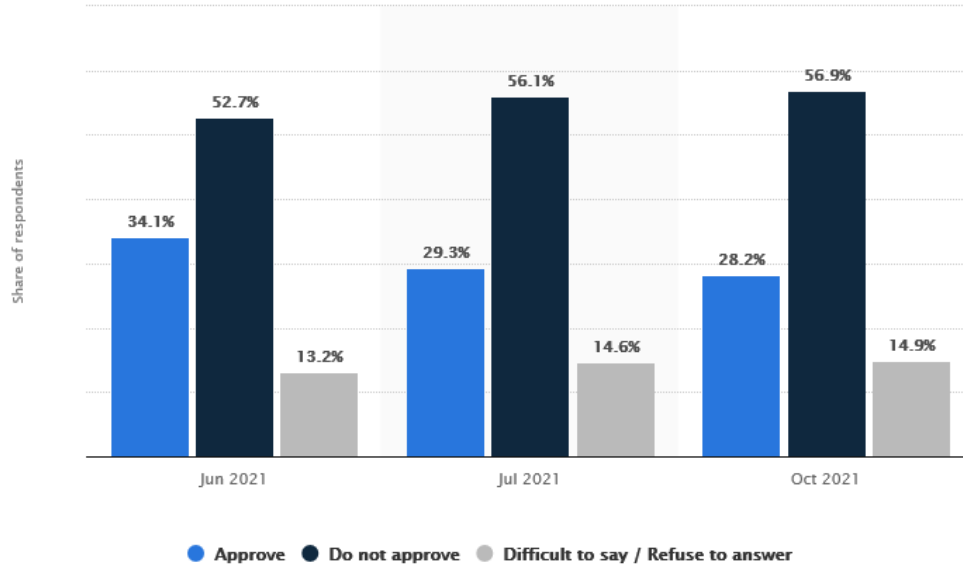
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1006&page=2>

KISS polls at the time indicated that the majority considered the broadcast ban on channels accused of being pro-Russian to be a mistake. "In general, 34.6% of respondents in this formulation consider the ban a necessary step, while 40.8%, on the contrary, consider it a mistake. If in the West and in the Center support of this step prevails, in the South, the East and Donbas there are more of those who consider such step as a mistake".

<sup>14</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-14/un-tribunal-de-ucrania-impone-arresto-domiciliario-al-diputado-viktor-medvedchuk-aliado-de-putin.html>

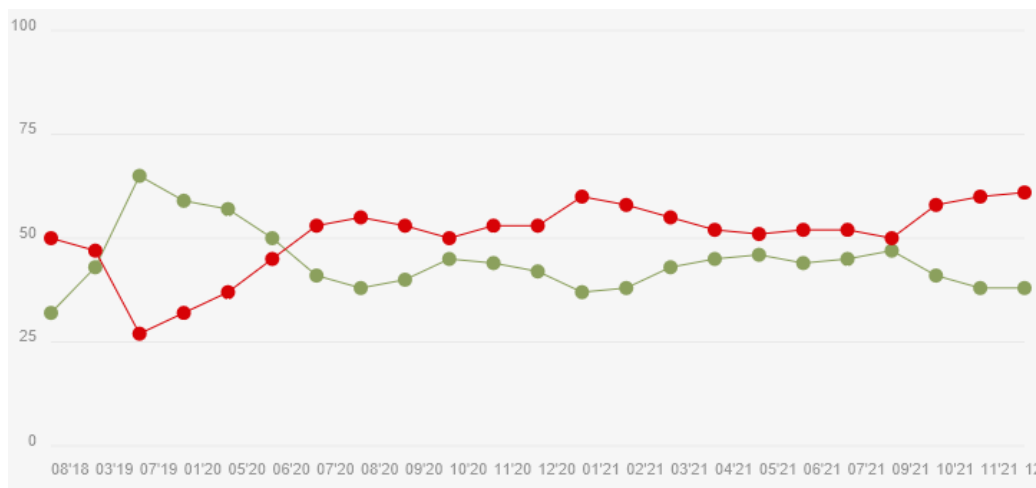


**In general, do you approve or disapprove of the activities of the Ukrainian president?**



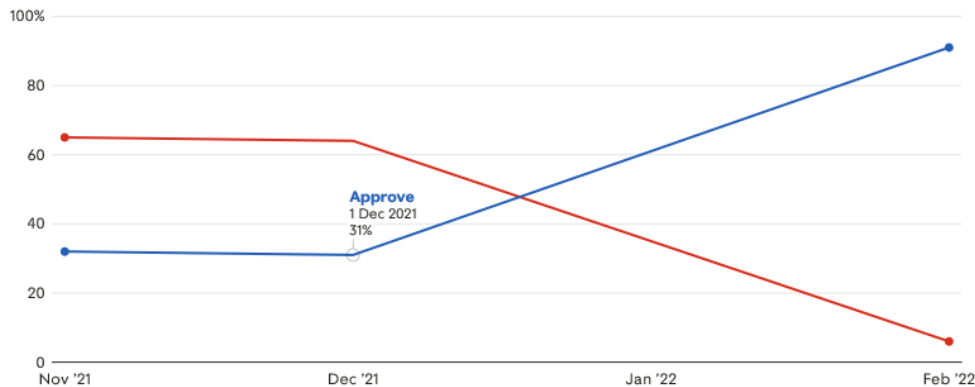
Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1100076/volodymyr-zelensky-s-approval-rating-ukraine/#professional>

**Trust President Zelensky: Red if you do not trust. Green if you trust**



Source: <https://ratinggroup.ua/en/>

### Trust President Zelensky: Red if you do not trust. Blue if you trust



Source: <https://ratinggroup.ua/en/>

Despite ongoing domestic erosion, Zelensky's political image remained indestructible abroad. Only a few critical voices were published in English. On 21 February 2022, a few days before the Russian invasion, the New York Times published a devastating article against Zelensky. "After almost three years in office, it is clear what 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".<sup>15</sup>

In a poll published by the online newspaper 'The Ukrainian Truth' on 24 January 2022, 53% of respondents thought that Zelensky would not be able to exercise the role of commander-in-chief to defend Ukraine against a Russian attack.<sup>16</sup>

A few days later, however, everything changed. Analysing different opinion polls, we find that the war has boosted confidence in the president and approval ratings from very low starting levels. The evolution of the president's ratings is proof of the Ukrainians' need, at the beginning of the Russian aggression, to provide themselves with an exceptional heroic figure.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/opinion/ukraine-russia-zelensky-putin.html>

<sup>16</sup> Ukrayinska Pravda, The Ukrainian Truth. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/01/24/7321508/>

## The representation of a heroic role

The gradual build-up of Russian pressure allowed sufficient time to write the necessary scripts and rehearse them if necessary. Mastery of staging, the ability to focus attention on his messages, the choice of tone and nuances appropriate to each audience, the control of body language and the portrayal of the necessary heroic role of resistance were no challenge for the lifelong actor, scriptwriter, and TV and film producer and director. We must imagine that everything had been meticulously prepared.

An experienced actor and scriptwriter knows that where there is pain something important is at stake. Amidst the trials and tribulations the hero of the film is able to show that the real evil is not pain but the fear of suffering it. The great challenge was to mobilise and sustain the Ukrainians' will to fight in the face of a far superior military force. Sustaining hope imposed a role on the international scene, where a certain public was predisposed to easy applause. Nothing can be desired effectively if psychologically we have the feeling that we are unable to achieve what we desire. Therefore, just as important as the interpretation of the role at home was the interpretation of the role outside it.

On 8 March, Zelensky addressed the British Parliament via video conference. He parodied one of the most famous quotes in world literature, from Shakespeare's Hamlet. To be or not to be, that is the question. This was not the question for the Ukrainian president after 13 days of war. "What is a more worthy choice for a noble soul than suffering ungodly fortune's unyielding rigour, or rebelling against a sea of misfortunes, and in so doing disappear with them?"<sup>17</sup> The answer to the question was clear: to be was the decided choice and that meant resisting. Zelensky then recalled Winston Churchill. "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..."<sup>18</sup>

The Ukrainian president's intervention brought forth cheers of approval and a long wave of applause from the British Commons. He also addressed the US Congress by video conference, knowing exactly how to tune in to the right frequency. He ended his remarks by acknowledging that President Biden is the leader of the world because he is the leader

<sup>17</sup> <http://4umi.com/shakespeare/hamlet/es>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8aR5cAOHNE>

of peace. Earlier he had recalled Pearl Harbour and the 9/11 attacks, going on to say that Ukrainians also have a dream. In many other parliaments Zelensky won the right to be heard and in all of them he gained the general approval of the representatives, receiving long applause.

On each stage, the speech was designed with varying degrees of success to connect with the representatives of the democratic countries listening to him. His emotionally charged messages were intended to mobilise the consciences of the world's democrats to come to the defence of the equality and freedom of all the men on the front lines of the struggle, where shared values were now under threat. His communicative success cannot be questioned. His narrative has gained traction both at home and abroad. It has totally convinced many that Russia alone is responsible for the war, while gaining full legitimacy in the defence of the country's sovereignty. So much so that some consider him a "global and moral leader".<sup>19</sup>

Winston Churchill mobilised the English language to launch it on the battlefield. Language and words are undoubtedly a powerful weapon. Zelensky has mobilised the weapon of democratic values with outstanding persuasiveness. To compare one with the other would be to somehow recognise equal merit. However, apart from any other considerations, which would certainly not be negligible, the fact remains that Churchill was not prime minister before the war and Zelensky was.

### **The hero as creator of meaning**

When it is all over, Ukrainians and the rest of the world will have to ask themselves whether this war could have been avoided and the extent to which the war hero's decisions did or did not bring it about. Immediately after victory in World War II, in July 1945, Churchill lost the UK election. He would later win the election again. He went down in history as one of the great leaders of Britain and the free world. However, this is no mean feat. Zelensky was not the hoped-for leader in peacetime. His attrition was rapid. He has begun to be the leader needed in the war, but it will be the peace to come that will decide whether or not he is a leader and a hero of the Ukrainians.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-03-20/zelenski-la-mejor-arma-de-guerra-de-ucrania.html#>

With the unconditional support of the US and the UK, Zelensky has reshaped many perceptions. The Ukrainians have so far accepted the price. In Ukraine, resignation has been replaced by genuine acceptance. We could think that the Ukrainian people have so far not just suffered the consequences of the attacks but have somehow been able to choose them, which means choosing to perform an act of freedom that means rejecting the occupation whatever the price. It is the final outcome that will set the new narrative. It is possible, then, that the value of pain is infinite for the victims and nil for the perpetrators. The victim that assumes their role thus becomes the most indomitable hero, and Ukraine's resistance will be strengthened.

However, we do not yet know how things will turn out. Unchecked escalation could place the world and especially Europe under a serious threat, the use of tactical nuclear weapons. We want to continue to believe that nuclear weapons are only a deterrent. However, we are not certain that Russia's political leaders and its military feel the same way. What we do know is that in February Putin ordered the defence minister to put Russia's nuclear forces in "special combat readiness". And in a televised statement he warned that if another nation interferes in the operation, "Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be like nothing they have ever seen in their entire history".<sup>20</sup> In addition, the possibility of using nuclear weapons is openly discussed on Russian state television.<sup>21</sup>

Russian military doctrine keeps the option of first use open if it is losing a war and its vital interests are under threat.<sup>22</sup> In June 2020, the basic principles of the Russian Federation's state policies on nuclear deterrence were published. The document states that "aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when

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<sup>20</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/04/20/u-s-must-can-prevent-russian-military-crossing-nuclear-threshold/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-sarmat-moscow-ukraine-britain-1702086>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/03/russia-ireland-nuclear-weapons-video-ukraine/>

<sup>22</sup> Russian military doctrine 2014. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia\\_military\\_doctrine.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf)

"The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is threatened". In the event of the outbreak of a military conflict involving the utilization of conventional means of attack (a large-scale war or regional war) and imperiling the very existence of the state, the possession of nuclear weapons may lead to such a military conflict developing into a nuclear military conflict".

the very existence of the state is endangered"<sup>23</sup> is one of the four specific conditions for a possible use of nuclear weapons.

On 26 April 2022, at the end of a visit to Ukraine, Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin noted that the US goal is to see Russia weakened enough to prevent it from invading a neighbouring state.<sup>24</sup> Four days later, President Biden asked Congress for an additional \$33 billion in funding for Ukraine, of which \$20.4 billion would go to provide Kiev with military and security assistance<sup>25</sup>. On Sunday 1 May, after meeting with the Ukrainian leaders in Kiev, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and a delegation of US lawmakers pledged to support Ukraine until it achieves victory against Russia.

On another front, the possible accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has fuelled the Russian government's perceived sense of insecurity. Russia's Deputy Chairman of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, has warned that nuclear weapons will be deployed in the Baltic if this happens, which would mean an end to its current status.

Meanwhile, US military assistance in the war has allowed Ukraine to bolster its combat power with advanced weapons systems and have clear intelligence advantages. Through diplomatic communication, Moscow has warned the White House of the danger of providing US and allied weaponry to Ukraine, calling for a halt to the irresponsible militarisation of the region on the grounds of the unpredictable consequences for European and international security.<sup>26</sup>

The situation may become complicated enough for Russia to interpret it as a serious threat. Russian leaders can understand that the West's position is shifting. In the Russia-Ukraine war, the US is increasingly engaging in a direct manner. The result is a

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<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation, Moscow, June 2, 2020,

<https://hansdevreij.com/2022/03/06/basic-principles-of-state-policy-of-the-russian-federation-on-nuclear-deterrence/>

<sup>24</sup> When Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III declared on Monday at the end of a stealth visit to Ukraine that America's goal is to see Russia so "weakened" that it would no longer have the power to invade a neighboring state, he was acknowledging a transformation of the conflict, from a battle over control of Ukraine to one that pits Washington more directly against Moscow. Several administration officials said that the immediate impetus for Mr. Austin's carefully orchestrated declaration that the United States wants "Russia weakened to the point where it cannot do things like invade Ukraine" was to set President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine up with what one senior State Department official called "the strongest possible hand" for what they expect will be some kind of cease-fire negotiations in coming months. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/us/politics/ukraine-russia-us-dynamic.html>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-biden-pide-congreso-eeuu-otros-33000-millones-dolares-adicionales-destinar-ayuda-ucrania-20220428175152.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-04-15/rusia-advierte-a-ee-uu-de-que-el-envio-de-armas-a-ucrania-tendra-consecuencias-impredecibles.html>

transformation of the conflict, suggesting a confrontation between Washington and Moscow, thus opening up the possibility of a dangerous interpretation of the need to use tactical nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory.

The familiar Russian concept of using nuclear weapons to escalate to de-escalate becomes especially dangerous in the current scenario, where a failure of Russian military operations could lead to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Concern about this potential scenario was expressed in the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review, which acknowledged that Russia's non-strategic nuclear forces had become so modernised as to be far superior to those of the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Moscow has conducted manoeuvres involving limited, demonstrative or warning first-use nuclear weapon exercises, convinced of the coercive effects they will have on European countries. The assessment of the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review is that Russia considers it feasible to end a conflict on favourable terms using non-strategic nuclear weapons.

The report to Congress on Russian nuclear weapons: Doctrine, Force and Modernisation<sup>28</sup>, updated in April 2022, assumes that Russia has sufficiently demonstrated its willingness to use force to alter the map of Europe and impose its will on its neighbours, backed by implicit and explicit threats of nuclear first use. The designed US-Russia conflict scenarios involve Russia's first use of nuclear weapons, whether in the form of demonstration or small strikes to coerce NATO allies.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, it is US assessment itself that identifies the danger of first use of tactical nuclear weapons. The evolution of the upcoming military operations in Ukraine, if unfavourable to Russia, could create a situation where, according to the US's own assessments, the use

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<sup>27</sup> The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review.

"Russian strategy and doctrine emphasize the potential coercive and military uses of nuclear weapons. It mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to "de-escalate" a conflict on terms favourable to Russia. These mistaken perceptions increase the prospect for dangerous miscalculation and escalation".

<https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

<sup>28</sup> Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization, Updated April 21, 2022. Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

of nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil is a possibility consistent with Russian capabilities, military doctrine and political will.

However, in addition to the danger it assumes in escalating the conflict, Russia has strong reasons to avoid using nuclear weapons, among which it is worth highlighting:

1. The impact on narratives.
2. Evidence of their weakness.
3. The negative effects on its relations with China.

In any case, whether nuclear weapons are used or not, Ukraine will have to bear the level of destruction and suffering that the war is imposing, including the cost of reconstruction, the frustration generated by the impossibility or difficulties of joining NATO and the EU, the insufficiency of Western aid and support, the loss of a significant part of its territory and the political evolution of Zelensky as the leader of the reconstruction.

## Conclusion

The distance between courage and recklessness cannot be measured until events establish outcomes, which end up being the only definitive unit of measurement.

The use of nuclear weapons would alter public opinion without knowing beforehand in what direction. The material and human costs of the war have yet to be determined. The effects in Ukraine will take at least a decade to overcome, if the foreign loans needed to finance reconstruction can be obtained.

A beautiful gesture, a well performed dramatised script, a long wave of applause are not enough to hide the horror of unconscionable destruction. The outbreak of the war made Zelensky a necessary heroic leader. We do not yet know where the outcome of these contentious proceedings will position this now famous character.

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