The Presidential Vlog: Trust and the Celebritization of Politics in Ukraine

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Abstract

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Comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy, popular in Ukraine for playing the president on TV, shocked many commentators when he was elected president in reality. Of particular interest however, is the scope of his victory and style of his campaign. Zelenskyy was touted as being the first presidential candidate whose campaign was entirely digital. That is, he communicated with supporters and the public at large entirely through his social media platforms, most notably in his YouTube campaign vlog: *Ze!President.* But Zelenskyy's victory is most peculiar given the democratic context in which it occurred. He was the first Ukrainian presidential candidate to unite the electorate in the country's independent history, as Ukraine's regions are typically electorally divided. Further, before his election Ukrainians reported the lowest levels of trust in the government in the world. Yet Zelenskyy garnered the highest ratings of trust a Ukrainian president has ever received. On its face, his victory appears merely to be confirmation of what

scholars describe as the celebritization of politics: a candidate-centric shift in the political landscape facilitated by the culture of social media. I argue that Volodymyr Zelenskyy's election reveals an underappreciated dynamic of celebritization: political trust. I argue that Volodymyr Zelenskyy gained the trust of the electorate by maintaining the image of a uniquely authentic Ukrainian patriot through airing an episodic documentary of the campaign on YouTube. While his particular brand of patriotism was made up of an inclusive populism and embrace of cultural-hybridity, an analysis of Zelenskyy's image constructed via the vlog serves to convince the audience that his patriotism is truly authentic; thus, trustworthy. Ultimately, these findings indicate that political celebritization may be driven by dwindling trust in government, and that in such environments, citizens display such interest in the personal profiles of political leaders in order to scrutinize them for authenticity.

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Introduction

When the world witnessed its first successful fully digital presidential campaign in 2019, many commentators expressed dismay (Karantycky, 2019). Indeed, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's candidacy was exceptional in many ways, perhaps most famously his status as the star of a popular TV show, on which he played the president of Ukraine. As it turned out, the scope of his victory was also unprecedented, as he was the first candidate to unify Ukraine's diverse and divided regions, and he did so with record turnout (Rahim, 2019). Nonetheless, the component that most preoccupied many commentators was his cold-shouldering of traditional media and eschewal of in-person campaigning in favor of a more "direct" engagement with his sizable audience on social media (Bateson, 2019). Zelenskyy, however, is far from the first political figure to rely heavily on social media to connect with potential voters. It is becoming the norm that politicians maintain an online presence, and use social media channels as an integral component of their communication strategies (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Nowhere can these dynamics be observed more clearly than in the realm of political campaigns.

As more politicians turn to social media platforms for campaigning purposes, a growing body of research on the topic has emerged. After Obama's successful bid for presidency in 2008, researchers began to examine the ways in which he used Facebook to inspire and mobilize a broad and diverse support base; perhaps most notably groups typically disengaged from the electoral process (Bimber, 2014). In 2016, Trump's unexpected win was met with scores of scholarly attention to his Twitter persona (Theye & Melling, 2018). While the two campaigns and candidates were markedly distinct in substance and style, both can be characterized by their dependence on social media to shape the narratives surrounding themselves and their candidacy,

and to engage the politically disengaged citizen (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). To that end, they have had a tangible influence on political communication strategies, and social scientists of numerous disciplines are adapting their lines of inquiry in kind.

Nevertheless, social media are a relatively new technology, and as such there is much that is not yet understood about the process and implications of digitally-mediated campaigning. Specifically, the research can be broadly characterized by two limitations that this study seeks to address. First, the majority of scholarship investigating social media as a means of political campaigning centers around written word. While such studies are critical, the absence of studies that engage with the unique dynamics of richer media becomes a problem as image and video centric platforms gain in popularity among citizens and their representatives alike. There is a need for more research which examines how politicians may use the unique affordances of visual social media channels to convey a certain image to the public.

Second, the majority of work on digitally-mediated image-making strategies pertains to late-stage democracies. In order to comprehend the implications of social media campaigning for the democratic process, it is imperative to investigate the phenomenon in a greater variety of democratic contexts (Manning et al., 2017). Given the clear potential of social media technologies to reach those disillusioned with traditional democratic institutions, there is a need for more research in environments of lower political trust and little civic engagement; newer, less-stable democracies are a better setting for this type of inquiry. This study seeks to address each of these gaps in the literature by using Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presidential campaign vlog to explore the dynamics of social media image-making in an environment of extreme mistrust. After all, as it will be explored, in the months leading up to his remarkably unusual victory, Ukraine reported the lowest levels of trust in the government in the world (Gallup, 2019). The

nature of Zelenskyy's victory alone makes this fact significant, as noted above, he was elected with unusually high turnout and was the first candidate to unite the country's regions. Yet, further puzzling are survey results that show high rates of trust in Zelenskyy personally, and in his ability to govern (KIIS, 2019). How then, in an environment of abysmal levels of political trust, did Zelenskyy's all virtual campaign curate such a trustworthy image of the candidate in the eyes of the electorate? I contend that a case study of Zelenskyy's YouTube channel *Ze!President* will contribute much to our understanding of how political candidates are able to use a changing mediascape to create a trustworthy image, even in contexts of extreme disillusionment and mistrust.

Section 2: Literature Review

From Impression Management to Political Image

The theoretical lineage of political image-making is often traced back to Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Since the book's publication, scholars have long recognized its relevance to mediated communication. Goffman's theory centers on the metaphor of theatrical performance. According to Goffman, as individuals move through different social contexts, rather than acting as their authentic selves, they perform an idealized version tailored for their audience, emphasizing some characteristics while hiding others. An audience necessitates a performance. This process of continued engagement allows the performer to adjust their behavior in order to create a favorable impression among the particular set of observers, what Goffman termed "impression management" (1959). The relevance of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor in the realm of political communications is clear, as the stakes of performance intensify in the case of an individual seeking mass appeal. These dynamics are readily apparent in the realm of political campaigns.

The concept of political image and "image-making" in particular assumes an audience of

constituents that elicits a performance from leaders and candidates, however, it is more specific as to the strategic dimensions of a *political* performance. Nimmo and Savage define a candidate's image as "based on both subjective knowledge by the voters and messages projected by the candidates." Nimmo and Savage's articulation of "image" was in part a response to the burgeoning PR industry. There was a growing sense that politicians' public and media appearances were increasingly staged, or professionally choreographed (1976). Nimmo and Savage's conception of image-making inspired a multi-disciplinary line of inquiry whose relevance continues to grow. More recent work specifies image-making as the strategic use of visual and verbal symbols that provide a mental shortcut for audiences to recognize and emphasize particular characteristics of an individual, event, or organization (Strachan & Kendall, 2004). Put simply, image-making is the process of activating a preferred impression or understanding of something. Yet, the goal is not simply to sway public perceptions, but to generate action (or inaction). In the case of political image-making, the purpose is to affect the publics' "personal political attitudes, and, by extension, decision-making in strategic ways" (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, p. 891)

In his work on news media and the politics of information, Bennett specifies four components of the image-making process that are particularly useful to this study. The first is *message shaping*: composing a simple, brief message for the audience to use in forming an impression of the matter at hand. Simple messages are open to a certain degree of interpretation, and thus, invite the audience to project their own meanings onto a situation. An image, Bennett says, is rooted both in symbolic suggestion and in the "feeling and assumptions that people have in response" (2016, 109). Thus, an effective political slogan or theme is a simple one. However, simplicity alone is insufficient, as even the catchiest slogan won't catch on if few people hear it.

Message salience specifies that communication channels must be saturated with the target message in order to receive and maintain widespread attention, particularly in a chaotic media landscape with fierce competition for eyes and ears. Image-makers remind their clients that consistency counts: salience requires repetition when the audience is bombarded with competing information.

Still, skeptical publics require more than simple, repetitive messages to absorb them as fact. The third component, *message credibility,* posits that an effective message must come from an authoritative, trustworthy source. In addition to the use of authoritative visual symbols, this means embodying one's message. For example, a candidate who constructs their image in opposition to a primary opponent may take a hit to their credibility if they later endorse their former rival. Finally, there remains an additional, critical component to the image-making process: *message framing.* As Bennett explains, image-making is inherently a storytelling process. Message "frames" are used to distill complicated and large amounts of information into familiar, summarized narratives (Entman, 1993). Thus, a message framed in the right way can "help people visualize, aspire, and put messages into the context of their personal lives" (2016, p. 112).

Image-making in the age of social media and political celebritization

These four components describe how a political image may be constructed strategically through traditional news media. Part of a more thorough examination of why the press is so easily spun, the migration of politicians to social media platforms has led scholars of new media and political communications alike to examine what this phenomenon means for the image-making process, Bennett included. Social media are a relatively new technology, but one well-documented (perhaps predictable) consequence is that political actors can partially bypass traditional modes of print and broadcast media to construct their images (Bennett, 2016). Press

conferences and other interview settings where the message is harder to control are increasingly foregone in favor of Tweets and live streams. This does not mean leaders will be ignored by legacy news, simply that journalists, too, glean their information from social media updates. This means images can be constructed within the relative safety of social media channels, but still broadcast throughout traditional media (Bennett, 2016; Ekman & Widholm, 2014; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Thus, research suggests more politicians prefer to do their image-making online (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016; Filimonov et al., 2016; Loader et al., 2016; Manning et al., 2017; Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

This process is often diagnosed to be part of a larger shift in the political landscape of late-stage democracies, characterized by two overlapping but conceptually distinct terms: "personalization" and "celebritization" of politics. Balmas and Shaefer define the personalization of politics as a process where politicians themselves become the main points of interest to the political arena, to the detriment of traditional democratic "political groupings": parties, parliaments, etc (2016). This perspective asserts voters are becoming increasingly concerned with the personality traits of individual politicians, and these personal attributes have taken precedence over questions of party and policy in voter's conceptions (Bimber, 2014; Graham et al., 2018). Celebritization accepts the presumption that politics are growing increasingly personalized, but is distinct in that it assumes the shift is fueled by a growing fixation on political image. Thus, politicians are treated more like celebrities in the public consciousness, and they act accordingly. The changes social media have stirred in the media ecology have enabled, perhaps required, a constant performance from political leaders. The increased visibility afforded by social media platforms has necessitated what Lalancette and Reynauld call "permanent campaigning" (2019) and what Ekman and Wildholm refer to as "performed connectivity" (2014, 2017). As they explain, social media platforms are well-suited for politicians to perform a connection to their constituencies because they allow aspects of their

professional and personal lives to be highlighted or concealed, packing them together to keep the attention of members of the audience, "as well as establish a meaningful connection with them" (Ekman & Widholm, 2014).

These articulations of the celebritization of politics make plain an apparent paradox in the functionality and appeal of social media communication. As evidenced by the literature above, it is well established that in their many capacities for selective self-presentation, social media are particularly well-suited for the performance of an idealized self, or even specific desirable traits (Brody et al., 2014; Maragh, 2018; Pearce & Vitak, 2016; Scolere et al., 2018) making them ideal image-making platforms for political actors. Yet social media, particularly in their mobile iterations, are designed to document. As research shows, central to the appeal of social media is their ability to provide what we might call authentic content; that is, they can deliver glimpses of others' intimate, personal, and *real* lives. Whereas social network sites in particular afford users editability (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), thus encouraging, maybe even requiring, a certain degree of selective self-presentation (Davis, 2020), they simultaneously encourage the sharing of spontaneous, in the moment, and thus, *authentic* content. Marwick and boyd highlight authenticity in their investigation of how Twitter users manage impressions among their "imagined audience," the author's vague conception of who might consume their work, affecting how and what they produce (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Scolere et al. find creative freelancers who depend on various social networks for securing gigs believe sharing "authentic" content is vital to their professional success; they believed prospective clients were not only interested in their work, but were searching for cues about the essence of their character in their posts (Scolere et al., 2018).

Similarly, research on the subject in the context of political campaigns emphasizes the importance of perceived authenticity in a candidate's online persona. Celebritization is

characterized by increased attention and interest in a political leader's private life and personal qualities. The shift in the broader landscape of political communications has been facilitated by the introduction of social media, which explicitly encourage the disclosure of intimate and authentic information. By their nature, social media platforms enable more authentic modes of political communication between voter and representative, in their capacities for interactivity, informality, and spontaneity (Ekman & Widholm, 2014; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). A critical factor in a candidate's claim to leadership is their ability to *be authentic*, which Van Zoonen describes as being coherent in presentation of self in the personal and professional realms (2006). This is becoming central to the credibility of their message. And while an image constructed digitally is likely a strategic one, just like the prospective employers in Scolere's study, online audiences will scrutinize these images and the personal information they project, searching for cues as to their representative's true character. Crucially, the increased interest in the personal lives of political leaders from online audiences, and the image-making strategies which appear to target them is often understood to be part of the gradual degradation of democratic society. Much scholarly attention to the celebritizing political sphere assumes more attention to individual politician's personal qualities is frivolous or irrational; cheapening discourse and distracting from substantive political issues (Loader et al., 2014). Few studies, however, directly engage with the underlying causes of this phenomenon. Few ask why voters might care more about qualities of their representatives than the traditional institutions with which they're associated. This study seeks to examine one possible underlying causal mechanism of celebritization: political trust.

Political Trust and socially mediated campaigning

A modest body of work has examined political celebritization from the perspective of the disengaged citizen which social media campaigning strategies seek to target. In one study,

Loader et al. seek to understand why young people (as a group of traditionally disengaged citizens) in late-modern societies may be disenchanted and why socially-mediated campaigning might hold a particular appeal to them. They argue communication strategies targeting white, educated, professional, and middle-aged voters reinforce the perception that the political system is intended only to represent those groups (and the perception that others are unqualified to participate). This perception has fueled disillusionment among the young and mistrust in the formal political system more broadly. Young people that do wish to engage in the political process may seek an alternative means to do so outside established institutions (2014).

A study using interviews with young people in Australia, the US, and UK found most participants viewed politicians' use of social media platforms as either an overt effort to rebuild trust and credibility with the disengaged or a first step in doing so. In fact, the respondents most disengaged from the political process felt the most positively about personal content with one caveat: the effect was conditional on whether a politician's self-disclosures were perceived as *authentic.* If a post was thought to be written by someone else, or seemed too obviously to be strategic image-making, participants felt the politician in question was insincere and untrustworthy. This study offers empirical evidence for the claim that in environments of political disengagement, the ability to embody an appropriately authentic image is essential, and may even help rebuild trust among disillusioned groups.

Studies like Loader et al. 's indicate the larger process of the celebritization of politics and the appeal of image-making online should not merely be understood as a natural consequence of an evolving media ecology. Rather, it may be considered a function of declining trust in the integrity of political representatives and the utility of traditional democratic institutions for substantive change. After all, fixating on the personal lives of political leaders is not unique to social media technologies; a truth evidenced by the long practice of

image-making. Schill explains that mere pictures serve as "heuristic cues regarding the candidate's background, personality, and demeanor, and directly shape a candidate's image" (2012, p. 127). He points out that audiences most prefer television appearances for making personality judgements, but notes the practice of image-making through available media channels is as old as the newspaper. Street identifies one of the earliest examples of image-making to be a staged photograph of Teddy Roosevelt posing, gun in hand, with a dead elk which he did not, in fact, shoot (Street, 2003)**.**

Fixation on the personal traits of leaders is not unique to social media and, as Bennett has shown, the image-making strategies used within social media are not novel. What has changed in many late-stage democracies is declining rates of political trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Rothstein, 2011). What differentiates social media as image-making platforms is their ability to cultivate an air of authenticity and trustworthiness by extension, to the politician in question. In their study of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Instagram use during his first year in office, Lalancette and Reynauld find Trudeau sought to project qualities like honesty, credibility, and trustworthiness (2019). It is important to note, however, that a politician's mere presence alone on social media does not increase their perceived trustworthiness. Rather, in their capacities to document the personal and professional realms, social media offer politicians an effective means to construct and maintain an authentic image. Audiences will then scrutinize this image for cues of realness or sincerity which are likely dependent on the national context, as Manning has argued (2017). In a study of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram, Avedissian shows that social media can be a critical tool of image-making even outside of democratic settings altogether. Though her study does not center explicitly around trust, Avedissian finds that through the channel's particular mixture of content centering around Islam, sport, and government PR, Kadyrov has been able to use his quite

popular Instagram as a means of legitimating his authority through the performance of specific national values (2016). Thus, as one of the few studies which examines political use of social media outside of a late-stage democracy, Avedissian shows the success with which a political image is received, and thus, the perception of authenticity, is dependent on the national context.

Section 3: Trust and the Ukrainian Democratic Context

The literature reviewed above shows that in many late-stage democracies, authenticity is an increasingly important attribute in political leaders, especially among populations disillusioned with the democratic process. Social media platforms offer politicians an ideal means of projecting a trustworthy image to voters, and that disillusioned voters may view their presence online as a first step in rebuilding credibility. Most of the research on digitally-mediated campaigning is centered around young people in late-stage democracies. But in order to better understand the relationship between civic (dis)engagement and socially mediated campaigning, research in a greater variety of democratic contexts is key; specifically those of lower trust. As Flyvbjerg has argued, if the goal is to fully understand a given phenomenon, the selection of an extreme case is ideal as it can better illuminate the causes and consequences of a given problem (2016). The Ukrainian presidential election of 2019 is an extreme case in several ways. While political trust is declining in many national contexts, Ukraine tops the charts. According to a poll taken in the year Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected, a dismal 9% of Ukrainians had confidence in their national government, the lowest reported number in the world (Gallup, 2019).

These perceptions are not unwarranted. Ukraine is what area scholars refer to as an "oligarchic-democracy" (Matuszak, 2012) and has a long history of corruption predating the fall of the Soviet Union. It worsened with independence, when rapid privatisation entrenched

today's oligarchy (Marples, 2007; Matuszak, 2012; Sakwa, 2015). Individuals "hand-picked" by president Kuchma were given special access to state property at exorbitantly low prices, essentially buying up entire industries overnight (Gorchinskaya 2020). Corruption became systemic. Material concerns such as low pensions and wages, wealth inequality, and a high poverty rate became intertwined with corruption in the national consciousness (Matuszak, 2012). Disillusionment did not bottom out in the Kuchma era. Rather, political trust has gradually eroded, reaching its lowest point just before Zelenskyy's election (Gorchinskaya, 2020b). In order to understand the success with which Zelenskyy's image was received, it is necessary to establish the context in which levels of trust in Ukraine sank to the lowest in the world.

Widespread dissatisfaction with the political order in Ukraine is exemplified by two civil uprisings within a ten year period: the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions. Each represented a response to flagrant corruption, inspired hope for serious reform, and gave way to disappointment as reforms stalled and corruption persisted. The cumulative result of these disappointments is that Ukrainians have lost faith in the integrity of their politicians as a whole (Gallup, 2019; International Republication Institute, 2017). Accordingly, the circumstances surrounding the Orange Revolution prove a useful entry point into this disillusionment. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians gathered in protest of a fraudulent election. The Kuchma administration reported its chosen successor, Viktor Yanukovych had defeated the reformist candidate,Viktor Yushchenko, despite ample evidence to the contrary. Having recovered from a mysterious poisoning weeks earlier, Yushchenko promised to return the nation's wealth "from the pocket of the clans" back to the people, and send the "bandits" responsible to jail. He was seen by many as a savior who would finally address the issue of corruption and stabilize the economy (Gorchinskaya, 2020a). Protests continued until a new election was granted, and

Yushchenko was victorious. Hopes soon dwindled, as, far from sending the bandits to jail, they remained active players in government and on good terms with the president. The oligarchy grew in size and power. He and his wife were accused of embezzlement. By the end of his term, voters were so disillusioned that they elected Yanukovych legitimately (Sakwa, 2015; Yekelchyk, 2007).

Corruption under the Yanukovych administration is by now well-known beyond Ukraine's borders, both because his corruption reached new and appalling extremes, and because his subsequent ouster set in place the conditions for the Ukraine Crisis[1]. Simply put, Yanukovych used his position to consolidate business interests nationwide, generating billions for himself and a group of associates, called "The Family", who occupied most senior positions in his administration. When he suddenly backed out of signing an Association Agreement (AA)[2] with the EU, perceived by many to be a necessary step in ensuring economic reform (Onuch, 2014; Sasse & Lackner, 2018), and instead took a loan from Russia, it was a betrayal. Protesters again organized on Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti). After a violent crackdown on protesters, the crowd ballooned into hundreds of thousands, and the protests grew into a civil uprising, referred to as Euromaidan, or "Maidan." After snipers killed 100 protestors, Yanukovych gave in to mounting pressure and fled to Russia.[3]

The mood after Euromaidan was much like the Orange Revolution; hope abounded, it was a chance to renew the old political guard, root out corruption, and ensure the rule of law (Pinkham, 2019; Sakwa, 2015; Toal, 2017). Presidential candidate Petro Poroshenko promised to do precisely that, and cautious, yet hopeful supporters won him the special election. Poroshenko is an oligarch/politician. Despite his history of mixing business and government

[1] The term "Ukraine Crisis" has been adopted by scholars and analysts to refer collectively to Putin's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk.
[2] It should be noted that an Association Agreement does not mean membership. In this case, it offered a trade deal and the promise of membership at an indefinite point in the future.
[3] It's presumed that snipers were soldiers acting on official order, but the investigation was never completed.

interests, the chocolate empire he headed was considered relatively less corrupt than others. He impressed voters with his active support for Maidan. He promised that there would be “zero tolerance for corruption” and quoted Singapore’s anti-corruption leader claiming he would begin by prosecuting his friends. He vowed to sell his factory in order to address a conflict of interest and help steer Ukraine closer to the West. As one Ukrainian journalist described: “He was seen as a new face who could rescue the country from crisis and war” (Grytsenko, 2019).

Poroshenko did not prosecute a single official (nor any of his friends) for corruption, though many were implicated in scandals. This irked Maidan activists who demanded prosecution of corrupt politicians from the previous administration. He refused to sell his business, handing to a blind trust instead and, despite his pro-Western stance, he did not close his factory in Russia until 2017. His wealth grew. Reformers in his administration resigned in protest (Grytsenko, 2019). Critics became vocal, and he cut off communication with the press. When Poroshenko morphed into a “hawkish conservative nationalist” before announcing his run for reelection, commentators surmised this “last minute makeover” was more electoral strategy than conviction (Mitrokhin, 2019). His slogan was “Army, Language, Faith”, but later insisted the phrase was “not a slogan. This is the formula of the modern Ukrainian identity.” (Grytsenko, 2019).

While such statements seem ironic coming from a president known to be secular (Mitrokhin, 2019), Poroshenko’s transformation was a typical one. It followed a familiar pattern in Ukrainian electoral politics. Election dynamics in Ukraine are undergird by the country's regional and cultural divides. Candidates often emphasize these divides, couching their ideologies in terms of national identity. Political scientist Lyudmila Pavyluk argues that in the 2004 election both Yushchenko and Yanukovych invoked cold war regional stereotypes and ethnic phobias to depict the opposing geopolitical orientations of the candidates and their

respective regions. This line of thinking is consistent with the idea of "two Ukraines," a pro-European West and a pro-Russian East. Zhurzhenko (2014) agrees that this is a familiar political script in Ukraine. Ukrainian politicians have opened up "Pandora's Box of identity politics" and candidates often pit essentialized regional stereotypes of Galicia and Donbas against one another to mobilize voters. Zhurzhenko has vocalized a concern that such divisive rhetoric primarily benefits Putin[4]. The utility of the approach is clear for incumbents facing corruption allegations like Poroshenko. They may have failed to reform the economy but they can take a hard stance on the culture war.

As Poroshenko's case illustrates, the reliance on identity politics as an electoral strategy can be understood in part as another factor in Ukraine's declining political trust. Ukraine's unique history as a borderland between empires means questions of national identity and culture are complex, even contradictory. (Bilaniuk, 2005; Sasse, 2010). Scholars have shown that while Ukrainians (like those in many post-Soviet states) care a great deal about developing their national culture, a long history of diversity means many Ukrainians are simultaneously comfortable with a certain degree of cultural-hybridity (Bilaniuk, 2017b; Kulyk, 2018; Wanner, 2014), perhaps best evidenced by language use. Ukrainian language is a point of pride for many citizens due to centuries of repression and stigma under Russian and Soviet control. The majority of citizens support Ukrainian as the sole state language and hope younger generations will speak it as a first and primary language. Yet due to the nation's geopolitical history[5] there is a degree of tolerance for Russian-speaking Ukrainians; and most citizens consider legal restrictions on Russian unnecessary[6] (Bilaniuk, 2017b). As most Ukrainians are tolerant of

[4] Many Ukrainian scholars and civilians who want closer ties with the West worry that dependence on identity politics contributes to the false perception that Russian speakers in the East face discrimination. This was Putin's stated reason for annexing Crimea after Euromaidan.

[5] Ukraine was historically a borderland between Empires, contributing to its ethnic and cultural diversity. Additionally, due to its history as a Soviet state, some of Ukraine's regions are inhabited by citizens who speak Russian as a first language, though, this may be changing with younger generations.

[6] It should be noted that in some of Ukraine's Western regions there is strong support for legal restrictions on Russian use, but at the time of this writing this position was a minority.

cultural hybridity to a degree, the "extreme" and essentializing rhetoric Zhurzhenko and Pavyluk describe is not only alienating to opposing sides but perceived as insincere and pandering, polarizing Ukrainians and distracting from more substantive issues (Zhurzhenko, 2014). Ukrainian expert Olha Onuch explains Poroshenko's failure to win reelection by highlighting citizens' low concern for language and religious laws. "It was bread-and-butter issues, it was survival, basic daily needs that aren't being met, the everyday corruption that they face in almost every single aspect of life" (Schreck, 2019).

Research shows culture and questions of national identity are indeed important to Ukrainians, but when financial insecurity is so acute, they do not take priority over material concerns (Onuch, 2014)[7]. Some scholars have argued this sentiment even holds true for the rebel controlled areas in Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR/LNR). Many analysts suggest the rebel territories broke away after Maidan primarily out of ideological kinship with Russia and nostalgia for the Soviet Union (Sakwa, 2015; Toal, 2017). However, political scientist Elise Guiliano finds most civilians in the occupied territories were largely concerned with financial security, which was exacerbated by a sense of abandonment by Kyiv (2018). Coal mines are the primary source of employment in the breakaway territories and they depend entirely on trade with Russia for survival. But the terms of the AA Yanukovych was to sign would cut off trade with Russia entirely (Giuliano, 2018; see also: Zhukov, 2016) Likewise, scholars maintain the majority of Euromaidan protesters were motivated not merely out of an abstract desire to belong to Europe and the wider West, but out of exasperation with a corrupt government; one that failed to meet the basic needs of many of its citizens (Onuch, 2014). For many, the primary appeal of joining the EU centers on the fact that membership in the union will make economic reforms compulsory. The perception is that international oversight offers the only hope to

[7] Ukraine is the only post-Soviet state whose GDP in 2016 was still lower than when it declared independence from the Soviet Union (Sakwa, 2016).

overcome systemic corruption.

Poroshenko did indeed sign the AA with the EU, yet, by popular account, still failed to live up to his promises to fight corruption through prosecuting corrupt officials and undertaking radical political and economic reforms. Instead of improving the standard of living, entrenched corruption in the energy sector combined with the terms of the AA made it so Ukrainians suddenly had to pay exorbitant prices for utilities, sometimes spending as much as half their income on these bills (Gorchinskaya, 2020b). The issue quickly became a top concern. Watchdog organizations accused Poroshenko of using his influence over Ukraine's notoriously corrupt courts to pass rulings favorable to his business interests. By 2017, a survey found a majority of Ukrainians believed corruption to be the most important issue facing their country, ranking just above the war. Poroshenko's approval ratings were down to 17%, but importantly, Ukrainians blamed the entire parliament, not just Poroshenko,for national and personal economic concerns. The Verkhovna Rada received a meager 7% approval rating.[8]

The trustworthiness of Volodymyr Zelenskyy

This was the context in which Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected president. The same month Gallup published a report showing Ukrainians had the lowest amount of confidence in their government in the world, Zelenskyy was the first candidate in Ukraine's independent history to unite the electorate, winning nearly every district at 73% of the vote (Rahim, 2019).[9] Despite the dismal levels of trust reported mere months earlier, survey results taken 100 days after the election reveal 70% of the Ukrainian population reported personally trusting Zelenskyy, and 70% reported confidence in his ability to implement reforms. These are the highest levels of trust reported in a Ukrainian president following an election (KIIS, 2019).

[8] Ukraine's parliament

[9] According to the Central Election Commission, Poroshenko won in 10 districts in the country's far West, while Zelenskyy won the remaining 199. 26 of Ukraine's 225 electoral districts could note vote due to annexation or war. See: (Українська правда, 2019)

While there has been much discussion of why he won, one question remains unanswered: how was Zelenskyy's campaign able to garner such unprecedented levels of trust from a united electorate, in a nation so often defined by its divisions? There are three main explanations for his surprising win: a protest vote, an extension of his celebrity, or his "entirely digital" campaign. Analyst Volodymyr Fesenko maintained the people wanted to "show the authorities the middle finger" (The Economist, 2019). Fesenko later noted Ukrainians, "just as they did five years ago, want radical political change", saying this was as an "electoral Maidan" (Schreck, 2019). Others suggested Zelenskyy's win was due to the popularity of his television alter ego, Holoborodko, a Ukrainian president who is a true Servant of the People, as the show's title suggests. According to this perspective, Zelenskyy's natural charm as an entertainer and association with Holoborodko is what propelled him to victory (Pinkham, 2019). Finally, another argument claimed he owed his victory to his communication strategy: avoiding the press and their difficult questions, campaigning from the safety of social media accounts (Bateson, 2019; Karantycky, 2019).

To be clear, these perspectives are not without merit. This study does not refute the fact that Poroshenko's unpopularity, Zelenskyy's fame, and communication strategy each played a critical role in his electoral victory. Still, none of these stories explain Zelenskyy's ability to earn the *trust* of a unified Ukrainian electorate. Analysts like Feskenko and Onuch are correct that Zelenskyy's victory may have been largely an expression of frustration with the ruling class. Nonetheless, this perspective does not account for the genuine and widespread enthusiasm that his campaign garnered. A protest vote alone would not account for the unusually high turnout, the active participation of citizens all over Ukraine via social media, nor his unusually high rates of trust. Likewise, while Zelenskyy's fame undoubtedly played a role in his election, trust again complicates this perspective. The claim that unprecedented numbers of

Ukrainian voters – known for their extreme skepticism of *any* individual's claim to leadership – simply voted for their favorite actor without further consideration, is difficult to reconcile. Finally, despite its relevance for this study, claims that Zelenskyy owes his win to his "entirely digital" campaign does not quite account for his perceived trustworthiness. Zelenskyy was not the only candidate who relied heavily on social media to communicate with voters. Notably, Poroshenko's campaign was very active on social platforms at the expense of the press. Some complained he only granted interviews to journalists on his payroll (Grytsenko, 2019)[10]. Thus, Zelenskyy's perceived trustworthiness cannot be explained by his dependence on social media alone.

I argue Zelenskyy's victory is inherently connected to the fact that the electorate trusted him, and this widespread, even enthusiastic trust was not somehow assigned to him by default. Rather, trust must be earned, and it is necessary to investigate the conditions under which he became the first candidate in independent Ukrainian history to earn the trust of a unified electorate in the context of extreme disillusionment. I propose that what accounts for his ability to foster trust in the Ukrainian electorate, at the time the populus with the lowest reported trust in the world, is the particular image constructed via Zelenskyy's social media channels. Further, I contend that Zelenskyy's case may offer a novel perspective on the dynamics of political celebritization, in that it reveals the centrality of trust.

Where trust in politicians is low, it follows that voters will increasingly want to know their candidates, and social media make candidates visible, (theoretically) accessible, and thus, knowable. That is, an image constructed via social media channels, built on intimate disclosures from the candidate's personal and professional life, may be perceived as more transparent, and trustworthy by extension (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). However, the literature reviewed

[10] Petro Poroshenko owns the popular Channel 5 in Ukraine, and was criticized notably (by the Kyiv Post) for only doing interviews with loyal journalists on his channel.

above shows that social media presence alone does not generate trust. Voters scrutinize such disclosures for their authenticity, and authenticity is context specific. What is perceived as authentic is dependent on the social and cultural norms specific to the audience, the performer, and the performance. Indeed, because perceived authenticity differs between national contexts, Manning et al. urged researchers to extend their inquiries beyond late-stage democracies, to examine the process of socially-mediated campaigning in new settings (2017). Herein lies the goal of this study, to understand how it was that Zelenskyy was able to gain the trust of the world's most distrustful electorate. To do so, it is necessary to examine the image he constructed and maintained on social media in the social and political context in which his election took place.

Section 4: Methodology

As discussed above, this study asks how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was able to gain the trust of a unified electorate, and posits that he was able to do so by constructing and maintaining a trustworthy image on his social media channels. To investigate this claim, I have built on recent work examining the dynamics of online image management to perform a multimodal discourse analysis of Zelenskyy's image on YouTube. Though Zelenskyy was active on Instagram and Facebook as well, I have chosen to focus on his YouTube campaign vlog, *Ze!President*[11] for several reasons.

First, many of Zelenskyy's social media posts to other channels originated on his vlog. Shortened clips were often cross-posted from YouTube. In that sense, the vlog represents a more complete picture of the campaign. Second, the research on political image-making suggests that visual messages and video in particular are crucial to the image-making process, as audiences prefer to make character attributions from video appearances (Schill, 2012). Thus, video

[11] The vlog posted its first video on January 25, 2019, shortly after Zelenksyy announced his candidacy. It is still active at the time of this writing.

messages are more pertinent to this study than text or still images featured on other platforms. Third, while Zelenskyy was active on Facebook and Instagram long before the campaign, the vlog was created with the nominal purpose of giving voters a window into the campaigning process. Given that this study is concerned with Zelenskyy's ability to garner trust, a platform that was created with the (stated) purpose of transparency is of particular relevance. Finally, consistent with Bennet's theory of political image-making in the age of social media, the *Ze!President* vlog appears to be the primary source of traditional media coverage of Zelenskyy's campaign. While the number of voters who get their news online in Ukraine is increasing, the majority watch television or read print media (KIIS). It is with this in mind that vlog posts were chosen for analysis. Of the videos posted from the time Zelenskyy announced his candidacy to his win, I have selected 11 videos for analysis based on the view count and which garnered the most press coverage. The intent is to guarantee that a sizable portion of the electorate either watched the videos firsthand or saw them covered in the press.

For analysis, each video was transcribed in terms of both auditory and visual content. All speech was recorded in its original spoken language; which, in this case, was a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian. To ensure the transcripts were accurate, I employed the help of a Ukrainian fluent in both languages when necessary. I then translated each text into English for analysis. Next, each video's visual and editorial content were transcribed and added to the speech content, so that each resembles a complete script; a holistic textual description of each video's content. However, some screenshots were archived and included on the transcripts where pertinent. Drawing from the discourse analytic methods described by Avedissian (2016), the multimodal approach was selected because it provides a framework for analysis of multimedia communication. As video messages are composed of not just verbal, but nonverbal and editorial communicative elements, all three were included in analysis.

An initial codebook was developed deductively based on the methods described by

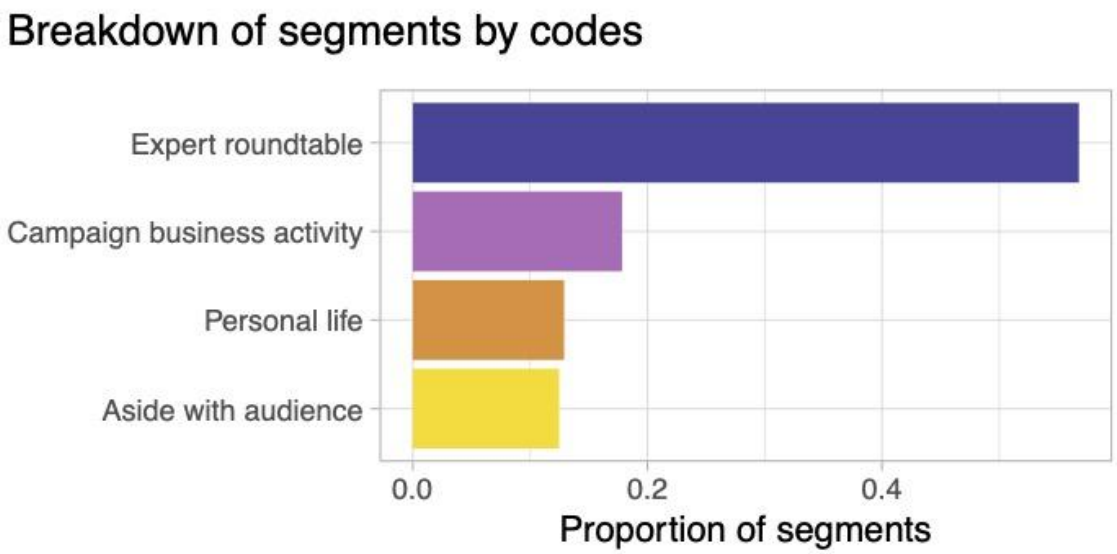
Lalancette and Reynauld (2019) in their analysis of Candadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's image on Instagram. This codebook contained variables intended to classify preliminary information about Zelenskyy's image and how the vlog's unique format was used to construct it, including elements of production and nonverbal communication such as dress, use of music, setting, film source (professional, Zelenskyy's smartphone) perspective of the viewer (candid, not candid), the setting of the shot, spoken language, and the use of logos, props, and film transitions. Next, a largely descriptive analysis of the vlog's thematic content was developed inductively using Nvivo. Themes were developed in order to determine the reality of Zelenskyy and his campaign that the vlog sought to construct (Nimmo and Combs, 1990), and classified into as many theme nodes as were necessary. From there, it was possible to ascertain how those themes fit together in service of a larger overarching narrative, and to interpret how the presence of certain themes in combination with image-making strategies employed in the vlog served to construct and maintain Zelenskyy's trustworthy image.

Section 5: Findings

Overview of the data

As previously discussed, nearly all of Zelenskyy's official campaign was virtual. The Ze Team (as Zelenskyy and his campaign staff dubbed themselves) abstained from rallies and campaign tours[12], opting instead to connect with the public on social media. The YouTube channel Ze! President is unique among them in that it was explicitly created with the purpose of documenting the campaign; to encourage the audience to follow Zelenskyy's campaign from the inside, as an observer. This does not mean that the underlying goal of political persuasion is unspoken.

[12] Save for a much-hyped televised debate with Poroshenko late in the campaign



The figure above shows the proportion of segments across all typical episodes. The two atypical videos in the dataset, his campaign ad and challenge to Poroshenko, are excluded. Whereas the atypical videos had atypical titles (they appear to be messages from Zelenskyy), episodes were labeled as such and generally have a common structure. Each typical episode bears the theme of a political issue, often presented as a problem or question that is explored in depth through roundtable discussions with experts in the topic at hand. These segments make up the majority of the vlog content, and appear to have the dual purpose of not only informing the audience of Zelenskyy's positions on the issues, but justifying them through expert testimony. The feeling of being granted a window into Zelenskyy's decision making process is reinforced through the use of candid camera work and subtle editing; no music, conversations appear to take place in real time, etc. Interspersed with these roundtable discussions, however, are a variety of other segments in which the audience is explicitly invoked. Asides are common, wherein Zelenskyy takes his phone somewhere private to speak to the audience, addressed as "guys" (rebyata) or "friends" (druzya) on the internet.[13] These asides are used to break up an expert discussion, with Zelenskyy explaining an issue in layman's terms or offering his opinion, or

[13] An "aside" is a dramaturgical device where a character speaks directly to the audience

simply to introduce or conclude a video. While each episode is primarily issue-oriented, there is a fair amount of attention paid to Zelenskyy himself, with many segments revealing some aspect of his life or personality. Accordingly, these segments are referred to as "personal life" on the figure above. Viewers see him at the gym, the market, the movies, judging comedy contests, at work on a film set, and occasionally being swarmed by fans. During these segments too, the audience is frequently acknowledged. Zelenskyy will turn to the camera to clarify or show us something such as where the camera is taking us next. Editing is less subtle, with mood-appropriate music and visual transitions. While these segments generally bear a broader connection to campaign, it goes unspoken. Constratingly, moments in the vlog where Zelenskyy is doing something explicitly related to the campaign, but is not a roundtable discussion are also common. I coded these as "campaign business activities," and refer to things like press conferences and interviews, but also more informal activities where campaigning is overt, a Chat Roulette session to connect with voters, for example. While these segments are mostly candid, the audience is occasionally acknowledged.

As the figure above illustrates, this is the typical structure of an episode: candid moments from the campaign, alternating with informal activities and/or asides with the audience. Herein lies the uniqueness of this mode of campaigning. Contained in each episode were moments in which campaigning was explicit, and moments where it was much subtler. By airing an episodic documentary of the campaign *process* on YouTube, the Ze team effectively integrated the front and back stages of his political performance, in Goffman's sense. The audience is given an apparent window into typically private moments in the campaign process, like deliberation on important issues. Yet because he is the candidate, the footage follows Zelenskyy, allowing the audience to experience the campaign from his perspective. Much is revealed about him in the process. The implication of revealing both the front and back stages is that little is left hidden from the viewer, in terms of both the campaign and the man at its center.

This aura of transparency may be reinforced by the decision to publish on YouTube in particular, as the medium encourages audience feedback. At times, Zelenskyy thanks viewers for their "likes and constructive dislikes." Further, popular topics get follow up videos, whereas the subjects of videos with less engagement are left alone. YouTube also offers the possibility of regular contact. On average, the Ze Team posted about two regular episodes per week. This does not include "special episodes" wherein other campaign staffers put out shorter and specialized content, often various efforts to get out the vote. Because most "special episodes" did not meet metrics for inclusion in this study they are not counted here. At the time of this writing, the channel Ze! President has 677K subscribers, though this number was likely higher during the campaign. The lowest view count of the videos selected for analysis is 690,541. Perhaps surprisingly, this was the channel's first entry, and despite the low engagement on YouTube, the video generated much coverage in the press. The highest view count is 3,265,416. There are two videos that are atypical in format but not categorized as a "special episode" by the Ze!Team that received enough views to be included: a campaign advertisement, and video addressed to opponent Petro Poroshenko, challenging him to a debate. Each of these are one minute or less, but other episodes range from 14 - 20 minutes.

Analysis

A comprehensive analysis of the data reveals that the image Zelenskyy constructed and maintained on YouTube was that of a uniquely authentic Ukrainian patriot. Zelenskyy's image was unique both in its specificity to his personal brand and the political values of the Ukrainian electorate. His image as a uniquely authentic patriot can be broken into three components: populism, cultural-hybridity, and authenticity. Populism and cultural-hybridity fit together to form Zelenskyy's particular brand of patriotism. On their own, these two themes may have generated a certain amount of trust among a large segment of the Ukrainian public, as they align closely with public perception of the problem (and its solution) in national governance.

Zelenskyy's perceived authenticity, however, was what made his trustworthiness unique. In each video, Zelenskyy commands an aura of authenticity by demonstrating his distinctive credibility on the first two components. Aspects of his personal and professional life are woven into each episode, which, when taken together, demonstrate that he has desirable characteristics and create a salient narrative about who Zelenskyy is as a candidate. In order to understand the ways in which the Ze Team generated his uniquely trustworthy image, it is necessary to further examine how each of the three components were harnessed in service of the broader image-making process.

Populism

While Zelenskyy never explicitly referred to himself as populist, or even defined his program in such terms, strong populist sentiment is perhaps the most overt theme in each video. He is hesitant to put a name to his ideology, but his vision for the country is generally a populist one; made apparent in his discussions with experts, journalists, asides with the audience, even the vlog episode's titles. It should be noted that populism as it is conceptualized here does not connote what is typically called "right-wing" populism; an ideology defined by xenophobic nationalism. While the word can be used in multiple and at times conflicting ways, in general sense populism implies an anti-establishment stance, that is, the belief that the people should wield greater power in a political system than a few select elites (Urbinati, 2019). It is in this sense that Zelenskyy's articulated vision was very much a populist one.

On a basic level, Zelenskyy took the position that improving the country's meager standard of living was the highest priority. Job creation, higher wages and pensions, control over price growth and staggering utility bills were among the proposed solutions to this end. Importantly though, Zelenskyy repeatedly expressed the belief that systemic corruption was at the heart of this problem. That is, the very reason so many Ukrainians were suffering financially was because the people had been effectively disenfranchised by a corrupt oligarchy, who had

leveraged their political power to enrich themselves at the expense of the national economy, and ultimately, the people. The solution to corruption and its concrete economic effects, then, was a populist one. At every turn, Zelenskyy denounced the corrupt establishment and positioned himself outside of it. As a fellow member of the public, incensed and exploited by systemic corruption, Zelenskyy could return power to the Ukrainian public.

One cannot escape the plentiful reminders of Zelenskyy's status as an uncorrupted outsider, made apparent not least by the structure of the campaign. The choice to campaign via an informal medium like YouTube is anti-establishment in and of itself, and perhaps to ensure this is not lost on the audience, the participatory, transparent and thus democratic nature of the campaign is referenced frequently. In the vlog's first episode, Zelenskyy is filmed giving a press conference after signing the paperwork to officially enter the presidential race. He explains to reporters that his proposed program is not of his own making, but that he and his team turned to their online community, combining ideas (Зе!Президент, 2019a). From the press conference, the camera cuts to Zelenskyy alone on a bridge, addressing the film audience directly. He informs us that the purpose of the vlog is transparency. The Ukrainian people, he declares, deserve to *know* their politicians, and thus the vlog "will show everything" about the campaign[14]. He continues that most importantly, he hopes the vlog will enable him to be a politician while remaining human. Thus the episode's title: "How to become president and remain human."[15] The notion that once in office, presidents have a difficult time remembering their humanity (i.e. prioritizing the needs of their constituents above their own) - and should be followed around by cameras to keep them accountable to the public - was likely one that struck a chord with the deeply disillusioned Ukrainian electorate. By characterizing corrupt politicians as inhuman, Zelenskyy is expressing his own frustration with corrupt politicians as a member of the public, positioning

[14] "Ви побачите все – хто ми, як ми готуємо передвиборчу програму, як ми збираємо команду, як ми навіть шукаємо гроші. І найголовніше, як стати президентом, і при цьому залишитись людиною."
[15] "Як стати президентом і залишитись людиною"

himself outside the establishment and as a more credible representative of the people. Zelenskyy is not alone in emphasizing the inherent populism in his campaign style. Experts laud the innovation of the socially mediated campaign for its transparency and communicative innovation. I do not mean to suggest their comments were planned, yet the editorial decision to include these comments is significant.

Zelenskyy further differentiates himself, and his newly formed political party Servant of the People (SOP) from the establishment by rejecting the hallmarks of traditional campaigns. Toward the end of the vlog's first episode, he explains in an aside with the audience that the party is about to have their first congress, but that "we do not like the word congress" because congresses are for official parties, and generally after forming official parties, members "become such great servants of the people that they abandon their promises. And our Servant of the People [party] is something else entirely" (Зе!Президент, 2019a). He continues that therefore they will instead hold a "gathering of Servants of the People."[16] Indeed this congress meeting, where the newfound party members vote to nominate Zelenskyy as a presidential candidate, is an informal one. We see montages set to relaxing electronic music of the Ze Team smiling, laughing, toasting sodas, eating pizza. The scene concludes by weaving together footage from Zelenskyy's smartphone, as he records a video introduction of the party with a selfie stick, and candid footage of the same moments. Thus our perspective switches back and forth from being the audience Zelenskyy is addressing directly, and being a fly on the wall as this unfolds.

Rejecting campaign norms was a theme that persisted throughout the campaign, even in the atypical videos selected for analysis. For instance, Zelenskyy famously refused to debate Poroshenko in the traditional manner, responding to Poroshenko's challenge on YouTube through a highly produced video stipulating his conditions of acceptance. He demanded the debate take

[16] "Сегодня у нас проходит первый съезд, слово съезд нам не нравится, потому что обычно, когда съезд, то партии. Потом они обычно становятся большими слугами народа и съезжают со своих обещаний. Вот. А наш Слуга народа это совершенно другое. Поэтому у нас сегодня слет, слет Слуги народа."

place at Kyiv's massive soccer stadium "before the people of Ukraine" and be broadcast live, that no journalist be denied access, and that they must take a drug test beforehand (Зе!Президент, 2019j). Indeed, the whole affair translates to a thumbing of the nose at the system in general and Poroshenko in particular, as the man at its head. This disrespect is eloquently enacted in the video's final moments. He ends his speech by telling Poroshenko to "think about it" (Podumaityeh). Yet rather than use the respectful grammatical ending of the sentence, he first uses the informal word, waiting for a second before adding the syllable at the end that signifies formality. The implication seems to be that he is not sure if Poroshenko deserves the show of respect. In fact, this video represents Zelenskyy's most explicit attack on Poroshenko. Experts occasionally criticize him by name, but Zelenskyy does not comment. Critically though, Zelenskyy launched this insult in such a manner that it was on behalf of all frustrated Ukrainian citizens, rather than himself. His demands, though perhaps unwarranted (there little to suggest Poroshenko was using drugs) were ostensibly for greater transparency and greater accountability to the public. Not only was Zelenskyy mocking the incumbent regime and the political system at large for its failures, but he did so in the name of popular democracy by implying that the people should have greater access to the campaign process. The message was that Zelenskyy was the candidate truly committed to these ideals.

Overt as they were at times, these reminders that Zelenskyy was a political outsider and thus a credible reformer prove a relatively subtle demonstration of his populism in comparison with the many populist policies he discusses on the vlog. Zelenskyy was explicit that his priority were those bread and butter issues Onuch discussed. Accordingly, all but the two irregular episodes are dominated by a segment referred to here as expert roundtables. In these segments, Zelenskyy and his team deliberate on a particular issue with a panel of experts. Each is specific to an issue of either corruption or economic security. These roundtables reinforced the impression that Zelenskyy's policies would prioritize restoring the economic and political power

of Ukrainian citizens.

He spoke with experts in "innovation" about establishing an e-democracy after Estonia's example. Such a system, he explained, would make the government accessible as a smartphone app, where citizens could vote or register a new business "without getting off the couch" (Зе!Президент, 2019h). He spoke with a panel of young people to talk about what the state could do to convince them to stay in Ukraine instead of seek work abroad (Зе!Президент, 2019d, 2019e) He spoke with economists about setting up a child wealth fund (Зе!Президент, 2019a), and experts in education about reforming the state's education infrastructure through a Ukrainian New Deal (Зе!Президент, 2019b). He spoke with experts in energy about breaking up monopolies and developing the country's own gas reserves to lower the astronomical costs of utility bills (Зе!Президент, 2019f). And of course, while corruption was an unavoidable topic in nearly all roundtables, he met with numerous representatives of anti-corruption organizations to discuss concrete steps the future president could take to combat corruption in all sectors of the state (Зе!Президент, 2019a, 2019c, 2019f, 2019g, 2019h). In an episode titled "Ukrainian courts are corrupt and greedy"[17], he agreed to adopt several of the experts' policy proposals in his program, including establishing an appointment process for new high court justices where they must be confirmed by a panel of international and public experts, as opposed to the old justices. Significantly, one expert points out that while they sent out the same list of anti-corruption proposals to every candidate, the Ze Team was the only one to request a meeting. The editorial decision to include this comment shapes the Ze Team's message, that Zelenskyy is the committed anti-corruption candidate (Зе!Президент, 2019g).

Notably, Zelenskyy often remains relatively quiet during expert roundtables. There are exceptions; he asks his fair share of questions and is active in some discussions. For the most part, however, as experts speak, we see him listening with a furrowed brow, fidgeting, or jotting

[17] "Украинский суд продажный и прожадный"

down notes. This hesitancy to speak up may well be taken as a sign of ignorance on the issues. However, portraying Zelenskyy primarily as a listener is consistent with his populist image. It was a central theme of his campaign that his program would be collaborative in order to ensure that policies would truly be to the benefit of the people, not self-interested state actors. His fairly hands off approach during roundtables may have confirmed this perception, conveying that his decisions would be influenced by independent[18] experts. Perhaps more importantly, Zelenskyy made it clear that beyond experts, average citizens would have more sway over decisions in his administration as well. Beyond transparency measures to keep them informed, Zelenskyy vowed to hold frequent referendums to give citizens a greater voice. This sentiment is represented particularly well in an exchange with an *Economist* reporter, in an episode where Zelenskyy is interviewed by a panel of journalists. The reporter asks what foreign policy would look like in Zelenskyy's Ukraine, and he laughs at the reporter's wording. "It's *our* Ukraine, not exactly mine!" he interjects. He continues "But this country of its people...it has already chosen European integration. I can only help steer Ukraine to Europe."[19] He goes on to say that he agreed with what he believed was the majority on this front, he would hold a referendum before a big decision like joining the EU or NATO (Зе!Президент, 2019i).

Beyond positioning himself outside the establishment as an uncorrupted member of the public, and espousing an ideology that privileges the role of the people over select elites, Zelenskyy's populist image was buttressed by a variety of visual symbols. Some of these symbols can be conceptualized as authenticity (as they appear to reinforce Zelenskyy's unique credibility as a populist) and will be explored in detail in that section. Nevertheless, there is one nonverbal demonstration of pure populism thus better suited to this section: his campaign ad.

[18] Zelenskyy also made a point to say that the experts he meets with are in fact independent, saying "not one of them works for the campaign." However, two experts shown at a roundtable did eventually go on to join Zelenskyy's administration.

[19] "Наша Украйна, она точно не моя!...Но вот она...страна своего народа...который уже выбрал евроинтеграцию. Я могу только помогать двигаться Украине в Европ."

This video is unique among vlog episodes as there are no documentary elements, it is entirely scripted and produced, a token campaign advertisement in every sense. The screen opens on a tight shot of a stop light at a crosswalk, with purple letters (Poroshenko's campaign color) counting down from forty. A moment later, the screen cuts to a wide-angle shot looking slightly down at the crosswalk, revealing crowds of people waiting to cross the intersection.

The camera pans along their faces, and the crowds look at each other, stone-faced or skeptical, from across the street. Zelenskyy's voice accompanies a solemn piano riff in the background, explaining that Ukrainians have been divided into the right and the wrong types. Interestingly however, from the moment the screen opens, accompanying Zelenskyy's voice and the music are sirens. As soon as the footage reveals the crosswalk, we see that what's dividing the crowd is not just an empty intersection, but a line of police and state vehicles, followed by a sleek, black, Mercedes SUV; the nearly universal symbol for Oligarchs across the post-Soviet space. The visual is a procession of authority figures and powerful oligarchs separating a crowd of Ukrainians on opposite sides of a divide, while they are powerless to do anything but wait (Зе!Президент, 2019k). The message is that social divides in Ukraine are not inherent, they've been enabled by a corrupt establishment who benefits from a divided public. After decades of political campaigns which did, in many people's minds, divide Ukrainians into the right and wrong types, this message was likely a salient one.

Cultural Hybridity

Beyond the powerful imagery of a citizenry artificially divided by corrupt authorities, other elements of the Ze Team's campaign advertisement serve as an effective representation of the second component of Zelenskyy's trustworthy image: his embrace of cultural hybridity. Consider the full transcript of the ad:

> "This is us. Those who are divided into right and wrong. Into "Little Russians" and "vyshvatnyk"[20]. Those who are called cattle, clowns, Khokhols[21]. But we are all Ukrainians. In the West, East, North, South and Center. And we are tired of standing still, waiting for this era to end. The era of greed, poverty, lies."[22]

As described above, during this half of the ad, the camera pans across the frowning, skeptical faces of the crowd. There are some scene-setting wide shots from a high angle, but often we see the faces of the crowd at eye level. Our perspective switches from one side of the crowd to the other, so that each time an authority figure drives through the intersection, we see it from both sides. The camera though, is focused on the faces on the opposite side of the intersection. The vehicles are blurry and out of focus. As Zelenskyy's voice over comes to the end of this last line, the light turns green and the walk symbol appears. Smiles break out on the faces of the crowd, immediately, both sides run to embrace each other. The music takes a hopeful turn and the narration continues:

> "So we do it together. Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking, wealthy and unemployed. Those who defend Ukraine. And those who were forced to seek happiness abroad. We are different, yet the same. We unite to move forward. After all, on April 21 there is only one choice - the past, or the future."[23]

During this half, we see shot after shot of joyful embrace. School girls, A mother and children, a young woman and a young male soldier in uniform, and a teen girl and an elderly man, presumably her grandfather. The united group then strolls down the street, together. The voice over cuts off at the last line, and Zelenskyy pops in from the right side of the screen, a few steps ahead of the crowd to deliver this last line in person (Зе!Президент, 2019k).

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[20] Little Russians (Malorussians) was a term used in imperial Russia to describe Ukrainians. It is emblematic of the belief in Russia that Ukraine is not quite it's own country, but a little brother to Russia. Here Zelenskyy is referencing Eastern Ukrainians who, in their cultural similarities to Russia, are characterized as not being real Ukrianians. Contrastingly, Vyshvatnyk is a hostile way of describing nationalists in the Western regions. Vyshyvanka is a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt.

[21] Khokhol is a pejorative for ethnic Ukrainians, characteristic of the idea that Ukraine is not a real country or ethnicity.

[22] "Це - ми. Ті, кого поділили на правильних і неправильних. На малоросів і вишиватників. Ті, кого називають бидлом, клоунами, хохлами. Але ми – це українці. На заході, сході, на півночі, півдні і в центрі. І ми втомились стояти на місці, чекаючи поки закінчиться ця епоха. Епоха жадібності, бідності, брехні."

[23] Тому ми робимо це разом. Україномовні і русскоговорящие, заможні і безробітні. Ті, хто захищає Україну. І ті, кого змусили шукати щастя за кордоном. Ми різні, але такі однакові. Об'єднуємось щоб рухатись вперед. Адже 21 квітня вибір тільки один – минуле чи майбутнє."

The message framing in the Ze Team's political advertisement leaves little room for interpretation. It forms a narrative which identifies the root cause of Ukraine's problems in the past, and articulates a solution. In this framing, the source of Ukraine's social, economic, and political struggles is not its regional diversity, it is not that inherent differences between "right" and "wrong" citizens have simply held their country back, as political discourse sometimes insinuated. In this political ad, the Ze Team tells a different story entirely, in which Ukrainians of all sorts have been exploited by corrupted authorities and the oligarchs who fund them. Regional divides, then, are not naturally occurring, but have been rhetorically constructed by those same corrupt officials; a distraction from their own role in creating "the era of greed, poverty, and lies" wherein the rest of the populus have suffered. Likewise, if the root of the problem is a corrupt ruling class who've effectively split the country as political cover, then the solution is to unite as *Ukrainians* against this corrupt system, regardless of cultural difference. Importantly, the civilians separated by a motorcade of authorities in the ad do not appear to be strangers. They are dear friends, as with two school girls, or they are partners, as with the young woman and her boyfriend returning from war, and, more often, they are family. In the ad, we see mothers embrace children, and grandparents embrace grandchildren. The Ze Team's message is clear. The country may be diverse, but needn't be divided, as the shared bond of national identity trumps all other distinctions. The message is that from Galicia to Donbas and Kyiv to Odesa, Ukrainians are all part of the same family.

This inclusive formulation of national identity fits within Zelenskyy's broader embrace of cultural hybridity, and when combined with his populism, these two campaign themes likely form a salient narrative among the Ukrainian public. Together, populism and cultural hybridity align closely with the priorities of the electorate articulated by analysts like Onuch and Fesenko.

In part, by embracing a certain degree of cultural hybridity, the public could be assured the priority would not be solving questions of national identity, but rather, diversity could be accepted and the emphasis could be on fighting corruption, strengthening the economy, and improving the standard of living. Beyond the campaign ad, Zelenskyy spoke about his own inclusive definition of national identity in plain language. In an episode devoted entirely to an interview with a panel of (mostly foreign) journalists, an analyst for the Atlantic Council points out that many soldiers who volunteered to fight against separatists in the DNR/LNR were Russian speaking. He further points out that Zelenskyy, who is himself a native Russian speaker from the East, had in the past expressed sympathy for Russophone citizens. Before the analyst can finish asking his question, Zelenskyy interrupts saying that such citizens are "Ukrainians all the same,"[24] (Зе!Президент, 2019і).

The analyst goes on to ask what role the Ukrainian language plays in the country's national identity. Zelenskyy responds that he falls back on his training as a lawyer. The constitution stipulates that the sole state language is Ukrainian - which, he says, is normal - "excuse me, but, we are in Ukraine." It also stipulates that the state should support and develop Russian and other minority languages, not suppress them. He reiterates this last point; that further restrictions on Russian use are unnecessary, in part because the switch to Ukrainian is happening on its own. He explains:

"...we live in a revolutionary moment for the Ukrainian language. Ukrainian is wonderful when it is spoken correctly, beautifully... it is stunning. Everyone is switching to the Ukrainian language with great pleasure. Our education system is already set up so that everything will be, everyone will speak Ukrainian. Our next generation will always speak Ukrainian."[25]

[24] "Одинаково Украинцев,"

[25] "...мы живем в революционный момент украинского языка. Украинский язык прекрасный язык когда на нем говорят грамотно, красиво, это потрясающе. Все хорошо все переходят на украинский язык с большим удовольствием. У нас и так образовательная система так сегодня выставлено что касается языках, все будет, всего говорить на Украинском языке. У нас следующее поколение будет говорить все по Украинцы."

He cites his children as an example, saying that while they know Russian, they speak Ukrainian more and more. This stance is fairly common among adult native Russian speakers in Ukraine. They consider it right that the younger generations should grow up speaking Ukrainian and want to see the language flourish, but personally find it difficult to make the switch (Bilaniuk, 2017a). As a Russophone Ukrainian himself, it's unsurprising that Zelenskyy would empathize with others like him, taking that national identity is not determined by language alone. What is more interesting about this exchange, however, is that Zelenskyy manages to adopt the pro-Ukrainian stance like that of his opponent, but mitigates it by saying the state should nevertheless support Russian. Certainly, his position is a bit contradictory, as "supporting and developing Russian" may well keep *everyone* from speaking Ukrainian in the future as he holds. This contradiction may well have been perceived as a bit of a cop out or overly idealistic stance, and likely did disappoint many citizens who are passionate about the endurance of their national tongue. Yet, perhaps other patriotic Russophone Ukrainians empathized with Zelenskyy's apparent struggle to reconcile his position, struggling to resolve the contradiction themselves.

It should be noted though, that while indeed more comfortable speaking Russian, Zelenskyy is quite competent in Ukrainian. Beyond overt statements like the one above, he demonstrated an embrace of cultural hybridity by switching back and forth between both languages. His language use patterns throughout the vlog indicate that Zelenskyy engaged in what we might call accommodating bilingualism, in opposition to the non-accommodating bilingualism observed by Bilaniuk (2010). Instead of a bilingual conversation where each speaker sticks to the language of their choice, Zelenskyy would switch to Ukrainian according to the preference of his conversation partner. If experts at a roundtable spoke Ukrainian Zelenskyy spoke Ukrainian, if they spoke Russian, he spoke Russian. If there was a mix, which was

frequently the case, Zelenskyy addressed questions or comments to the speaker in their preferred language. This was often evidenced by one of Zelenskyy's Ukrainian speaking team members, Ruslan Stefanchik, who was nearly always present at expert roundtables. Even when all experts spoke Russian, and Stefanchik would interject in Ukrainian, Zelenskyy would switch. Whether we can understand this accommodating bilingualism to be a gesture of linguistic support or simple politeness, it demonstrates an embrace of hybridity.

Since most of the populus displays a similar acceptance of linguistic diversity, as discussed in earlier in this study, Zelenskyy's stance on Ukrainian language could be considered relatively uncontroversial, at least in comparison. His statements about rebel fighters in the DNR/LNR may have been more of a political risk, and to that end, may serve as a stronger representation of his embrace of all kinds of Ukrainians as legitimate. In the same interview, Zelenskyy expressed the opinion that the rebels had fallen victim to an information war, and to get them back, Ukraine should wage their own information war to combat the false notion that citizens of Donbas were not real Ukrainians and didn't belong. When asked about potential compromises, whether he'd be willing to surrender any part of the Eastern territories, he responded "We will not sell our people, we will not sell our land"[26] (Зе!Президент, 2019i). Zelenskyy took a conciliatory stance, implying that the rebels were still Ukrainians, and as such, civilians who matter.

The statement indicates that to Zelenskyy the imperative to win the war against the Russia-backed separatists lay not only in restoring the country's territorial integrity, but reuniting Ukrainians who'd been unjustly divided. His expressed sympathy was likely perceived by some as a cop out or perhaps a betrayal, undermining the effort of Ukrainian soldiers. Yet his

[26] "Мы не продаем своих людей, не продаем территории."

continued popularity despite campaigning on a ceasefire suggests a majority found statements like these tolerable, if not agreeable. Indeed, surveys taken early on in Zelenskyy's presidency show that most Ukrainains were amenable to a certain degree of compromise in the war if it meant a sooner end (Kudelia, 2020). This same sentiment, that Zelenskyy considered the separatists fellow countrymen and as such, felt some degree of empathy for them, is evidenced elsewhere in the interview where he insists that brokering a ceasefire would be his first step. Naive as this may have been, as the press lambasted, he explained it was "his sociology as a Ukrainian" to prioritize an end to the killing (Зе!Президент, 2019i).

Like his populism, the element of Zelenskyy's image as an adherent of cultural hybridity was constructed not only linguistically but through visual symbols. While some of these themes will be further unpacked in reference to Zelenskyy's perceived authenticity, there remains an additional, visual element of Zelenskyy's image that was no doubt intended to symbolize his embrace of cultural hybridity: his logo. Every vlog episode includes an intro sequence in the form of a theme song set to footage from the campaign. While this footage mostly changes from episode to episode, there are two consistent elements in each into sequence: a shot from Zelenskyy's press conference in the first episode, where we see his head framed against a big Ukrainian trident[27] on the government building behind him, and an animated logo. First, the screen turns black. Then, timed to the rhythm of the theme song, two dots appear in rapid succession, a blue dot on left, and a yellow one on the right. The dots then move together and form a single, green one. It was a stroke of good fortune that this symbolic device was available for the Ze Team. Ukraine's national colors are blue and yellow; the flag is equal parts of each color. Zelenskyy's name, in both Ukrainian and Russian, essentially means "green". Accordingly,

[27]A blue shield with a gold trident is the national coat of arms of Ukraine. The trident is a common national symbol in modern Ukraine.

after the two dots come together to make a green one, it disappears and a green square with the letters “Ze!” appear, and underneath it, “President”. Thus, the Ze Team is emphasizing that even in name, Zelenskyy himself symbolizes old divisions dissolving, making way for national unity.

Authenticity

As the previously outlined findings demonstrate, much of the Ze!President vlog fits within the two categories of populism and cultural hybridity. Zelenskyy’s populism is emphasized by the structure of his socially-mediated campaign, visual and verbal reminders that he is a political outsider, and numerous populist policy proposals. His embrace of cultural hybridity is evidenced by his language-use patterns and an inclusive definition of national identity which emphasized unity over social division. In combination, the themes of populism and cultural hybridity form Zelenskyy’s particular brand of patriotism. A patriotism in which the political establishment is accountable to every Ukrainian, regardless of ethnic or cultural identity, and accordingly, the material needs of every citizen are met. Given the political moment in which the campaign took place, it is unsurprising that Zelenskyy’s brand of patriotism was appealing to the electorate. With trust in individual politicians and the government itself at an all time low, a populist stance was likely necessary to gain the trust of the public. In some ways, his embrace of cultural hybridity may have been risky, particularly, his conciliatory stance toward the separatists in Donbas. To be certain, there were those who found such statements to be a betrayal of those who died in the Maidan and the war. Yet perhaps due to the growing perception that the political focus on national identity was insincere or even harmful, an embrace of cultural hybridity may have similarly boosted Zelenskyy’s trustworthiness with the larger portion of the electorate that leans toward the middle. To that end, Zelenskyy’s particular patriotism on its own may have generated a certain amount of trust among the electorate.

There remains an additional element of Zelenskyy's image, however, that appears to entirely to reinforce Zelenskyy's *authenticity* as a patriot. As it is conceptualized here, authenticity denotes all content that appears intended to remind the audience that the values and traits demonstrated through Zelenskyy's patriotism are not simply part of the campaign, but who he is at his core, outside the context of the election. Zelenskyy's image as a *uniquely authentic* Ukrainian patriot, I argue, was what generated such unusual levels of trust. Much of Zelenskyy's authenticity was demonstrated in the video segments that were woven in between clips of expert roundtables. Authenticity was thus a dominant theme in both asides with the audience and other segments where Zelenskyy is shown not at work on the campaign, but in the context of his personal or professional life.

Despite the relevance of his professional life as the star of Servant of the People, references to the show appear on only three occasions. Zelenskyy's alter ego, President Holoborodko appears as a major focal point in only the episode about corruption in the courts. Zelenskyy introduces the episode in an aside with the audience in an empty square. He explains that after the Constitutional Court "legalized illegal enrichment"[28], the topic of the vlog became very real, but, the vlog is not the first time he's raised the issue of corruption in the courts. Rather, he says "we've raised this topic more than once in our beloved - and yours too, I hope - series Servant of the People…" (Зе!Президент, 2019g)[29] Thus, he and his team wanted to discuss it with experts. Spliced into footage of the expert roundtable, however, are a series of corresponding flashbacks to different episodes of Servant of the People about corruption in the courts. The audience sees alternating clips of experts describing the nature of the problem and proposing solutions, and Holoborodko's fictional fight for court reform. As described earlier, a

[28] "После того как наш Конституционный Суд узаконил незаконное обогащение, тема влога стала очень актуальной."
[29] "Вы знаете, эту тему мы не единожды поднимали в нашем любимом, и в вашем, надеюсь, сериале «Слуга Народа»."

main concern of the experts was the issue of how to ensure the removal of corrupt judges. During this discussion, the camera cuts to a clip from Servant of the People in which Holoborodko appears to be debating a candidate in a TV studio. The candidate exclaims "Wait a second! What do you want? To get rid of the old judges? And replace them with whom, rookies? What about standing, experience?"[30] Holoborodko fires back with a piercing stare "Experience in taking bribes, do you need such comrades?"[31] (Зе!Президент, 2019g) Later in the roundtable discussion as they discuss how to disincentivize taking bribes, we see clips where Holoborodko and an associate, sleeves rolled up, prepare to make a list of judges whose assets far outpace their salaries and fire them.

This is the basic structure of the episode: clips of Servant of the People matched to the grievances the experts raise and their proposed program for resolution. It is possible to interpret this message as a simple reminder that Zelenskyy played the beloved Holoborodko on TV. This is certainly what so many in the press warned about - that Zelenskyy was merely channeling a popular fictional character. However, when taken in the editorial context of the episode, it appears the message is beyond the simple claim that Zelenskyy equals Holoborodko. By inserting corresponding clips from Servant of the People into the expert roundtable, the Ze Team appears to be actually fortifying Zelenskyy's credibility on the issue. Inserting clips that so closely relate to what the experts say shows that Zelenskyy has not only been on the right side of court reform for years, astutely calling out this exact problem on his show. By including these flashbacks of sorts, the message is that for Zelenskyy, fighting corruption in the courts is an authentic conviction. Zelenskyy himself implies this is how the clips are intended when he tells

[30] "Секундочку! Секундочку! Что вы хотите? Убрать всех старых суддей? И с кем заменить? Желторотиками? А где вы этих желторотиков…? Стаж, опыт."
[31] "Опыт в получении взяток, нужны такие вам товарищи?"

the audience "this is not the first time we've raised the issue."[32] It should be noted after all that while Zelenskyy was often called plainly a "comedian" in the press, a more accurate label may be a political satirist, as he is not only an actor but a writer on the show. His success as such is a testament to the fact that before his candidacy, he had been accurately pointing out the flaws in Ukrainian governance for years. With references to Holoborodko contained to so few episodes and incorporated in the intentional manner described here, it does not appear that the Ze Team attempted to convince the public that Zelenskyy *was* Holobrodko. Rather, they used his status as a political satirist to convince the audience of his authenticity. The message is that his consistency on issues of corruption means the public can trust he is an authentic reformer.

Zelenskyy used comedy as an indirect means of reform outside of Servant of People, and outside of his presidential run with his co-creation of an improv competition reality show, the League of Laughter (Liga Smikhu). Accordingly, the Ze Team also used his involvement with the League to demonstrate authenticity. Zelenskyy and other Kvartal 95 members started the improv competition in 2015, not long after the outbreak of war and Putin's annexation of Crimea. Before relations between the two countries soured, the best shot at success for an aspiring Ukrainian comedian would be through KVN, a Russian sketch comedy competition. KVN was originally a Soviet program, however, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union it remained an international competition. As such, it remained one of the most popular comedy shows in the post-Soviet space, and, for post-Soviet comedians, the most accessible means of making it. Conflict between Ukraine and Russia complicated this avenue for young comedians, and Zelenskyy headed up the creation of the Ukraine-based League of Laughter in response. It is fitting, then, that when the vlog released a two part episode exploring the reasons why so many

[32] "We" refers to Kvartal 95, his production company and fellow SOP writers. Many of the core Kvartal 95 members joined Zelenskyy's campaign and are Servant of the People party members.

young Ukrainians move abroad, they filmed it in Odesa, where Zelenskyy was acting as a judge on the latest season of League of Laughter.

In the two part episode, rather than holding an expert roundtable, Zelenskyy sits down with a panel of dozens of young people (ostensibly spectators of the competition). He asks them in earnest why they think it is that so many young people emigrate. While the participants raise a host of concerns, from ethnic discrimination, the war, and the general feeling of abandonment by the state, the overarching theme is a lack of opportunity. Again and again, the participants explain that with meager wages and low employment prospects, seeking opportunity abroad can feel like the only option. A young man from Kazakhstan interjects that while he is "not happy" about some of the recent "events" in Ukraine, he is glad about their outcome. He clarifies that his own country is still dependent on Russian resources, and as a result, many see it as superior and move there. He uses the League of Laugher as a way to combat this mentality (Зе!Президент, 2019e).

> "Right here, there are those who are involved with KVN - their utmost goal is to go to Russia and to stay there. What you did with the League of Laughter, I think after 5 or 10 years, the generation that's growing up watching you specifically, which is everyone here, they will strive to be here, to stay here. This large, clever, comedic potential will develop and stay here."[33]

The participant from Kazakhstan seems to have perfectly articulated the Ze Team's message. During this episode, clips from the League of Laughter competition and Zelenskyy sitting at the judges' table alternate with clips of the youth roundtable. That is, as we listen to Ukrainian youth describe their feeling that they are forced to seek opportunity abroad (in comedy, in this instance), we see that Zelenskyy is apparently working to change that problem as they speak, through creating opportunities for Ukrainian comedians at home. Notably, besides

[33] "Вот все, кто у нас занимаются КВН, у них высшая цель уехать в Россию и остаться там. То, что вы сделали с Лигой Смеха, я думаю через 5-10 лет то поколение, которое вырастет, смотря на именно вас, которые все здесь, они будут стремиться быть здесь, остаться здесь. Это очень большой умственный, юмористический потенциал, который будет развиваться и останется здесь."

seeing Zelenskyy at the judges table, the video includes clips from the performers. In one such clip, one group incorporates an interview clip of Zelenskyy into their performance. Projected onto a large screen on the stage while the performers step aside and watch, Zelenskyy is shown in an interview saying "And the first possible steps need to be taken to make all these people, all our workers, so that they all return here."[34] The screen goes dark, and one performer addresses Zelenskyy directly at the judges table, saying that they will in fact return, before tying in a joke about another prominent politician and candidate Yulia Tymoshenko.

Perhaps it makes for a tenuous argument to equate incentivizing such a narrow segment of the population to stay in Ukraine through opportunities like Liga Smikhu with creating more opportunities in the domestic workforce more broadly. Yet, the production of this particular episode suggests the Ze Team is making precisely this argument, with the goal of reinforcing the authenticity of Zelenskyy's statements about preventing the youth workforce drain being a priority. The editorial decision to juxtapose the clips of him hosting Liga Smikhu, weaving in the participant from Kazakhstan's observation, and then finally offering some apparent proof in one of the sketches that Liga Smikhu is having its intended effect: comedians will return. Even the decision to film the youth panel in Odesa where Zelenskyy was judging the competition bolsters his authenticity as a patriot. Zelenskyy was explicit on several occasions that he sought to make Ukraine a better place to live through opening up opportunities. In his first press conference, he said "There will be signs in Poland that say 'Work in Ukraine (Зе!Президент, 2019a).'"[35] By verbally alluding to and directly filming his involvement in the League of Laughter, the Ze Team is conveying to the audience that his desire to create more opportunities

[34] "И первыми всевозможными шагами нужно сделать чтобы все эти люди, все наши заробітчани, чтобы они все вернулись сюда."
[35] "Ми бажаємо, ми гадаємо, ми мріємо, щоб колись, унайближчому часі з'явились вже об'яви в Польщі – «Робота в Україні."

for Ukrainian citizens is an authentic one (Зе!Президент, 2019d, 2019e). The message is that the audience can trust he means what he says.

References to Servant of the People and the League of Laughter are reminders to the audience that in Zelenskyy's pre-political professional life, he was consistent in, and thus authentically devoted to the same ideals and convictions he was campaigning on. Consistent with the literature on what connotes authenticity, the vlog often shows Zelenskyy in a more personal setting to demonstrate that he remains consistent on the issues in his personal life as well. A clear example is a vlog segment that appears twice among the episodes selected for analysis, which Zelenskyy dubs "Pull-ups in Ukrainain",[36] though in a later episode the segment incorporates a treadmill (Зе!Президент, 2019b, 2019d). As the name suggests, in these segments he makes a fitness game out of practicing his Ukrainian. It's clear that the gym is a regular part of Zelenskyy's life. References to his trainer, the gym, and fitness more generally are not uncommon in the vlog. In his Ukrainian Language workouts, he fuses together an aspect of his personal life with a commitment to bolster the status of Ukrainian through leading by example.

When the segment first appears, Zelenskyy introduces it in an aside. After greeting the audience at the door of the gym, he, his trainer, and a Ze Team member named Yura gather beneath a pull-up bar. Zelenskyy turns to the camera and says that combining education and sports can be simple. He explains he will be hanging from the pull-up bar while Yura gives him a word in either Ukrainian or Russian. If he can't correctly translate it to the other language, he must do a pull-up. The trainer interjects that he should do two, and Zelenskyy relents. Notably, the words are challenging ones, and despite the fact that he is visibly struggling, he appears to be having fun, laughing and poking fun at himself. He also appears genuinely invested in the game,

[36] "Підтягування українською".

reacting with delighted excitement when he does well, and disappointment when he misses one. At the end of one segment, Zelenskyy drops from the bar and chortles with how exhausted he is. Then, he looks at his hands and walks over to the camera to show the audience his red, stinging palms, saying "Look, here's how the Ukrainian Language learning goes for me (Зе!Президент, 2019b)."[37] This moment in particular makes clear that the message behind the segment is that despite Zelenskyy's personal preference for speaking Russian, his professed commitment to develop Ukrainian is sincere. It may be hard work for him personally, but he is willing to put his money where his mouth is. The message is that voters can trust that Zelenskyy's brand of patriotism is an authentic one, carrying over from his campaign rhetoric to parts of his everyday life.

Beyond structured segments of the vlog, perhaps more consequential for Zelenskyy's perceived authenticity were his many personal disclosures to the audience. As Zelenskyy himself implied in the first episode, voters have a right to truly know their politicians in order to determine their authenticity. The frequent moments where Zelenskyy shares something personal with the audience would have reinforced the perception that he is indeed consistent as both a politician and a person, and ultimately an authentic one. It should be noted that the many audience asides on their own may have been useful in cultivating a sense of familiarity and thus, trust to some extent. However, it is more likely that the substance of these disclosures in combination with their format was what made for a particularly authentic message. For instance, on several occasions, Zelenskyy makes casual mention of how miserable he finds the campaign process. At times he does so in good humor, joking with a campaign staffer about how many days there are to go (Зе!Президент, 2019a). Elsewhere it takes the form of a taxicab confession.

[37] "Посмотри, вот посмотри. Ось вам, українська мова як мені дається, бачите?"

Riding in a car late at night, turned toward the camera, he discloses that the urge to "throw it all to hell" is strong (Зе!Президент, 2019a).[38] One of the episodes in Odesa opens with Zelenskyy on a park bench, describing in detail his exhaustion with attacks in the press, saying that before the trip his instinct was to hide like a hedgehog. He confesses he was counting the days, then the hours left in the campaign, and ultimately, he was losing his confidence (Зе!Президент, 2019e). Moments like these run contrary to Zelenskyy's generally positive demeanor, but allow us an intimate, ostensibly more authentic glimpse into his brain. Rather than putting on an obligatorily happy face for the camera, the perception is that Zelenskyy is showing us his authentic self. Further, the idea that he dislikes campaigning strengthens his credibility as a true public servant, indicating that he does not want to be in politics at all, but is doing so out of a genuine sense of duty to his country. The message in asides such as these is that the audience can trust Zelenskyy when he says he is running as a servant of the people.

Verbal disclosures such as these combine with footage depicting elements of Zelenskyy's personal life to boost the audience's sense of familiarity with the candidate. There are moments in the vlog where we see Zelenskyy out in the world, ostensibly being himself. While such moments may increase his authenticity in a general sense, many seem to indicate that in his natural element, Zelenskyy is a bonafide man of the people. The monologue described above where he candidly describes the beating his confidence has taken, for instance, takes a positive turn when he explains that being around Odesans has improved his spirits. He goes to say that while he's grateful for his online community, the chance to speak with people in person has given him peace. During this monologue, the screen cuts away from Zelenskyy on a bench to footage of him on the streets of Odesa, where he's surrounded by a small crowd, smiling,

[38] "...последние 2 дня у меня одна мысль в голове, и она меня не покидает, бросить это все нафиг."

laughing, and taking selfies. Throughout this episode, moments like these are woven in; Zelenskyy in his personal life, campaigning while not campaigning. In the first part of this two-part episode, he says to the audience that his kids will expect presents from Odesa, so he and the Ze Team are headed to Privoz Market. He is dressed in a baseball cap and hoodie but still recognized, and we are shown another montage of selfies with fans. This gives way to Zelenskyy strolling into a toy booth at the market. After he chats and jokes with the saleswoman working the booth about what to bring his son, he starts asking her questions about her life as a Ukrainian. He asks "How is life in Odesa, generally?"[39] When she responds that it has been difficult but she's grown accustomed to it, he asks her to elaborate on local problems. She responds "Same as everyone. I want to eat."[40] She goes on to say that it's impossible to earn a decent living, particularly when utility bills are so outrageous. He asks how she thinks they should resolve such problems, and she shrugs, saying "...we need a good leader, probably (Зе!Президент, 2019d)."[41]

Later in this same episode, we see Zelenskyy in another part of the market buying salo. He is surrounded by fellow shoppers waiting to talk with him or take pictures, but again, the exchange included in the episode mostly centers around him asking those closest to him about local problems. One insists that things aren't so bad, while another says that inflation is out of control and her pension is only forty-two hryvnia[42] (Зе!Президент, 2019d). In another episode, Zelenskyy does Chatroulette and talks with strangers on the internet about their lives and their problems. While these conversations contain serious moments as well, many of his conversation partners make Zelenskyy laugh, and after the segment he is beaming (Зе!Президент, 2019b). By including these moments in the vlog, moments where Zelenskyy appears truly in his element

[39] "Ну, а как вообще в Одессе живется?"

[40] "Ну как у всех. Кушать очень хочется. Это - во-первых. Два! Очень тяжело заработать. Это, во-вторых. И коммунальные платежи?!"

[41] "Как решить? Не знаю, наверное, хорошего хозяина надо…"

[42] The equivalent of $1.52 at the time of this writing.

talking to regular people, the Ze Team is sending a message that his professed concern for the welfare of average citizens is an authentic one. While they may have only reminded the audience of Zelenskyy's popularity, the moments in which we simply see him stop what he is doing to take selfies with fans[43] seem to indicate he cares enough to make time for people. In another aside, he explains that it is both important and fulfilling to go see how people live, to talk to them about their lives, and to ask for their input face to face. Including footage of him doing precisely that sends the message that Zelenskyy means it when he says that he wants to improve the lives of all citizens; that they can trust his brand of patriotism is an authentic one.

There remains yet an additional demonstration of Zelenskyy's authenticity that warrants discussion. At the end of the two-part episode in Odesa, the scene cuts to Zelenskyy back on a park bench, speaking to the audience. He poses the question to himself about whether or not his community will turn out at the polls. He continues:

> "I have a general confidence that they will come in full. For what, I don't know, the last fifteen or twenty years - well what in all that time did we offer them? What kind of alternative? Have we offered them a person who understands and speaks their language? I don't think so"(Зе!Президент, 2019e).[44]

He likens the electoral situation of the past in Ukraine to an individual without pants. If you offer them a choice between several pairs of shoddy '70s pants, it is understandable that they settle for whichever. However, Zelenskyy continues, "this is a different class."[45] He goes on to say that people are no longer willing to settle, that they have questions, and that they demand answers. At present, he says, the younger generation has not voted because they do not think change is possible this way. But, he continues, even if they do not win, through creating a

[43] Selfie montages are relatively common, occurring in 3 episodes
[44] "У меня вообще уверенность, что они придут полная. А что за последние, там не знаю, 15 лет, не знаю, 20, там, лет, ну что в течении этого времени мы предлагали им? Какую альтернативу? Предлагали ли мы им человека, понимающего и говорящего на их языке? Я думаю, что нет."
[45] "Это – другой класс."

grassroots, participatory movement, they've already changed everything, they've already turned electoral politics "upside down (Зе!Президент, 2019е)."

In this monologue, Zelenskyy has constructed a salient narrative both about the difficulties of achieving substantive change, and the importance of his own campaign that likely rang true for young and older Ukrainians alike. He pinpoints why the younger generation is so disengaged and subsequently does not vote, because no politician has delivered anything of substance. Yet, he also articulates why the failures of the government were tolerated for so long; out of desperation as people simply tried to recover from the social, economic, and political upheaval of the past. Ukrainians were metaphorically stripped to their underwear, and took the worn-out pants out of sheer necessity. Now that people are demanding better, he recognizes the importance of a true representative of the people coming to power, one who will deliver the substantive change they are asking for. By articulating a narrative which pinpoints both the reasons why so many Ukrainians are so deeply disengaged and the reason why the problem has persisted, Zelenskyy is demonstrating that he genuinely gets it. He gets why trust has sunk so low, as someone once stripped down to his underwear himself, and he gets that the way to overcome this mistrust is to center the public; ostensibly through running a transparent, and participatory campaign outside the corrupt establishment. This moment encapsulates Zelenskyy's campaign philosophy, and asserts to the audience that merely by proving a campaign like his own is possible, he and his supporters have already put a dent in the corrupt establishment. In making this explicit in an aside with the audience, the message is that Zelenskyy is for real; that his professed desire to deliver substantive change is an authentic one.

Conclusion

My findings indicate that the image President Volodymyr Zelenskyy constructed and maintained on his campaign vlog, *Ze!President*, was that of a uniquely authentic Ukrainian patriot. His brand of patriotism was defined first by a markedly populist ideology. He posited that the root cause of Ukraine's social, economic, and political problems was a government corrupted by oligarchs and their employees, who governed according to their own business interests rather than their constituents' needs. This was a simple, repetitive theme with mass appeal in Ukraine given the political moment, when the populace had been disappointed by rampant corruption in each administration, even after waging two uprisings in protest. Further, he framed this message by creating a narrative in which the solution to this problem was a united Ukrainian people empowered by popular democracy. This narrative connects to the second facet of his patriotism, an embrace of a certain degree of cultural hybridity. Zelenskyy often emphasized his belief that there is no right or wrong type of Ukrainian citizen, and rejected the usual campaign rhetoric about which region is more culturally correct. Again, this simple and frequent theme likely carried broad appeal to the Ukrainian electorate who had come to regard the focus on culture as a way to divide the citizens and distract from more substantive issues. Zelenskyy made statements to this effect, and further framed this narrative by adopting the stance that Ukrainian culture, above all language, would take root naturally with the younger generations, becoming dominant gradually. According to this narrative, legal restrictions on Russian were unnecessary.

Zelenskyy's brand of patriotism may well have generated a certain amount of trust among the public, though I have argued here that it was the perceived authenticity of his image that made his trustworthiness so extreme. By weaving in elements of Zelenskyy's personal and professional life outside of the campaigning context, the Ze Team was reinforcing the perception

that the convictions Zelenskyy professed as a politician were consistent with Zelenskyy the person. Further, the credibility of Zelenskyy's image as a uniquely authentic patriot was made possible by the structure of his campaign. By airing an episodic documentary of the campaign *process* on YouTube, the Ze team effectively integrated the front and back stages of his political performance. The audience is given an apparent window into typically private moments in the campaign process, from deliberation on the issues to bearing witness to intimate private moments with Zelenskyy, such as moments of self doubt. Accordingly, because he is the candidate, the audience experiences the campaign from Zelenskyy's perspective, and much is revealed about him in the process. The implication of revealing both the front and back stages is that little is left hidden from the viewer, in terms of both the campaign and the man at its center.

There are two implications of these findings which warrant further discussion, and offer potential avenues for continued research. The first pertains to the general relationship between trust in government and the celebritization of politics. As observed by Loader et al., much of the literature on celebritization assumes that social media platforms are themselves undermining the fabric of democracy, cheapening sophisticated political discourse by enabling the public to fixate instead on the personal qualities of individual leaders. Such scholarship, however, fails to consider whether there are substantive political concerns fueling the increased interest in individual politicians and subsequent disinterest in traditional political institutions scholars have defined as celebritization.

In the case of Ukrainian electoral politics, the fascination with individual political leaders and their characteristics should not be understood as a mere consequence of a socially-mediated campaign, but rather, as a reaction to decades of rampant corruption and the inequality it enabled. Having been disappointed by each subsequent administration, Ukrainians eventually lost trust in the government and politicians at large. Given this widespread distrust, it follows that electorates will scrutinize candidates in greater detail for signs of trustworthiness.

They may analyze whatever media representations are available for cues of honesty, integrity, transparency, and ultimately, for authenticity. Social media like YouTube simply offer the candidate a reliable means of demonstrating the consistency in their personal and professional lives that is necessary for an authentic image. Socially-mediated campaigns may better be conceptualized as an outcome of disillusionment and distrust rather than the cause of celebritization. Further research should be conducted that investigates this relationship. There is a need for more research that examines the sources of mistrust from the voter's perspective. Ethnographic, interview, or survey-based studies could reveal much about the underlying reasons of political distrust, and what voters perceive to be authentic and why. Similarly, ethnographic examinations of the image-making process - ie, from the perspective of PR and communication teams, could shed light on the strategies that candidates use to generate an air of authenticity.

Ultimately, conceptualizing political celebritization as an outcome of distrust rather than a separate problem brought about by social media implies a more structural, and complex solution -- eliminating the causes of distrust. Despite the fact that Ukrainians have been consistently divided in electoral campaigns, citizens in this case were willing to unite around a candidate who they believed could do exactly that: fight corruption, and build a trustworthy government. However, as he has strayed further away from his proposed program, and failed to deliver on his many promises in the years since his election, trust in Zelenskyy has dropped dramatically. He has replaced many of the young reformers in his administration with established political elites, even, in one case, from the reviled Yanukovych administration. He made changes to the process by which judges are confirmed, throwing out a provision he campaigned on which specifies that new justices must be appointed by a panel of independent experts (Gorchinskaya, 2020c)**.** He made deals with some oligarchs to avoid stepping on the toes of others, despite promising to prosecute them at all costs. And most recently, he went back on a promise never to ban any TV networks, blocking three pro-Russian media outlets for spreading propaganda

(Mirovalev, 2021). Interestingly, while his YouTube vlog is still active, their documentary-like style has dissipated overtime. Now, most videos are short, pre-prepared statements of Zelenskyy standing in front of a flag. What does Zelenskyy's fall from favor mean for the people of Ukraine, and the future of their democracy? Will his failure to deliver on the issues that united the country lead to further divisions? Will the repeated failure to put in a dent in systemic corruption, improve the quality of government, and in turn, relieve the economic strain on so many Ukrainians lead to the collapse of democracy in Ukraine altogether?

These questions should be the focus of future studies in Ukraine. There is an abundance of research on the nature of social divides in Ukraine, but too few that engage with the quality of governance concerns that seem to be at their heart. Analysts too often assume that the divides and unrest in Ukrainian civil society are brought about by inherent differences between citizens. However, many scholars (Bilaniuk, 2017b; Giuliano, 2018; Sakwa, 2015; Sasse & Lackner, 2018; Toal, 2017; Zhukov, 2016; Zhurzhenko, 2014) argue that the divides are not inherent; rather, they may be economic rather than ethnic (Giuliano, 2018; Zhukov, 2016), and that even in war, many Ukrainians have evolved to embrace a certain amount of cultural hybridity and are tolerant of their nation's diversity (Bilaniuk, 2017a; Kulyk, 2018; Wanner, 2014). The findings of this study further show that social divisions in Ukraine are not insurmountable, rather, citizens were willing to unite around a common vision of statehood, one in which civilians are empowered through popular democratic policies and the needs of every citizen are met. In order to understand the quality of governance concerns that are at the heart of these problems, future research should more deeply examine the dynamics of systemic corruption in Ukraine.

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