

UKRAINE'S UNLIKELY PRESIDENT, PROMISING A NEW STYLE OF POLITICS, GETS A TASTE OF TRUMP'S SWAMP

Volodymyr Zelensky swept to power pledging to end corruption. Then the White House called.

By Joshua Yaffa October 25, 2019

0:00 / 47:39

Audio: Listen to this article. To hear more, download Audm for iPhone or Android.

Kiev's central square, the Maidan, was the site of two revolutions, and its name has become a kind of universal shorthand for a popular uprising. The first revolution, in 2004, brought to power Viktor Yushchenko, who promised European-style reforms but ended up presiding over a feckless administration. Disaffection with his corrupt successor, Viktor Yanukovich, led to the second revolution, starting in 2013, in which more than a hundred protesters were killed. The Maidan is also the site of the annual celebrations of the country's Independence Day—the anniversary of the day, August 24, 1991, that Ukraine formalized its statehood after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This year, on August 24th at nine in the morning, more than a thousand children formed a line that led up the street where, five years ago, scores of demonstrators were fired on by snipers. The children, dressed in white, clutched yellow-and-blue Ukrainian flags and bouquets of daisies.

Volodymyr Zelensky, the country's new President, stood halfway up the cobblestoned alley with his wife, Olena. Zelensky, who was elected in April, with seventy-three per cent of the vote, is forty-one, with close-cropped brown hair and a disarming ability to adopt whatever persona suits the occasion. Before he declared his candidacy for President, on New Year's Eve, 2018, he was the leading member of a troupe of actors and satirists who spoke to Ukrainians' frustrations with the country's turbulent post-Soviet transition. On the phenomenally popular television show "Servant of the People," which aired from 2015 to the spring of 2019, he played Vasyl Holoborodko, a

lovable and self-effacing high-school teacher who, in the first episode, is filmed by a student unleashing a profanity-filled tirade against Ukraine's corrupt political class. Holoborodko becomes a viral sensation, so much so that, however improbable the plot point might be, he is elected President.

Since 1991, Ukrainian politicians, despite claiming to be against corruption, have kept close ties to oligarchs while taking pleasure in their bureaucratic powers, enjoying what Dostoyevsky once called "administrative ecstasy." Zelensky, who cast himself as a Ukrainian Everyman, represented a departure, though his campaign was light on policy specifics. Even a hundred days into his Presidency, he had spent little time articulating how, exactly, he was planning to execute his proposed reforms, which included disciplining a self-interested oligarchy and negotiating an end to the five-year war with Russian-backed separatists in the eastern region of the Donbass, in which, to date, more than ten thousand people have been killed.

His earliest moves were symbolic. He reduced the bloated Presidential motorcade to two cars with no sirens, the minimum his bodyguards would allow, and hinted that he might move the Presidential administration from its Stalin-era building, on Bankova Street, to somewhere more laid-back. For Independence Day, he replaced the traditional Soviet-style military parade of soldiers and tanks and missile launchers, which he called "pompous and expensive," with the March of Dignity, featuring schoolteachers, doctors, social workers, and athletes.

Zelensky and Olena walked down the street, trailed by children. Church bells rang. Then Zelensky addressed the crowd. "Twenty-eight years have passed," he said, referring to Ukraine's post-Soviet independence. "They were difficult, stormy, thorny—but they were ours together." He went on, "The whole country cut coupons"—a reference to the quasi-currency issued after independence to help Ukrainians buy daily necessities—"and, let's be honest, watched 'The Rich Also Cry' "—a Mexican telenovela popular in the former Soviet Union in the early nineties. The speech, optimistic and unifying, tinged with a sense of laughter through tears, encapsulated Zelensky's brand of populism.

In the end, the obstinate forces of tradition and inertia stymied the administration's move from Bankova Street. But, under the new President, visitors could wear shorts if they liked. The new Prime Minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk, a thirty-five-year-old lawyer,

once rolled into work on a scooter. Zelensky, in his first days in office, suggested to the pair of honor guards who have historically been positioned outside the President's office, greeting the commander-in-chief each morning with a salute and the words "Good day, Mr. President! I wish you health!" that perhaps they could just say a quiet "Good morning."

A few days after the March of Dignity, I visited Zelensky at the Presidential suite, which occupies the entire fourth floor of the administration building—a warren of corridors, gilded reception rooms, and parquet floors. He welcomed me into his office, which looks much as it did under Yanukovich, a kleptocratic would-be dictator with famously bad taste. There are half columns of green marble, and a carpet in rich yellows and reds covers the floor. Taking a seat across from me in a large leather armchair, Zelensky smiled conspiratorially. "This is no place for a normal person," he said. He delivered a practiced routine about his "iPhone 11"—a switchboard the size of a microwave—before growing suddenly serious. "These walls are filled with the symbolism of the past thirty years," he said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "They were the site of what brought our country to the condition it's in. You want to wash all this off yourself."

I asked him how his career in entertainment had prepared him for politics. "What the viewer loves in an actor, this feeling of humanity—of course I use it," he said. "And that's very easy to do, because I remain myself." Acting had taught him another lesson, too: "Politics is like bad cinema—people overact, take it too far. When I speak with politicians, I see this in their facial expressions, their eyes, the way they squint." Energized by the parallel, he went on, "I look at things like a producer. I would often watch a scene on the monitor, and the director and I would yell, 'Stop, no more, this is unwatchable! No one will believe this.'"

Zelensky's most scrutinized performance to date was a phone call, on July 25th, between him and President Donald Trump, a summary of which the White House released in late September, after a whistle-blower complaint came to light. The complaint indicated that, during the call, Trump had "sought to pressure the Ukrainian leader to take actions to help the President's 2020 reelection bid," including asking Zelensky to pursue an investigation into Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son, who was on the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

President Trump Is Impeached

In the call, Zelensky, who is speaking Ukrainian and using an interpreter, is generous with his praise, mentioning that he stayed at the Trump International Hotel and Tower on Central Park. “I just wanted to assure you once again that you have nobody but friends around us,” he says. When Trump compliments Zelensky on his election victory, Zelensky builds on their similarities: two very different types of populist who, nevertheless, both turned television stardom into political power. “We used quite a few of your skills and knowledge,” he says. “We wanted to drain the swamp here in our country.” Trump launches into a rant about Europe—“Germany does almost nothing for you,” he says—and Zelensky readily agrees “not only one hundred per cent but actually one thousand per cent.” Zelensky then mentions U.S. military aid. Trump brings up a “favor,” and goes on to talk about a conspiracy theory connected to the 2016 U.S. election, and also “talk of Biden’s son.” Zelensky indicates that he is open to Trump’s requests. Soon, he says, Ukraine will have a new prosecutor general—“one hundred per cent my person,” who will “look into the situation.”

Zelensky, evidently embarrassed, has said that he hadn’t expected his side of the conversation to be published. Vitaliy Sych, the editor of the weekly news magazine

Novoye Vremya, told me that Zelensky, although he sounded “fawning and servile,” had been put in an almost impossible position. For nearly three decades, Ukraine has counted on bipartisan support in Washington to offset relentless pressure from Russia. Zelensky, desperate to end the war in the Donbass, is heavily reliant on U.S. military aid and diplomatic muscle. He was set on arranging a meeting with the U.S. President. “It would be a signal to Russia, of course,” a policy adviser of Zelensky’s told me; such a meeting would strengthen Ukraine’s position in its standoff with its more powerful neighbor. “But it would also be seen as a very positive sign in Ukraine: here is a new President who is supported by the leader of the most powerful country in the world.”

On September 24th, after the news of the whistle-blower complaint, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced a formal impeachment inquiry into Trump. The next day, when the summary of the call was released, Zelensky finally got his audience with Trump, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. The circumstances were not the ones he had wished for. At a joint press appearance, he insisted, in slightly broken English, he had not been pressured in the call, and that, in any case, he did not want to get involved in American politics. (Earlier, he had told a Russian journalist, “The only person who can put pressure on me is my son, who is six years old.”)

On October 22nd, William Taylor, the top U.S. diplomat in Kiev, delivered testimony to Congress as part of the impeachment inquiry. He said that he had become “increasingly concerned that our relationship with Ukraine was being fundamentally undermined by an irregular, informal channel of U.S. policy-making.” The channel, he said, was coordinated by Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s personal lawyer, and included Kurt Volker, then the U.S. Special Representative to Ukraine; Gordon Sondland, whom Trump appointed Ambassador to the E.U.; and Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy. In mid-July, Trump had ordered a freeze on nearly four hundred million dollars in U.S. military aid to Ukraine that had been authorized by Congress, though it reportedly took several weeks for the news to make its way to Kiev. Taylor testified that Sondland had made clear to Zelensky that both a White House meeting and the military aid were dependent on his publicly announcing that he would conduct investigations that were of personal and political interest to Trump.

During my meeting with Zelensky, in August, he talked about the frozen military aid as a technical matter. But there was clearly something on his mind. “There are some

difficulties,” he said. “It’s a complicated story that started a long time ago.” He summed up his position: “Large empires have always used smaller countries for their own interests. But, in this political chess match, I will not let Ukraine be a pawn.” The sentiment was spot on and the delivery perfect, but, in reality, it might have already been too late.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Zelensky’s home town of Kryvyi Rih, in the southeast, was a major center of iron mining and metallurgy. By the early nineties, it had fallen into decline, blighted with unemployment, alcoholism, and banditry. Gangs of teen-age delinquents known as the *beguny*, or “runners,” terrorized the city with hammers, knives, and bottles. Zelensky and his friends found an escape in a variety-show and sketch-comedy competition called K.V.N., the full name of which, in Russian, means Club of Funny and Inventive People. K.V.N. competitions first appeared on Soviet television in the nineteen-sixties and soon became a national pastime, held in universities and performance venues all over the Soviet Union.

In 1994, Zelensky’s high school, School No. 95 in Kryvyi Rih, held a K.V.N. tournament that pitted teachers against students. Alla Shepilko, then a mathematics teacher and now the school’s director, recalled that Zelensky, who was in the eleventh grade, was the captain of the student team, and was confident that they would win. Shepilko asked him why, and he said, “Because you are the teachers. You can say only what you are allowed to say. But we are free to say what we really want.” When I recently visited the school, a squat building of beige brick, with a design out of the standard-issue socialist-architecture catalogue, Shepilko told me, “It’s true—we were delicate, always searching for just the right words. But they were genuine, speaking directly and without observing the norms of diplomacy.” The students won handily.

Zelensky, whom everyone called Vova, grew up in a Ukrainian-Jewish family: his mother, Rimma, is an engineer, and his father, Alexander, a professor of computer science. Like many Ukrainians living in the country’s eastern regions, the family spoke Russian at home. Alexander was known for his work ethic; he often returned from the office after eleven at night. Even now, at seventy-one, he teaches five classes a semester at a local university. When I visited him at his office, I discovered that he is also something of a cutup, ending many of his sentences with a smile. “I’m laughing all the

time, making jokes, and, if you'll excuse the unliterary phrase, messing around," he told me.

In the mid-nineties, Zelensky and several of his K.V.N. friends enrolled at a local university, where they studied law. But they devoted much of their energy to K.V.N., and formed a troupe called Kvartal 95. It was run as a collective, but, as Zelensky's school friend Vadim Pereverzev said, there had to be "one person who has the final word, who takes ultimate responsibility. This leader turned out to be Vova." Zelensky attracted the attention of Boris and Serhii Shefir, a pair of brothers who were leaders of a more established K.V.N. troupe. Serhii told me, of Zelensky, "He had charisma, energy, and, most important, desire, an absolute and uncompromising desire." It became clear that Zelensky and his friends weren't going to become lawyers. Alexander Zelensky told me, in his office, "I resisted—but not for long. I could see that he was engaged, that he enjoys it. He found himself, and that's great."

In 2002, Alexander Rodnyansky, a producer who was then the head of Ukraine's largest television network, agreed to air Kvartal 95's live comedy show in prime time. Russian society's relationship to politics tends to be marked by a leaden self-seriousness, Rodnyansky told me, but in Ukraine, where politics is defined by a cycle of hope and disappointment, people approach everyone and everything with a guffawing irony and an abiding skepticism. It's a sense of humor that is irreverent and heavy on folksy shtick, which wormed its way from Odessa to Kryvyi Rih and, later, to Brighton Beach. The members of Kvartal 95 were masters of the genre.

The show, "Evening Kvartal," was made up of sketches that resembled those on "Saturday Night Live," with the dial for the zany and the ribald turned up. Zelensky and his castmates mocked the villains of the first Maidan and also its heroes. The oligarchs were ripe for satire, but so were traffic police, petty bureaucrats, and the Orthodox Church. Politicians of opposing factions came to see the show, often sitting on different sides of the audience. "Sometimes we'd hear that we'd gone too far, or that we offended someone," Shefir remembered. "A person whom we'd poked fun at would come up and tell us, 'That was a bad joke you told about me, but what you said about the other guy was funny.' "

In December, 2013, Vladimir Putin, wary of losing influence over Ukraine, offered Yanukovych a bailout worth fifteen billion dollars and a favorable gas deal after

Yanukovych withdrew from a trade agreement that would have brought Ukraine closer to the E.U. For many people in Ukraine, Yanukovych's refusal to sign the agreement was a blow; Europe represented not just a potential trading partner but an aspirational vision of Ukraine as a modern, functional, corruption-free country. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators filled the streets to protest the government. One *Kvartal 95* sketch from the period made fun of the brutality of the riot police; in another, Zelensky played a psychiatric patient who is recruited by a government functionary to go after demonstrators.

In February, 2014, after months of clashes, Yanukovych fled. Within weeks, Russia had annexed Crimea, and by that summer it had ignited a separatist conflict in the Donbass. Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch with holdings in everything from chocolate to media, was elected President, with a mandate to carry out deep and lasting change. But it soon became clear to his opponents that, like his predecessors, Poroshenko was primarily intent on preserving his grip on power, making backroom deals with fellow-oligarchs and wielding influence over law enforcement and the courts.

In the winter of 2015, Zelensky and his *Kvartal 95* colleagues began writing "Servant of the People," a sendup of Ukraine's corrupt political culture. In early episodes, Zelensky's character, Holoborodko, confused and overwhelmed after becoming President, is introduced to his extensive staff (there is a tanning specialist, a masseur for the President's earlobes, and an ostrich cultivator) and shown around his new residence. "Remember the government default of 2008?" an aide asks, pointing to a golden chandelier. "That's what caused it." In a scene that has recently taken on an uncanny resonance, Holoborodko gets a call from the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. "Hello! Congratulations, we decided to invite your country into the European Union," she tells him. Holoborodko goes nuts. "Oh, fuck! Oh, sorry—wow! I'm so happy!" he cries. But it's a mistake: Merkel meant to call Montenegro. He ends the call, cursing furiously.

Holoborodko speaks with a bracing honesty. When meeting with officials from the International Monetary Fund, a big lender to Ukraine, who are presented as conniving hucksters, he tells them, "Go to Hell! We aren't beggars, or migrant workers, or some borderland wedged between orcs and elves." He is a wise fool, calling out injustice and illogic not just among the ruling class but among ordinary Ukrainians, too. In one

episode, he goes off message at a press conference, telling a television correspondent how a pure-hearted Ukrainian can readily turn into a *khokhol*, an epithet that Russian speakers sometimes use for Ukrainians to denote weak-mindedness. He goes on to explain how this happens: the story starts at birth, he says, with a bribe for the doctor in the delivery room. The Ukrainian of Holoborodko's fable rises in the world, becoming a deputy in parliament, and, over time, his cynicism grows. He ends up swapping barbecues on the Dnipro River for holidays in the Maldives, so as to get farther away from other *khokhols* like himself. That, Holoborodko says, is our "mysterious *khokhol* soul."

Zelensky once joked to a BBC reporter that, although he is a fan of "Monty Python," Ukrainian audiences wanted something broader, like "Benny Hill." But, for all the buffoonery of "Servant of the People," it contained a barely hidden civic manifesto. "We were not just making a kind of humorous critique but also proposing something to society, putting forward our vision," Yuriy Kostyuk, one of the show's chief writers, said. "In fact, the show was successful precisely because we weren't indifferent—we really wanted 'Servant of the People' to demonstrate that a different life was possible."

The show was a runaway hit, and in 2016 it was picked up by Netflix for distribution abroad. At the time, Ukraine's post-Maidan hopes for deep, systemic change were fading. No high-ranking officials had been prosecuted for corruption. The war continued. "We'd spent our lives worried about the same problems that worried everybody, and on top of that we had gained a certain degree of popularity and public trust," Pereverzev said. "All this was leading us to something, even if we didn't know what." Kostyuk told me about a moment on set, in 2015, when the team was filming the *khokhol* monologue: "I was looking at the monitor, and I caught myself thinking, Can this really be it? Is this the ceiling—the maximum of what we can convey through the television screen?"

Zelensky told me that his decision to enter politics was the result of a nagging feeling that he needed to do something to help transform his country. "I started out making fun of politicians, parodying them, and, in so doing, showing what kind of Ukraine I would like to see," he said. "And then came this series, in which I could play such a President. O.K., so I couldn't actually *be* the President, but I could play him . . . and at some point I understood there was a chance. These feelings accumulated in me to the

point of spilling over—which coincided with things accumulating and spilling over for the Ukrainian people, too.”

As the head of Kvartal 95, Zelensky had faced bureaucratic issues that spoke of wider problems. “It was difficult to register my business,” he told me. “It was difficult to pay my taxes. It was difficult to protect my intellectual property. It was constantly difficult.” To help Ukrainian businesses, he went on, “I needed a political instrument.” Zelensky decided to launch a political party— Servant of the People Party, its name borrowed from the show—which he hoped would be able to get a handful of competent deputies voted into parliament. Serhii Shefir, by then a top executive at Kvartal 95, recalled, “We felt that the people were listening to us, but that politicians weren’t. So we decided that we needed to go into their territory, to go inside their system, and to start talking to them from there.” Zelensky announced his candidacy on the “Evening Kvartal” New Year’s special.

Poroshenko was running for reelection on a platform anchored in Ukrainian nationalism and an attachment to a heroic past. His campaign slogan was “Army, language, faith.” Zelensky’s Ukraine was aspirational, a country of programmers and entrepreneurs. He asked simple, provocative questions. When we met, he described encountering the West in the two-thousands. “I travelled to America and all over Europe,” he said. “And I didn’t understand why in France or Germany you can walk the streets and see, in the morning, grandmothers sitting in cafés drinking coffee. Why isn’t it like that in my country?”

Zelensky’s campaign was daringly experimental. He gave very few interviews and barely held traditional campaign events. Instead, he recorded his own content on the campaign trail, mainly videos—in which, for instance, he toured Lviv, in western Ukraine, with a local guide, who taught him a few words in the regional dialect, and interviewed I.T. professionals. The “Evening Kvartal” troupe mounted a national tour, putting on comedy shows in which the performers acted as though their star weren’t in the middle of a Presidential campaign, while winking that, of course, he was. Toward the end of the tour, in the city of Dnipro, Zelensky addressed the crowd as himself. “It feels like for the past twenty-eight years we’ve been living in some dark forest,” he said. “But we can do this together and leave darkness behind.” He called on audience

members to turn on the flashlights on their cell phones and hold them aloft. He said, “On March 31st”—Election Day—“raise your eyes and find the light.”

MORE FROM THIS ISSUE

NOVEMBER 4, 2019

A REPORTER AT LARGE

A Cybersecurity Firm's Sharp Rise and Stunning Collapse

By Raffi Khatchadourian

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Why We Can't Tell the Truth About Aging

By Arthur Krystal

OLD WEST DEPT.

Waiting for Kanye in Wyoming

By Corey Morris

SHOUTS

A Bibli

By Bob C

The third season of “Servant of the People” premiered as the election approached. The show’s fictional Ukraine, still led by Holoborodko, had splintered into two dozen independent fiefdoms—a metaphor, perhaps, for the separatist territories in the Donbass, or maybe a reference to the rhetoric of many of Ukraine’s post-independence politicians, Poroshenko included, who had pitted the country’s Ukrainian speakers against its Russian ones. “Enough with the old slogans that cleave our land apart—east, west, north, south—we’re one country, we’re all Ukrainians,” Holoborodko says. During the campaign, Zelensky was happy for voters to conflate him with his television counterpart. As one of Zelensky’s advisers, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, a television and event producer, told me, “The show created an image in the minds of people of who the President could be.”

Kostyuk, the writer for “Servant of the People,” who had become Zelensky’s top campaign aide, told me that the team had been impressed by the New York representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; they admired her viral campaign video, which positioned her as a woman of her community—getting ready for work, taking the subway, talking to voters. Kostyuk paraphrased the video’s message: “How can those in power truly represent us when they don’t live next door, don’t breathe the same air, don’t drink the same water, aren’t treated in our hospitals, don’t send their children to the same schools?” He added, “That’s what we were saying, too.”

Iryna Bekeshkina, a leading sociologist in Kiev, called Zelensky's campaign a "direct hit, right on target." By the end of Poroshenko's term, Ukrainians were disgusted with the incumbent political class. Bekeshkina and her colleagues analyzed the results of a 2018 nationwide poll and found that only sixteen per cent of the population identified "professionalism" as a key attribute for a politician. More important was that a candidate be seen as an honest and incorruptible person. Zelensky had that image going into the campaign, and he preserved it by avoiding uncomfortable or complicated topics, such as whether Ukraine should aspire to join NATO, or negotiate directly with separatist leaders in the Donbass. "He was a screen on which every person projected his own fantasies," Bekeshkina said. One Western diplomat in Kiev put it slightly differently: "You could say that having no real policy positions turned out to be his secret sauce."

In February, 2019, after Zelensky met with European ambassadors in Kiev, news leaked that they were uneasy about his candidacy. An E.U. diplomat told me that, although Zelensky was "a very careful listener," he spoke in "very general statements and wasn't able to answer simple political questions. The impression was terrible." And, for all Zelensky's emphasis on replacing the corrupt regimes of the past, he was seen to be close to Ihor Kolomoisky, an oligarch with holdings in metals, aviation, energy, banking, and media, who owns 1+1, the channel that aired "Servant of the People." During Zelensky's campaign, 1+1 enthusiastically promoted his candidacy.

Kolomoisky's worth is estimated at more than a billion dollars. He owned PrivatBank, Ukraine's largest financial institution, from 1992 to 2016. That year, the Ukrainian government nationalized the bank, which was on the brink of insolvency, and Kolomoisky and his associates were accused of embezzling five billion dollars. (Kolomoisky has denied these accusations.) He fled to Switzerland, and then to Israel. In the weeks before the election, Ukrainian journalists published records showing that Zelensky had travelled on a private jet thirteen times to Geneva and Tel Aviv, where Kolomoisky has homes. Zelensky was accompanied on many of those flights by Andriy Bohdan, Kolomoisky's lawyer, who later became Zelensky's chief of staff.

Vitaliy Shabunin, who heads the Anti-Corruption Action Center, in Kiev, said that a certain degree of proximity to a figure like Kolomoisky was unavoidable for a politician. "If you are a baker and can't get your loaves into the supermarket, your business is

destined to forever remain small-scale,” he said. “And, for Zelensky, the supermarket belongs to Kolomoisky.” Zelensky told me that, in the Ukrainian media, “every channel belongs to one large financial interest or another.” Given the long history he shared with 1+1, it was only logical that the channel supported his candidacy. But “support” on Ukrainian television doesn’t mean positive advertising, he clarified, so much as “how you are destroyed on this or that channel,” and, on Kolomoisky’s channel, “no one destroyed us.”

The twenty-four hours before an election in Ukraine are known as a “day of silence,” when no campaigning is allowed. 1+1 circumvented this rule by airing a variety show of Kvartal 95 offerings featuring Zelensky and a documentary on Ronald Reagan, in which Zelensky voiced the President in Ukrainian. As if the parallel weren’t obvious enough, a spokesperson for the network explained, in a press statement, “Reagan traded his acting career for politics, where he achieved great results.” The next day, in the first round of voting, out of thirty-nine candidates, Zelensky came in first, with thirty per cent of the vote; Poroshenko came in second, with sixteen. In their final showdown, on April 19th, the two men met for a debate at Kiev’s Olympic Stadium. They taunted each other on a cramped stage. “I am the result of your mistakes,” Zelensky told Poroshenko.

Zelensky’s difficulties with the Trump Administration began not long after the election. In early May, Rudy Giuliani announced that he intended to go to Kiev. He wanted the Ukrainian authorities to pursue several matters, including investigations into Ukraine’s supposed interference in the 2016 U.S. election and into the Bidens. Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said that Giuliani was trying to recruit a foreign government to influence the U.S. electoral process. Giuliani cancelled his plans, blaming Democrats and various Ukrainians. “I’m not going to go, because I think I’m walking into a group of people that are enemies of the President—in some cases, enemies of the United States,” Giuliani said, on Fox News. According to the Western diplomat in Kiev, Zelensky’s team felt “personally targeted” by Giuliani’s comments. The policy adviser of Zelensky told me that this was the moment when Zelensky and his staff realized the difficulty of the position they were in: “We understood that there is a risk in being dragged into this struggle, and had a clear feeling that it’s definitely not where we want to end up.”

Around this time, Zelensky held a meeting ostensibly to talk about energy policy. Instead, the group spent hours discussing how to deal with Trump and Giuliani's expectations. "He was concerned," a person familiar with the meeting said, of Zelensky. "The reason for the meeting was about not wanting to say no to the President of the United States, whose support he was going to need on Russia, security and the I.M.F." Later that month, two Soviet-born businessmen, Igor Fruman and Lev Parnas, working for Giuliani, showed up in Kiev. They wanted to see Zelensky. He demurred, and dispatched Shefir, the Kwartal 95 executive, who was acting as one of his chief political advisers, to meet with them. According to someone familiar with the exchange, Shefir told them that the Zelensky team could not talk about a potential meeting with Giuliani until after the inauguration: "They"—the Zelensky advisers—"had the instinct not to stick their finger in the socket."

Meanwhile, journalists and diplomats in Ukraine were becoming newly concerned about Zelensky's relationship with Kolomoisky. Just before the inauguration, Kolomoisky had made a triumphant return to Ukraine on a private jet. In April, a district court in Kiev had declared the nationalization of PrivatBank illegal, inviting the possibility that the bank could be returned to him. In May, Kolomoisky told the *Financial Times* that Ukraine should simply default on its foreign debt. "We should treat our creditors the way Greece does," he said. "How many times has Argentina defaulted?" Defaulting would throw into turmoil loan negotiations with the I.M.F., and Zelensky said that Ukraine had no such plans. But, as a source familiar with the country's discussions with the I.M.F. said, "the reaction could have been stronger." Yulia Mostova, the editor of the Kiev-based *Mirror Weekly*, told me, "When the President wields personal control over law enforcement and the courts, it's terrible. But when the President doesn't have any influence on the judicial system, and these bodies use that freedom to spit on the law, it's no better."

In May, in a Holoborodko-esque gesture, Zelensky walked to his inauguration ceremony, giving high fives en route. In his speech, he spoke of how he wanted bureaucrats to remove portraits of the President from their offices. "Hang your kids' photos instead, and look at them each time you are making a decision," he said—an echo of Holoborodko's declaration, in his inaugural address, that his only promise was to "act in such a way that I won't be ashamed to look children in the eye." Then, in a

surprise move, Zelensky announced the dissolution of parliament and called for new elections.

In July, the Servant of the People Party came in first in the parliamentary elections, gaining enough seats to rule on its own, without forming a coalition. None of its M.P.s had held office before. In one race, a twenty-nine-year-old wedding photographer defeated the millionaire owner of a local aerospace factory, a four-term incumbent. In another, a former elections-commission official, who had been in parliament since the nineties, was ousted by the owner of a regional chain of pizzerias.

Volodymyr Fesenko, a veteran political analyst and the head of the Penta Center, a think tank in Kiev, explained that, whereas the two Maidan revolutions brought into power a “contra-élite”—a long-standing opposition that had experience in politics and government—Zelensky and the Servant of the People Party marked the first time that the country would be run by a “proto-élite” of outsiders. With a popularity rating above seventy per cent and an overwhelming majority in parliament, Zelensky had assembled more power than any Ukrainian leader in modern history.

He began to enact a series of sweeping changes. He cancelled legal immunity for parliamentary deputies, a move long sought by anti-corruption activists. He called for the private sale of farmland in the country, which the World Bank estimates could add fifteen billion dollars a year to the economy. On September 7th, after weeks of negotiations, he welcomed home thirty-five Ukrainians who had been held as prisoners by Russia, including the film director Oleg Sentsov, who had become a cause célèbre.

Zelensky hired a half-dozen writers and producers from Kvartal 95 to join him as Presidential advisers. They struck me as approachable and intelligent, if a bit intoxicated by their success. Tymoshenko, the producer, who now serves as a top communications adviser to Zelensky, told me that the administration had conducted research that it says shows that people are less interested in watching press conferences than in hearing the President himself. “They want the President to sit in front of a camera and speak with them directly, like, ‘Hey, guys, so here’s what happened last week,’ ” he said. Bohdan, Zelensky’s chief of staff, put it more bluntly: “We talk to the people without go-betweens, without journalists.” A hundred days into Zelensky’s Presidency, his first in-depth interview—with an actor from the Kvartal 95 troupe who

played Holoborodko's Prime Minister on "Servant of the People"—was far from hard-hitting.

During the campaign, Natalie Sedletska, the head of an investigative-news program called "Schemes," had tried to ask Zelensky about production contracts that Kwartal 95 had with Russian partners; he declined to comment. (A spokesperson for Zelensky said he does not remember receiving Sedletska's inquiry.) In January, reporters from "Schemes" waited for Zelensky outside his office, but he brushed past them, saying, "I don't owe you anything." Sedletska told me that she didn't necessarily believe that Zelensky was hiding explosive secrets, but did think that he might not be ready for his "collision with reality." She went on, "You're no longer just the darling of the people but the object of real scrutiny, and of real questions."

I recently spoke with Alexey Kiryushchenko, who directed all three seasons of "Servant of the People" and has adapted many American sitcoms for Ukrainian and Russian audiences. (Local versions of "The Nanny" and "Who's the Boss?" are among his biggest hits.) Kiryushchenko told me that he often gets stopped on the street: "People grab me to ask, 'Will there be a new season?' I tell them they've already missed it." That season, he explained, had begun with Zelensky's campaign and unlikely victory: "It's come to life, it's happening in real time."

In retrospect, what was unfolding looked less like a comedy than a geopolitical psychodrama. William Taylor testified that Trump, having promised Zelensky a White House meeting in a congratulatory letter on May 29th, declined to set a date for weeks. In the days before the July 25th phone call, Taylor said, Gordon Sondland, the Ambassador to the E.U., recommended to Zelensky that he use the phrase "I will leave no stone unturned" when he spoke to Trump. The morning of the call, Kurt Volker wrote a message to Andriy Yermak, a lawyer and a longtime friend of Zelensky's, who was acting as an emissary to the Trump Administration. Volker told Yermak that, if Zelensky managed to convince Trump that he would take action on the various issues of political interest to the U.S. President, "we will nail down date for visit to Washington."

Zelensky and his advisers, few of whom had experience in foreign diplomacy, spent much of the summer looking for a way out of their predicament. The Western diplomat in Kiev described for me the nature of his conversations with the Zelensky

administration: “The Ukrainians would ask us, ‘Is there a person we can talk to in the U.S.?’ They were looking for a magic solution, a person who could fix this and make it go away.” But U.S. policy toward Ukraine was split into what Taylor described as “two channels of U.S. policy-making and implementation, one regular and one highly irregular.” John Bolton, then Trump’s national-security adviser, “wanted to talk about security, energy, and reform” with Ukrainian officials, Taylor said, but Sondland “wanted to talk about the connection between a White House meeting and Ukrainian investigations.” One thing was clear, the Zelensky policy adviser said: “We were trying not to upset Trump, even as we knew we could not answer this question in a way that would satisfy all sides.”

In early August, Yermak and Giuliani decided to meet in Madrid. “Why should we rely on speculation and secondhand conversations?” Yermak recalled thinking. But their conversation seems to have led to further confusion: Giuliani left the meeting with the impression that Ukraine would pursue the investigations into the Bidens and Ukraine’s role in the 2016 U.S. election, while Yermak believed that he had made only general assurances that the new administration would look into a range of cases, as part of its over-all anti-corruption agenda. The Zelensky policy adviser wondered, in hindsight, whether engaging with unofficial emissaries like Giuliani under any circumstances had been a mistake. “People wanted to bring the President good news—‘I met Giuliani, I resolved everything,’ ” the policy adviser said. But it was never going to be so simple. “We should have stayed away.”

Taylor, who had learned about the freezing of military aid to Ukraine on July 18th, said that, after a visit later that month to the front lines in the Donbass, he had become grimly aware that “more Ukrainians would undoubtedly die without the U.S. assistance.” He stated that Sondland had told Zelensky that, if he did not “clear things up” by issuing a public statement about the investigations, the two countries would be at a “stalemate.” Taylor took this to mean that Ukraine would not receive the military aid. He summarized the message he heard from Sondland and Volker: “When a businessman is about to sign a check to someone who owes him something, he said, the businessman asks that person to pay up before signing the check.”

Senator Chris Murphy, who sits on the Committee on Foreign Relations, told me that, when he met with Zelensky in Kiev on September 5th, Zelensky immediately brought

up the funds: “He started the meeting and said, ‘What’s going on with this aid, why isn’t it coming?’ He was clearly confused and bothered.” According to Taylor, in early September, Zelensky agreed to make a statement to CNN. But, on September 11th, the military aid was finally released, and the interview never happened.

Zelensky appeared to have settled on trying to funnel Trump’s requests through a formal legal process. Yermak told me that, if Trump and other officials had concerns, “it would be most logical to arrange a meeting between the Attorney General”—William Barr—“and our general prosecutor, where they could discuss all the issues regarding cooperation between the United States and Ukraine.” Mostova, of the *Mirror Weekly*, described the approach as a play for time. “They thought the pregnancy would go away on its own, shall we say, but it doesn’t work like that,” she said. The policy adviser said, of Zelensky, “He had only good intentions. He just wanted to do his job as President, and get the support he thought his country needed.”

In one sense, Zelensky was saved by the whistle-blower complaint, which seems to have put an end to Trump officials’ demands for investigations. But, as the impeachment inquiry proceeds in Washington, the challenge for Zelensky will be to avoid irritating a volatile American President while preserving good will among Democrats. Zelensky could be in a tough spot if, in the course of the impeachment inquiry, Congress requests to speak with Ukrainian officials or to access their documents. The Zelensky policy adviser said, “It’s like when a policeman comes up to you in America and says, ‘Whatever you say could be used against you.’ There is absolutely no benefit to getting involved.”

A former communications consultant to the Zelensky team suggested to me that one of the President’s biggest weaknesses is his *laikozavisimost*, or “likes dependency”—an attachment to the overwhelming approval that he has received on social media. Many prospective reforms, however, such as the fiscally necessary measure of raising domestic prices on heating gas, are certain to be unpopular. When I spoke to Zelensky, he conceded, “Most people loved what I did before. But, in *this* job, if you are the subject of such high expectations, you can fall rather painfully.” He added, “Worry and discomfort won’t affect my decisions. I’ve buried all that deep down.”

Though the pressure campaign from Trump is likely over, Zelensky’s relationship with Kolomoisky is a more persistent concern. The President may be required to distance

himself from the man who helped make his fame possible. Zelensky, during our conversation, insisted that he would not offer Kolomoisky any special privileges, and that he would push him, just as he was pushing other oligarchs, to spend a considerable amount of his fortune on social and infrastructure projects. Already, one oligarch had paid for a fleet of ambulances, and another had provided new apartments to the families of Ukrainian servicemen. Zelensky said that he tells each of them, “Look, buddy, the past is past. . . . But the time has come to give up the majority of your money to social projects and the reconstruction in the Donbass.” He insisted that he was not afraid of offending Kolomoisky or of losing the support of 1+1. “If the channel turns against me after that—well, then we will understand that he doesn’t want to live in a different way,” he said.

In September, the administration in Kiev released a photograph showing Zelensky and Kolomoisky in Zelensky’s office, smiling broadly. Several days later, Prime Minister Honcharuk told the *Financial Times* that the administration was seeking a “compromise” with Kolomoisky about the future of PrivatBank. The comments created a furor, and Honcharuk disavowed them. On September 17th, a house belonging to Kolomoisky’s chief antagonist, Valeria Gontareva, a former head of Ukraine’s central bank, was destroyed in an arson attack. No suspects were found, but the source familiar with the country’s discussions with the I.M.F. said that it was “hard not to draw a connection” with Kolomoisky and the ongoing legal disputes surrounding PrivatBank. An agreement for a new I.M.F. loan package for Ukraine, worth as much as six billion dollars, has been delayed because of concerns about the independence of Ukraine’s central bank. Zelensky condemned the burning of Gontareva’s home, but for several weeks did not make any forceful statements about Kolomoisky and his efforts to have PrivatBank returned to him. The source said, “By not doing anything, he is showing where he stands.” Finally, on October 23rd, Zelensky’s administration made its position clear, saying that it sees “no reason to return the state-owned PrivatBank to its former shareholders.”

On a recent evening, I went to see Kolomoisky in his office in Kiev. At fifty-six, he is avuncular, almost cuddly looking, with a curly mane of silver hair and a silver beard. He told me that, at first, he hadn’t been sure about Zelensky’s decision to enter politics, but that he’d quickly become certain of Zelensky’s victory. “All he needed to do was

announce that he was running—that's it," Kolomoisky said. "He could have left on a three-month vacation and still would have won."

Zelensky said that he neither sought nor received any advice from Kolomoisky, and Kolomoisky told me that no one from Zelensky's administration had discussed the future of PrivatBank with him, or proposed any deals. "But, if they were thinking that way, they'd be smart," he said. He insisted that he'd had nothing to do with the burning of Gontareva's home, although, he said, "if you ask me how I feel about it, I don't care at all. She lost some property—it happens to all of us." He argued that his bank had been unfairly taken from him, and said that he wanted to either get it back or get some material compensation, knowing that either option would displease the I.M.F. and foreign lenders. He brought up the scene in "Servant of the People" in which Holoborodko sends the I.M.F. delegation packing: if he did it, why can't Zelensky? "He should tell them to fuck off," Kolomoisky said.

By the end of September, Zelensky—facing increased pressure to make his positions on Trump and Kolomoisky clear—had still not held a substantive press conference or given an interview on the subjects to Ukrainian media. On October 1st, he announced that he was prepared to follow a set of conditions, first proposed by Germany's Foreign Minister, for bringing about an armistice in the Donbass conflict. A vocal minority considered the terms too favorable to Russia, and, five days later, thousands of people protested in Kiev. Zelensky's popularity ratings, though still above sixty per cent, were beginning to show their first slump.

Then, on October 9th, Zelensky announced that he would be speaking to the media the next day, in what he described as a "press marathon." The event was held at a food market that once housed a nineteenth-century munitions factory and now boasts the Instagram-friendly aesthetic that has become part of the global design vernacular: white tile, blond wood, and geometric light fixtures with softly lit neon bulbs. On the second-floor balcony, next to a counter offering shucked oysters, Zelensky sat with rotating groups of a dozen journalists from 10 A.M. until midnight.

His dealings with Trump came up almost immediately. "I really wanted to be world-famous, but not for this," Zelensky told one group of journalists. Shortly after noon, I took my place with another group at the table. The Ukrainian reporters pounced, asking Zelensky about his relationship with Kolomoisky and the situation with

PrivatBank. By way of explanation, Zelensky acted out what he said was his typical message to the oligarchs. “You have two billion dollars? O.K., one billion goes to paving roads,” he said, adding, “That’s how you have to talk with them—tough is good.”

As he had done in New York, he insisted that he had not been pressured on the call with Trump, and batted away more detailed questions on the subject. “I understand that, with my words today, I can influence the choice of the American people,” he said. Defending or accusing Trump “would be unjust, not just to the candidates but to voters.” It would be “a form of informational pressure,” he said, which could backfire on Ukraine. He told an American journalist, “We are not the service staff of American politicians.” He knew that many Americans—Democrats, voters, the reporters at the table—would have liked him to describe the messages that Trump and the people around him had passed to Ukraine. “I understand what you want—clearly and directly,” he said. “But I will not change any answers.” He sounded like a politician. ♦

Published in the print edition of the November 4, 2019, issue, with the headline “The Swamp.”



Joshua Yaffa is a Moscow correspondent for The New Yorker. His first book, “Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia,” will be published in January. [Read more »](#)

Video

The Life-Changing Magic of Impeaching Trump

Andy Borowitz explains why Donald Trump's impeachment is a precious moment to be treasured, and reveals what secrets lurk behind closed doors at The New Yorker.

CONDÉ NAST

© 2020 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement \(updated 1/1/20\)](#) and [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement \(updated 1/1/20\)](#). [Your California Privacy Rights](#). The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast. *The New Yorker* may earn a portion of sales from products and services that are purchased through links on our site as part of our affiliate partnerships with retailers. [Ad Choices](#)