

Verbal and Nonverbal Components of Political Addresses by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (wartime period)

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Abstract

The wartime period requires effective crisis management and strong leadership skills for its strategic regulation. In choosing to analyse the political address as a case study, we focus on its unique style and the level of support expressed by Ukrainian society, as evidenced by national polls and the number of followers on social media. It applies descriptive and analytical methods to examine the verbal and non-verbal components of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's political addresses during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research findings highlight the implications of the President's leadership style from both internal and external perspectives and how it is communicated through verbal and non-verbal aspects.

Keywords: language, war, Ukraine, politics, speech, Zelenskyy.

Introduction

Since the outset of the Russian military's full-scale invasion in 2022, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been addressing Ukrainians daily to convey his position and call on the people of Ukraine to take decisive action. In addition, foreign governments, their members of parliaments, politicians, and ordinary citizens are also addressed intending to encourage them to actively support Ukraine against Russian aggression. A sense of strong national unity and trust in government performance is also powered by the high assessment of presidential activity.

To have a comprehensive picture of the political situation in Ukraine and realise the impact of the government policy on the Ukrainian people, we refer to the results of the polls held by the Razumkov Center's sociological service conducted in cooperation with various partners during the period from December 2021 to December 2023 (Razumkov Centre 2023, Разумков Центр 2023). The survey displays a wide range of questions which help to receive a deep look into Ukrainian society before and during the first years of the full-scale war. To support our research with a profound

sociological background we will include one of the poll questions which focuses on the people’s trust in key Ukrainian politicians, officials and public figures. Among the public figures who were assessed during the survey, respondents most often expressed trust in V. Zelenskyy (71%), V. Kim (65%), D. Kuleba (56%), S. Prytula (55%), M. Podoliak (52%). As the focus of our paper is the political addresses by V. Zelenskyy, we only include the poll results connected with his figure:

Table 1: Poll on the Trust to President

	Distrust	Trust	Not aware	Hard to say	Balance of trust/distrust
Volodymyr Zelenskyy					
July–August 2021	61.0	32.6	0.4	6.1	-28.4
February–March 2023	9.9	84.9	0.5	4.7	75.0
May 2023	11.0	83.5	0.3	5.1	72.5
July 2023	13.6	80.8	0.6	4.9	67.2
September 2024	18.6	74.8	0.1	6.5	56.2
December 2023	23.4	70.7	0.3	5.6	47.3

Source: Razumkov Centre 2023

We have also referred to the President’s official social media pages, which are regularly updated two to three times daily. The number of subscribers and followers demonstrates the high interest of Ukrainian citizens in the President’s posts there (at present, there are 3.2 m followers on Facebook, 842 K in Telegram, and 1.4 m in Viber). Each post is also actively reacted to by the readers, adding an extra layer of audience involvement.

The invasion demands effective crisis management and strong leadership. The level of support expressed to the president of Ukraine evokes

the analysis of political discourse focused on studying his addresses to the nation, their communicative structure and verbal and non-verbal means to express the ideas. These are the reasons for the central focus of this paper in approaching two basic research questions. The first one relates to the phenomenon of his leadership style in communication and the second one focuses on verbal and non-verbal features of the political address.

Literature review

Since the outburst of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, most of the research on war discourses has studied the means of war coverage in different media (Umland 2019, Raza and Malik 2022, Lőrincz 2023). Investigation of English-language media searches for cognitive metaphors used in war representation summarises that the analysis results indicate that “the war in Ukraine is frequently viewed as a game or a battle between good and evil” (Petiy 2023: 203). Some authors have undertaken quantitative and qualitative methods on war discourse. The study carried out by Lőrincz (2023) applies corpus analysis in Eastern and Western English news releases to identify their main topics. The paper reveals that lemmas *Putin* and *Putin’s* predominantly appear in the subject and attribute positions among the collocates of the term *war*, while lemma *Zelenskyy* is more commonly found in the object position. She concludes that the syntactic pattern suggests that lemma *Putin* is often associated with the agent or instigator of the action (Lőrincz 2023). Some features of communication strategies and tactics of political speeches by the President are analysed by V.Yakymchuk and N.Lopatuk (2024) since the beginning of the Russian invasion of the territory of Ukraine. They identify and study the mechanisms of verbal realization of communication strategies and tactics in speeches by Volodymyr Zelenskyy as part of a political discourse.

Some other researchers approach political discourse in Ukraine from the perspective of leadership strategies and practices in times of crisis management (Clark and McQuade 2024, Olcott 2023, Demczuk 2023). According to the study by Don Olcott (2023), it is revealed that despite the depth of covering the leadership topic in literature, university leaders can adapt and/or replicate Zelenskyy’s leadership style that may potentially be applicable at their institutions as it is “a reminder that the human condition craves inspiration and genuine leadership” (Olcott 2023: 152).

There also have been several studies that investigate the ways how the president of Ukraine V. Zelenskyy and the president of Russia V. Putin are approached by media sources. The study by Raza and Malik (2022) utilises

BBC as a data source to compare the media representation of Putin and Zelenskyy with the tools of multimodal CDA. They conclude that BBC's profiles are not neutral and "represent Putin as rigid, vastly powerful and a threat, whereas Zelenskyy is shown as amiable but dauntless in the face of war and political strife" (Raza and Malik 2022: 148). A recent study by Chiluja and Ruzaitė (2024) examines the language of political conflict based on the war rhetoric of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Applying the methodology of critical discourse analysis they suggest that "conceptualizing the language of political conflict from the war rhetoric of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy shows that conflict language accentuates the polarization of identities and social actors through constant magnification of the 'evils' of the outgroup" (Chiluja and Ruzaitė 2024). The work by Gregić and Božić (2022) focuses on the main features of crisis management through verbal and non-verbal communication of both presidents.

The phenomenon of Zelenskyy leadership style

"The fight is here, I need ammunition, not a ride" Zelenskyy answered when offered an evacuation from Ukraine (Braithwaite 2022). This phrase has gone viral, is printed on T-shirts and mugs, and inspires the creation of hundreds of memes around the globe. Overnight, Volodymyr Zelenskyy became a hero on a global scale. "Zelenskyy personifies, from this moment on, a mythical David facing his Goliath (Putin)" (Pfleger 2022: 59). Named Time's 2022 Person of the Year the president is referred to as Churchill 2.0, because as the British prime minister who in his famous WWII radio address offered his people 'blood, toil, tears and sweat', he uses image and discourse as "weapons to mobilise, to instil courage, to keep morale up, a decisive factor in any conflict" (Fernández and Crespo 2022: 305).

His leadership is analysed in the frame of the Great Man Theory (Clark and McQuade 2024), or Bernard M. Bass's concept of idealized influence of transformational leadership, according to which the leader "encourages followers to act beyond their immediate interests through their idealized influence (charisma)" (Demczuk 2023: 330). He is even portrayed as the updated archetype of the classical hero since "all these stages of Zelenskyy's life are equated with the path of the classical hero who has to go through different cycles until he meets his destiny". As a reckless, young, dynamic, virile man in a kind of uniform operating from a secret location against his antagonist, he embodies the traits of an idealised hero (Pfleger 2022: 58). Others claim that Zelenskyy has captured "the world's imagination [because

se] he is one of us. A common man in an uncommon role in uncommon times” (Olcott 2023: 147).

Among the president's qualities, it is distinguished empathy, communication skills, calm under fire, adaptability and willingness to negotiate and compromise, who listens “to his NATO partners, to his military, to his citizens, to his enemies [... but also] he becomes razor sharp in his judgment and makes sound decisions against all odds” (Olcott 2023: 144-145). Many observers highlight his extreme heroism, and personal sacrifice for the sake of the nation: “Not only does he give inspiring speeches from his bunker, but against the advice of security to stay inside due to the danger of an attack, Zelensky leaves his hiding place and visits his soldiers on the battlefields and in hospitals, as well as places where Ukrainian forces found mass graves of civilians (Demczuk 2023: 333).

President Zelensky can create a shared identity and a sense of ‘community’, he is an example of a leader who shows high ethical conduct, a perception of confidence, and acts under a collective sense of mission. He achieves this primarily through daily communication with citizens. From the beginning of his tenure, Zelensky relied on direct communication with the public, also using social media channels and accounts. This relationship with the citizens was especially important during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when he was introducing decisions about the restrictions giving also practical tips for everyday life (Donaj and Wochelski 2022: 156). Throughout his electoral campaign referred to as “a clown nurtured by Russian showbiz”, due to his beginnings as a comedian and actor (Kaninskij 2022, cited in: Clark and Mcquade 2024: 108) he skilfully uses his acting skills that have become particularly important in the face of Russian attack. Since the 24th, of February when the president imposed martial law throughout the country, not only the number but also the model of his addresses has changed. His communication strategy characterised by openness, accessibility, constant presence through social networks and willingness to share information builds confidence in him and simultaneously signals the content of his communication to be reliable and trustworthy (Gregić and Božić 2023: 104).

Verbal and nonverbal component of political addresses

Zelensky addresses the nation in a video format daily late at night. During the day President also reports about the main activities he holds with national or foreign partners on his pages on social media which are regularly updated from two to three times daily. The number of subscribers and fol-

lowers demonstrates the high interest of the Ukrainian citizens in the President's posts there (at the moment there are 3.2 m followers on Facebook, 842 K in Telegram, and 1.4 m in Viber). Each post is also actively reacted by the readers adding an extra layer of audience involvement.

Addresses by Volodymyr Zelensky, in the context of political discourse in Ukraine at the times of full-scale war, refer to a specific genre of communication where the president delivers a formal speech to the nation. They serve as a means for the leader to communicate the government's vision, policies, and plans to the public. These speeches are typically carefully crafted and prepared, combining persuasive language, rhetorical devices, and emotional appeals to captivate and engage the audience. They are often amplified through media channels, reaching wider audiences through live broadcasts, online streaming, or social media platforms. These platforms allow for greater dissemination and engagement with the address, enabling individuals to share their reactions and discuss the content in real time. The video often starts with an introduction, including titles or captions identifying the event, location, and date. There might be accompanying music or graphics to set the tone. Depending on the nature of the video, visual aids such as slides, charts, or video clips may be incorporated to support Zelensky's points or provide additional context to the audience. There may be moments of audience interaction or engagement in live and online speeches and addresses. This could include applause from the audience, responses to questions, or reactions to Zelensky's statements. Throughout the video, various filmmaking techniques such as camera angles, editing, music, and visual effects may be used to enhance the presentation and maintain audience engagement. The overall goal is to effectively communicate Zelensky's message and connect with viewers on a personal or emotional level.

As a former comedian and actor, President brings a unique communication style to his addresses. Transparency and openness are the main features of his addresses. He often employs gratitude, empathy, and directness to connect with the Ukrainian people on a personal level, making his speeches stand out from traditional political rhetoric. The significance of speech opening through greetings derives from some informal cultural fillers which set the tone and content of the message. The president usually starts his address with a simple greeting 'Fellow Ukrainians' or 'Dear Ukrainians!'. Although "[U]nlike Putin, who recognizes his 'comrade officers', Zelensky is aware that his address is directed not only to the 'citizens of Ukraine' but also to the entire world" (Chiluwa and Ruzaitė 2024: 8).

He finishes his address with a national salute 'Glory to Ukraine' [Slava Ukraini! Слава Україні!], which is always accompanied by a specific culturally shaped response 'To the heroes – glory' [Heroyam Slava! Героям

слава!]. This formula became popular after Ukraine declared Independence in 1991 and is a symbol of Ukrainian sovereignty and resistance to foreign aggression. It is also the battle cry of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. During the war against Russia, this greeting has taken on a special meaning for Ukrainians and the international community. It is a kind of war cry, “a formula that is emblematic and well-established in the cultural memory of Ukrainians” (Pfleger 2022: 6). By using it the president builds a chain of rapport with the civilians, militaries, and the international community. He is seen as a leader who speaks from the heart and genuinely cares about the concerns of ordinary citizens, which resonates strongly with many Ukrainians.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy has perfected his ability to communicate effectively, not just through words but also through powerful non-verbal cues. His non-verbal communication has significantly shaped his public image and perception of Ukraine's leadership, especially during the ongoing conflict with Russia. While delivering his addresses, Volodymyr Zelenskyy reports on daily experiences from Kyiv, and in this way, he also affirms that he is present to the suffering of his people. With privileged access to information, he denounces the brutal and constant aggression giving details from the battlefield. Zelenskyy frequently records messages from undisclosed locations or the streets of Kyiv, reinforcing his image as a leader who refuses to abandon his people. The choice of location itself becomes a powerful non-verbal signal of resistance and resilience. The audience is given an almost intimate experience with closed images of the phone and a melancholic, almost poetic tone of voice that makes it clear what he feels and experiences. He also sends a message of hope to the Ukrainian soldiers, “you see, we are making good progress, we must persevere, we will defend Ukraine” (Gregić and Božić 2023: 104). It produces a soothing effect on the audience and carries the meaning that the president is still in control and present in the besieged country.

His body language is also important while addressing the nation as it is strictly controlled still having a feeling of relaxed manner. This effect is achieved by using open hand gestures, which reflect transparency and trustworthiness. These gestures invite the audience to engage and listen, reinforcing his messages. His hands are often close to his chest, which in many cultures is associated with honesty and sincerity. Other gestures he uses are opening his palms or putting up a clenched fist to express the strength of the nation and its unity (Gregić and Božić 2023: 104-105).

Voice control and body language are part of his communication strategy. Since the outburst of the war, he appears only in an olive-green T-shirt or hooded sweatshirt having the symbol of Ukraine on his chest. Zelenskyy's

choice to frequently wear military-style or casual clothing during the war, instead of formal suits, is a powerful non-verbal statement. It reflects solidarity with soldiers and civilians, conveying that he is “one of them” and dedicated to the nation's defence. In this way, he emphasizes the extraordinary nature of the situation and sends a message that he shares the fate of the Ukrainians compelled to fight. The picture is completed by puffy eyes, a tired face and a one-day beard of the president, which confirms that “he works hard and has no plans to abandon his compatriots”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of V. Zelenskyy's political addresses confirmed our assumptions about their crucial role in mobilising the Ukrainian people and fostering a sense of national unity during the war. Based on a national opinion poll and the number of followers on social media platforms, it is shown that he is a leader trusted by society, who can convince others to undertake challenging tasks and who is willing to take risks. The communicative significance of the speech is often used to rally support for the government's actions and initiatives, thus fostering solidarity among citizens. Zelenskyy's non-verbal communication is carefully crafted to convey strength, resilience, empathy and solidarity - crucial qualities for a leader in times of national crisis. Moreover, his activities are effective with Ukrainians and volunteers, as more than twenty thousand people from 52 nations joined the Ukrainian armed forces in the fight against the Russian army (Demczuk 2023: 334). His ability to connect verbally and non-verbally with both Ukrainian and international audiences enhanced his effectiveness as a leader during difficult times. Overall, Zelenskyy's addresses are important both for their content, their means of communication, and their impact on shaping public opinion and mobilising society for the defence of the country.

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