

The Political Landscape in Ukraine in the Context of 2019-Elections: Populism and External Threats

Abstract

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, which began on 24th February 2022, had been preceded by a long hybrid war, continuing since 2014. The 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections in Ukraine took place in the context of Ukraine's sovereignty being violated and a part of its territory being annexed. Russia's war against Ukraine was one of the most powerful catalysts of increasing electoral populism. The election campaign was characterized by populism and public confrontation between Petro Poroshenko (the incumbent president) and Volodymyr Zelenskyi. Candidates used all possible means to mobilize support from the electorate, including promises of a quick end to hostilities in the East of the country (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where Russian troops were occupying part of the territory). After Zelensky's victory, populist rhetoric persisted. In this article, the author examines the electoral campaigns of 2019 in the light of a populist influence on the electorate's choice and security threats to Ukraine before the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022. The author defines populism as a major threat to Ukraine's national security and the future of democracy.

Keywords

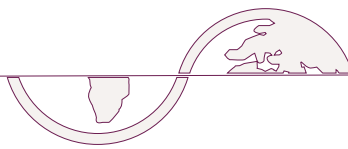
populism, elections, security, hybrid war, Russo-Ukrainian war, democracy, information, disinformation.

Abstrakt

Pełnoskalową wojnę Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie, która rozpoczęła się 24 lutego 2022 r., poprzedziła długotrwała wojna hybrydowa trwająca od roku 2014. Wybory prezydenckie i parlamentarne w Ukrainie w roku 2019 odbyły się w warunkach naruszenia suwerenności państwowej i aneksji części terytorium Ukrainy. Wojna Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie stała się jednym z potężnych katalizatorów wzrostu populizmu wyborczego. Kampania wyborcza naznaczona była populizmem i publiczną konfrontacją między Petrem Poroszenką (urzędującym prezydentem) a Wołodymyrem Zełenskim. Kandydaci sięgnęli po wszystkie możliwe środki, aby zmobilizować poparcie wyborców, między innymi obiecując szybkie zakończenie działań wojennych na wschodzie kraju (w obwodach donieckim i ługańskim, gdzie rosyjskie wojska okupowały część terytorium). Po zwycięstwie Zełenskiego retoryka populistyczna pozostała niezmienną. W artykule autorka omawia kampanie wyborcze roku 2019 w świetle wpływu populizmu na wybory i zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa Ukrainy przed pełnoskalową inwazją Rosji. Autorka uznaje populizm za jedno z głównych zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa państwa ukraińskiego i przyszłości demokracji.

Słowa kluczowe

populizm, wybory, bezpieczeństwo, wojna hybrydowa, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, demokracja, informacja, dezinformacja



Introduction

The year 2025. It has been eleven years since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Back in 2014, Moscow annexed the territory of the Ukrainian Autonomous Republic of Crimea and launched a hybrid war against Ukraine. The outbreak of hostilities on the eastern border and Russia's actual seizure of districts in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, followed by the establishment of an occupation regime there, radically impacted the geopolitical situation in the world, especially in Europe. Analogies between the events in Crimea and those of 1938 (the Anschluss of Austria) or 1939 (the partition of Czechoslovakia) prompt reflection not only on the cyclical nature of history but also on the possible consequences of the Kremlin's aggressive policy against Ukraine for Europe and the world as a whole.

It quickly became obvious that Russia had launched an active hybrid war not just against Ukraine but against the entire democratic world. Its goal was to erode the very foundations of democracy and devalue democratic institutions and processes. The toolbox Russia used in this hybrid war included the fueling of populist public sentiment in countries worldwide, from the European Union to the United States of America. Moscow spread disinformation about public sentiments in Catalonia and Scotland, propelled separatist aspirations, and actively used populist slogans to discredit democratic values, including by means of modern information and communication technologies. At this time, right-wing populism in France was also financially supported by Moscow. In 2017, Marine Le Pen received EUR 9 million from a Russian bank to back Russia's policy toward Ukraine (LB.ua, 2017). In addition to the Covid pandemic, which significantly affected the dynamics of socio-economic and socio-political processes in the EU and Ukraine, Russian hybrid aggression became an additional factor influencing EU citizens' political orientations, which is reflected in the outcomes of parliamentary and presidential elections in individual EU member states and the European Parliament.

In Ukraine, the Revolution of Dignity, which began in 2013, turned the country by 180°: the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, and Petro Poroshenko came to power with the support of the majority of the Ukrainian electorate. His main slogan was "to live in a new way," but the meanings that the general public attributed to it were not always consistent with the realities around them. Therefore, everyone, from supporters to opponents of Poroshenko, pinned

their hopes on the 2019 elections. The Russian side was highly active in deploying all available resources and mechanisms to influence the Ukrainian electorate, seeking to fragment it and "reintegrate" it into the "Russian world" framed in Soviet terms. Zelenskyy's victory was supposed to help establish a quick and sustainable peace, but three years later, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine whose aim was to destroy Ukrainian statehood altogether.

The Russo-Ukrainian war is ongoing, not only on land, sea and air. Information is one of its most potent areas. The battles fought here are often invisible, but they are mighty and their consequences are felt across Europe. In the recent two years alone, the democratic world has watched the elections to the European Parliament with bated breath, and the presidential and parliamentary elections in EU member states were no less tense. The recent election in Romania has shown that the rise in the ratings of right-wing and left-wing populists is not accidental. In addition to the relatively conducive political environment, including the Russo-Ukrainian war, the war in the Middle East, and the deteriorating socio-economic situation, one must consider Russia's interest in and considerable contribution to undermining the EU's stability.

With the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war now in its fourth year, the challenges and threats to the security of the European and global community are likely to snowball. However, if there is a consolidated response to authoritarianism, which is primarily sought by populist radicals of the right-wing persuasion, democracy will reassert its right to exist.

Under these circumstances, the situation in and around Ukraine plays an important role in the context of changes on the map of hostilities and the Russo-Ukrainian front line. Ukraine can be an example of a concerted civic response to attempts to establish authoritarianism, both in its modern history and in its current struggle against Russian aggression.

This article aims to analyze changes in Ukraine's geopolitical landscape after the 2019 elections. Its argument offers a retrospective account of the 2019 presidential election, describes the distinctive features of Ukraine's socio-political development from 2019 to 2022, outlines changes in the socio-political environment following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, and discusses populism as a means of communication and Russia's tool of influence on the resilience of Ukrainian society.



Populism: Understanding the Concept

In today's technological and information landscape, we are increasingly confronted with the notion of "populism." While there is no single approach to understanding populism, the phenomenon has undeniably entered and gained a foothold in the political sphere both as political rhetoric and as a strategy of power (Yarosh, n.d.). Populism as a political phenomenon considerably predates the term itself, particularly in its modern interpretation. In the 19th century, left-wing political populism garnered popularity in the U.S. and Russia, and in the 20th century, it continued to gain supporters in various parts of the world: from Argentina under Perón's rule to the Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany after its reunification in 1990. In the 21st century, populism as a political ideology has been embraced by the right wing, for example, the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Romanian Alliance for the Unification of Romanians (AUR).

British philosopher Isaiah Berlin's comparison of populism to Cinderella's slipper prompts the observation that although various theories of and approaches to populism have been crafted, the conceptualization of populism is still work in progress. At the same time, researchers propose a list of populism's signature elements, including the sacralization of the people, insistence on there being a threat to the people, statism, centralized leadership, emotionally-loaded xenophobia, racism and/or anti-Semitism, the promotion of an "organic society," extensive reliance on conspiracy theories, a religious-like aura with a mandatory nostalgic view of the past, and anti-elitism. (Kiianka, 2015).

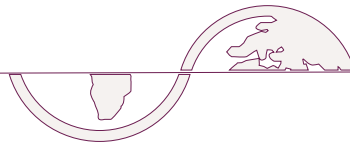
At the turn of the millennium, populism gained considerable support across segments of the population in countries worldwide. Whether left-wing or right-wing, populism invokes the people as the primary arbiter of political processes. Anti-elitism is a derivative of populism, with the populists insisting that the elite's arrogance and selfishness produce situations that put the people at risk. The elite-caused threats can purportedly be addressed by increasing public participation in political decision-making processes, particularly through instruments of direct democracy. This can only be done by a political leader who speaks in a language intelligible to the general public, without intermediaries, giving the "people" a sense of significance and influence. On the whole, political populism is "a promise/strategy that appeals to the general population and responds to a social demand" (Popovych, 2019). This seemingly generalized de-

inition explains why politicians who use various, sometimes opposed, slogans are referred to as populists. Understanding the population's needs and demands and presenting corresponding proposals in an attractive form are greatly facilitated by modern information and communication technologies, including artificial intelligence, on which any politician can capitalize. Unsurprisingly, the chain "promise–power–fulfilment of the promise" is interrupted at the stage of "power" under such conditions. After all, we would be hard pressed to find a populist who actually seeks to satisfy the interests and needs of his or her voters. This is usefully illuminated by Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, which emphasizes that populism is impossible in a society where all individual demands are met. Yet a society in which all the demands of individual groups are satisfied is also impossible; no system can possibly satisfy all the demands as they are often mutually contradictory. The accumulation of unsatisfied demands produces a gap between the institutional system and the community. Because government cannot respond to the community's demands, it loses legitimacy. As the people's demands are constantly at odds with the authorities' actions, contradictions and misunderstandings persist (Laclau, 2005).

In his theory, Laclau (2005) also explains that different population groups' diverse and sometimes conflicting demands generate a "populist identity" and a chain of equivalences. He points out that populism is existentially abstract and vague because otherwise it would not be able to combine contradictory demands in a populist chain and forge a unity that did not exist before.

In the 21st century, populism has developed new properties and is actually turning into a tool of constant communication between politicians and society. In recent decades, the number of governments with populist political actors in power has almost doubled. As a result, the number of people living in countries led by at least partly populist leaders increased to more than 2 billion in 2022 (from 120 million in 2005) (Zaslav'ska, Posvistak, & Nalimova, 2022).

Populism can take various forms, ranging from discursive to political strategies. Yet common to all cases is a charismatic leader capable of mobilizing society to act (or to refrain from action). Populist political leaders can use any style: tough and authoritative, condescending, or soft, but their rhetoric always aims to produce emotional involvement of the electorate, who will support their candidacy in the election and vote for them. Discursive populism both triggers and intensifies antagonism between opposing ideologemes (for and against the people) and



uses evaluative judgements to explain the struggle for power in terms of the victory of the strongest (who, by default, should be the populist leader). As a political strategy, populism mobilizes the electorate and promotes the idea of social unity, which should lead to electoral victory.

At the end of the 2010s, the so-called new populism emerged, characterized by anti-elitism, offering simple solutions as a response to “ordinary people’s” appeals, disdaining the state and, accordingly, denying serious problems in public administration, promoting the “us”/“them” opposition, and disregarding expertise. This exemplifies a combination of discursive populism and political strategy.

In addition, the active use of digital technologies has greatly facilitated the spread of populist slogans in the general population. Importantly, “new populism” is also about communication between government and citizens. While it can contribute to increased citizen participation in political decision-making, it can also erode democracy, increase social tension, and spread disinformation and propaganda.

Timothy Snyder has defined populism as “democracy minus the future” (Snyder, 2019). The current socio-political upheavals corroborate the validity of his observation as the effects of promises of easy solutions to problems, coupled with an ostrich-like approach to real challenges and threats, force the democratic world to seek practical tools to counter modern populism as a destroyer of democracy.

The impacts of populism are rapidly increasing as seen over the recent decade in elections in various countries globally, including in Ukraine on the eve of the large-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. This war has undoubtedly redrawn the dynamic of socio-political developments in Europe and profoundly affected the global security architecture. Along with it, populism as a political discourse and strategy has entrenched itself in contemporary political practice, in particular as a hybrid weapon in Russia’s war against Ukraine, becoming a significant threat to democracy.

The threat that the Russo-Ukrainian war poses to democracy does not lie in the military and political disruption of global politics as such; it primarily comes from the promotion of populist politicians and the fanning of the populist sentiment wherever Russia sees its interests and where its technological and financial capacities allow it. Populism, as a political strategy and a discourse, is today the basis of the Russian authorities’ communication not only with their own society but also with the international community. This is particularly true in the context of spreading the ideology of the Russian world and

mobilizing populations to support Russia. The threat posed to democracy by the dissemination of populist promises and ideas became more evident after in the wake Russia’s wide-scaled invasion of Ukraine.

The Forerunner: Or, Ukraine in the Context of the 2014 Presidential Election

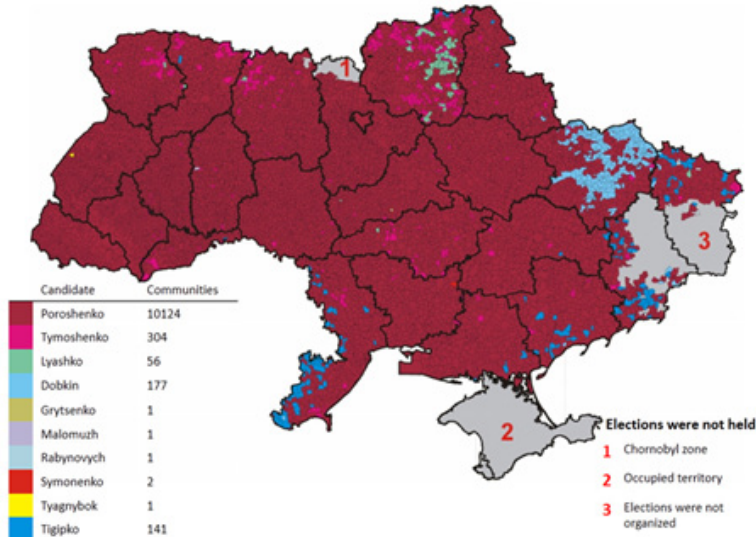
From 2013 to 2019, Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine was implemented in at least three directions: national Ukrainian, European/global, and internal Russian. What these three strands shared was the systematic discrediting of the Ukrainian government and state and the undercutting of Ukraine’s status as a political actor. The pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich’s flight from Ukraine to Russia was also used to discredit, first, the 2014 elections themselves and later the newly elected president and parliament. In addition to information weapons, Russia also used physical weapons. The deployment of troops, first to the Crimean Autonomy and later to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, posed a real threat to the existence of Ukraine as a state. Already on 13th April 2014, Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council adopted a decision “On urgent measures to overcome the terrorist threat and preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine.” On the following day, 14th April, the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) began. When deciding to launch the ATO, the then-acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov said: “We will not allow Russia to repeat the Crimean scenario in the eastern region of Ukraine” (Duka, 2025). However, despite attempts to force Russian militants to lay down their arms, this was not achieved before the 2014 presidential election.

The first presidential election campaign following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine took place under entirely new conditions for Ukrainian society. It was held amid Russia’s undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine, which resulted in the immediate loss of territorial integrity. The annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear for the future, which had a direct impact on the course and outcome of the election. Nevertheless, the electoral map of Poroshenko’s support is unique in showing that for the first (and so far only) time, Ukrainian citizens, regardless of their geographical location, supported one and the same candidate.



Snap elections of the President of Ukraine | 25 May 2014

Results in communities: winning candidates



Map 1. Results of the 2014 presidential election in Ukraine (second round) (<https://socialdata.org.ua/en/new-political-landscape-of-ukraine-geographical-peculiarities-of-presidential-and-parliamentary-elections-of-2014/>)

The common motive behind this choice was people's desire for a rapid end to the anti-terrorist operation, the restoration of peace, and Ukraine's quick integration with the EU, with all the benefits of EU membership. Probably in response to the electorate's expectations, on 26th May, the day after his victory, Poroshenko said: "The anti-terrorist operation cannot and will not last for 2–3 months. It should and will last for hours" (Semenova, 2020). However, this promise remained a promise only, inscribed in the annals of Ukraine's political history; Poroshenko could not fulfil it due to objective circumstances. In April 2018, the ATO was reformatted into the Joint Forces' Operation. In August 2018, while already in office, Poroshenko apologized to the citizens for "the hope that did not come true. [...] for a promise that did not come true" (Semenova, 2020).

The Year 2019: Security Challenges and the Presidential Election

From 2014 to 2019, Ukraine made significant progress towards European integration, launching a number of reforms, among which the decentralization reform was the most successful one, establishing new united territorial communities and reforming the state's administrative and territorial structure. However, many problems and challenges remained, with the ongoing war in the eastern part of the country being the gravest concern for

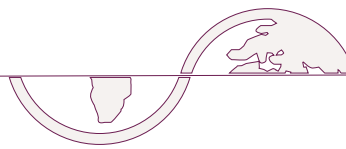
the citizens. Carried out by three sociological companies (the Centre for Social and Marketing Research "SOCIS," the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology [KIIS], and the Razumkov Centre), a sociological survey on "Ukraine on the Eve of the 2019 Presidential Election" showed that the war in eastern Ukraine was considered the most pressing issues by most respondents (61.2 %) (SOCIS, 2019). Security concerns, both individual and collective, were a priority for the population and required a response from the candidates for the state's highest office. The election campaign brought such responses.

According to the sociological data, the following most common socioeconomic problems included low wages/pensions (53.7%), high utility tariffs (52.7%), and rising prices (28.9%) (SOCIS, 2019). These worries were also reflected in the agendas of presidential candidates and their political bases during the parliamentary elections.

Zelenskyy and Poroshenko were the top two presidential candidates in the ratings, with the majority of respondents ready to vote for them. Despite this, significantly fewer respondents were convinced of Zelenskyy's victory; he only scored third after Poroshenko and Tymoshenko in such predictions (SOCIS, 2019). The 2019 election campaign in Ukraine was characterized by discursive populism. Presidential hopefuls promised their electorate "everything" and "immediately after the election." The rampancy of unfulfilled promises in Ukrainian politics prompted a petition to introduce strict criminal liability for failure to fulfil political promises. If the petition was not signed by enough people to make it eligible for mandatory consideration, it certainly drew the public's attention to the issue on the eve of the presidential election (Bohaychuk, 2019).

Both Poroshenko and Zelenskyy made unrealistic promises to their electorate, yet they differed in their approaches to identifying the electorate's demands and responses to them and in defining the priorities to be addressed. In his campaign, Poroshenko emphasized patriotism and Ukrainians' desire of to preserve Ukraine and restore the country's territorial integrity. For example, he declared: "Ukraine will never go to any bargaining or underhanded agreements. And Crimea will be returned to Ukraine [...]. We will liberate Crimea" (Barkar, 2019). However, in light of his unfulfilled promise to end the ATO quickly in 2014, the public's trust in his words was not high.

For his part, Zelenskyy projected the image of "a people's president." This was facilitated by his recognizability as an actor and showman. The movie *Servant of the People*, released shortly before the 2019 elections, only helped establish his popularity



and build trust in him as someone who knows the needs of the people. In the eyes of a significant proportion of citizens, he was “one of their own” and “just like me.” Therefore, he was entrusted with the critical task of breaking the corrupt power machine and opening opportunity for participation in governance to every citizen. As a response to this public demand (and in the context of the image he created), Zelenskyy invited his electorate to “work with him to develop the action program of the future president and his team: ‘We will draw up the agenda together with you [...]. So, step number one: please write down the five main problems of Ukraine that concern you’” (Barkar, 2019).

In the second round, both candidates launched an unprecedented struggle for the electorate’s attention. For the first time, Ukraine watched a debate of two presidential candidates at the country’s largest stadium, the Olympic National Sports Complex. It was highly theatrical and became the main election show for the entire country (Zelenski Prezydent, 2019). In their attempt to please the electorate, the presidential hopefuls turned their debate into a political joust, each believing that he was superior to the other.

The 2019 election was won by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who became president of Ukraine. His victory was impressive: 73.22% of voters chose him against 24.45% of votes for Petro Poroshenko (LB.ua, 2019). Yet this time, the map of Ukraine was not of the same color, although the overall level of support for Zelenskyy was and has remained remarkable:

April 2019 Ukrainian Presidential Election Results
(Second Round at the Oblast Level)

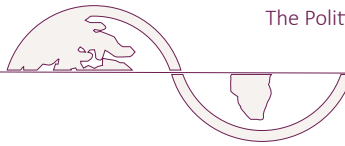


Map 2. April 2019, the results of the presidential election in Ukraine (the second round) (<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine%20Elections%20Update%202020.pdf>)

The 2019 Parliamentary Election in Ukraine: The Victory of Populism and Anti-Record Participation

On 21st July 2019, a snap parliamentary election was held in Ukraine as the newly elected president had terminated parliament’s powers. The main reasons for this were the low level of trust in the Verkhovna Rada and the absence of a coalition since 2016. A total of 22 political groupings took part in the election. Most of their agendas contained elements of demagoguery and populism. Symptomatically, “against” in various combinations was the most common word used in the election campaign: against “the old political system, the system of corruption, lies and lawlessness” (“Servant of the People”), against “corruption,” “chaos” and “separation of Ukrainians” (“European Solidarity”), against “people who commit major crimes and rob the country” and the “impunity of high-ranked corrupt officials” (“Voice”), against “the cultural policy of the previous government” and “the policy of discrimination,” etc. (Zaslavs’ka, Posvistak, & Nalimova, 2022). The victory of the presidential party—“Servant of the People”—might not be impressive in terms of the percentage (43.9%), but it was enough to form a mono-majority in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, taking 254 of 450 seats. For comparison, “Petro Poroshenko’s European Solidarity won 8.9% of the vote in these elections, while the pro-Russian OPFL (Opposition Platform for Life / Опозиційна платформа за життя) won 11.5%. At the same time, the voter turnout in the election was record-low, with only 49.8% of the citizens going to the polls (Dzhulay, 2019). This was the lowest level in all the years of Ukraine’s independence.

The reformatting of state-power relations went on until 2022. The period was characterized by the new president and his team’s monopolization of power and influence on the bodies of authority. As Razumkov Center analysts reported: “the tendency to create a single center of state decision-making around the president has led to the levelling of the constitutional role of the Verkhovna Rada as the parliament of a democratic country, to the actual loss of independence of the Cabinet of Ministers with its activities being unconstitutionally subordinated to the Office of the President of Ukraine” (Razumkov Centre, 2021). Before Russia’s large-scale war against Ukraine began, Ukraine had basically established the “presidential” model of government. Moreover, although Zelenskyy’s failure to fulfil his election promises seriously dented the public’s trust in him, it did cause his absolute loss. Despite dissatisfaction with the non-fulfilment of election promises and the overall situation in the country,



Zelenskyy enjoyed more support than any other leading politician, according to a public opinion poll at the end of 2021. Paradoxically, the level of trust in Zelenskyy exceeded the level of trust in his political base, the Servant of the People party while the level of trust in the European Solidarity party exceeded the level of trust in Poroshenko, its political leader (KIIS, 2021). The relevant statistics are shown in Table 1

Candidate	Trust rate	Political party	Trust rate
Volodymyr Zelenskyi	20.2%	Servant of the People	12.7%
Petro Poroshenko	14.7%	European Solidarity	13.7%

Table 1. Trust ratings of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Petro Poroshenko, and their political parties in 2021

The results of the following survey confirmed the positive dynamic of trust in Poroshenko’s political party, European Solidarity, and Poroshenko himself as president. At the same time, the level of trust in both Zelenskyy and his political base was decreasing (Table 2) (KIIS, 2022).

Candidate	Trust rate	Political party	Trust rate
Volodymyr Zelenskyi	19.1%	Servant of the People	11.7%
Petro Poroshenko	16.6%	European Solidarity	15.5%

Table 2. Trust ratings of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Petro Poroshenko, and their political parties in 2022

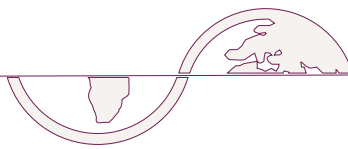
On the eve of Russia’s large-scale offensive against Ukraine, the situation in the country was marked by a growing social distrust in the government and its institutions, tensions over the threat of Russia’s military invasion, and the government’s policy of reassurance, which evoked mixed reactions in citizens. The situation at the turn of 2022 was critical: the level of trust in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the government stood at 11% and 14%, respectively, as of December 2021 (KIIS, 2024). The lack of significant changes in the economic situation, the stalling of reforms, and openly populist initiatives, such as the Presidential University, the Green Country project, and cashback for buying Ukrainian products, caused at least some people to misinterpret the loss of territorial integrity and the threat of Russian invasion, especially in light of the ongoing hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. The Armed Forces of Ukraine remained, in a sense, a guaran-

tor of stability, with Ukrainian citizens’ trust in them (72 %), exceeding their trust in the church (51%), the media (32%), and even voluntary organizations (68%) in December 2021 (KIIS, 2024).

External Populism as an Unaccounted-for Threat to National Security

In addition to internal populism, Ukraine and Ukrainians faced external populism. By external populism I mean Russia’s information offensive against Ukraine geared to discrediting the Ukrainian state in the eyes of Ukrainian citizens and the world. From 2014 to 2022, Russia was actively and consistently spreading disinformation narratives that demeaned the Revolution of Dignity and Euromaidan, Poroshenko and his team, and later Zelenskyy and his team. If Poroshenko and Zelenskyy embraced diametrically different positions and approaches, they were united by Russia’s attitude to them and their pursuits. During the 2019 elections, Zelenskyy’s electorate believed that his election as president would produce mutual understanding and open the possibility of dialogue between Ukraine and Russia, but this belief was dispelled shortly after the election. Zelenskyy’s pre-election call to “just stop shooting” did not work, and one year later, he explained that he had talked of the Russian side and not of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. “If the other side just stopped shooting, everything would be over,” he said (Donbas. Realyi, 2020).

Instead, Russia systematically accused the Ukrainian side of violating the Minsk agreements, emphasized its own desire for peace and Ukraine’s unwillingness to make concessions, and talked of the external governance of Ukraine and the corruption of the Ukrainian authorities, all this in the Ukrainian media space for the Ukrainian consumer. The most common Russian narratives, such as “Russia does not need the war” and “escalation is the work of Ukraine, which also violates the Minsk agreements,” aimed to debase Ukraine in the eyes of both Ukrainians and the West (IMI, 2020). These and similar anti-Ukrainian and populist narratives were disseminated in Ukraine by the traditional and digital media, including the 112.Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK TV channels, owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian politician and godfather of Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation. Importantly, the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) decided to close these TV channels in 2021, during Zelenskyy’s term in office, before the outbreak of a large-scale war with Russia, (Komarova, 2021).



That decision sparked a public debate, in which human and civil rights were invoked as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Ukraine has ratified. However, the decision remained unchanged. In my view, this played a positive role in clearing the Ukrainian information space of Russian disinformation and populism. At the same time, to compensate for this limitation, Russia increased its activity in social media, especially Telegram channels.

The Russian side persistently and actively worked to foster negative attitudes to Ukraine. Its efforts in this regard were considerably intensified in the run-up to the large-scale invasion. I believe that the biggest threats to Ukrainian statehood in 2021 included:

- 1) escalation of social tensions in the country and dissatisfaction with the actions of the authorities;
- 2) the threat of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army; and
- 3) the risk of Ukraine being geopolitically isolated in fight against the Kremlin's armed aggression.

While the former threat was internal, the latter two were external. They were caused by

- a) Russia's aggressive imperial policy,
- b) the lack of a national development strategy for Ukraine, and
- c) the Ukrainian authorities' lack of understanding of the geopolitical situation in the early 21st century.

The Ukrainian authorities' position and behavioral model regarding the potential threat of a large-scale invasion confused and even irritated some Western partners. For example, the Ukrainian president's warning of the likelihood of a Russian offensive did make the U.S. respond as expected. Even after the start of the large-scale invasion, Ukrainian-American relations were conflicted to an extent (Tysyachnyy, 2023). This impacted the process of providing the necessary assistance to Ukraine in the war with Russia.

On the eve of the Russian offensive, Moscow used the very idea of war to legitimize its military aggression against Ukraine and to build and consolidate other countries' populations' trust in Moscow. Importantly, the reasons for waging the war were framed as so "transparent," "reasonable," and "understandable" that they found some support and even members of the North Atlantic Alliance were inclined to try and understand the Kremlin's position and find a possible compromise. For example, the notions that "NATO promised Russia not to expand further," that "Ukraine's membership in NATO poses a threat to Russia" and that "Ukraine's non-alignment and non-supply of weapons will 'stabilize' the situation" elicited some support and significantly

influenced many people's perception of the situation in Ukraine, with this attitude also shared by decision-making hubs.

Obviously, in times of war, populism as a political phenomenon takes on special characteristics. It can be a crucial communication tool for government and society and effectively cause distortions in the political system of a given country. As an aggressor's offensive weapon, it can lead to:

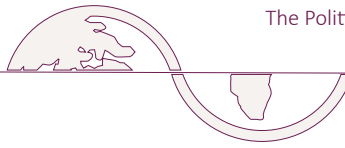
- a) the population of the country under attack, causing its maladjustment and, accordingly, internal weakening and loss of resistance, which will ultimately lead to defeat;
- b) the partners of the country under attack, weakening their support and, accordingly, reducing its potential to resist the aggressor.

As of today, Russia has failed to achieve either of these aims, but it persists in its efforts to divide Ukrainian society and sow discord among Ukraine's allies. At the same time, the Ukrainian experience demonstrates that a robust civil society grounded in democratic values not only blunts the destructive influence of populism but also undermines its crude methods of operation, in this way creating opportunities to preserve democracy not only in Ukraine but also far beyond its borders. The experience gained by the international community in the Russo-Ukrainian war is invaluable for developing effective tools to counter populism as a political practice, given its ruinous effects on democracy.

Conclusions

The 2019 elections in Ukraine were a manifestation of the so-called new populism, which resulted in the practical reconfiguration of the state power relations and the subsequent concentration of power in the hands of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine. Despite his failure to fulfil his election promises, the level of the public's trust in Zelenskyy remained quite high from 2019 to February 2022 as compared to other politicians' rankings. At the same time, his political party, Servant of the People, lost ground to Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity in 2021. The personalization of power was a response to the public demand for a strong and charismatic leader ready to take responsibility for what was happening in the country. Notably, Zelenskyy and his team stood up to the Russian large-scale invasion in Kyiv. Contrary to the Russia-disseminated news, he did not flee the country, but began a new stage of his presidency as the leader of a belligerent state fighting an existential war for its survival. His trust rating immediately soared and, if fluctuating, has remained high to this day (in May 2025, he was trusted by 74% of the respondents, according to a KIIS poll) (KIIS, 2025).

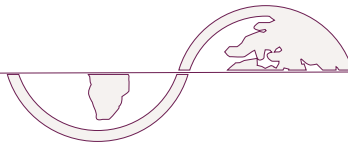
The threat of Russia's military invasion was the biggest threat that



accompanied the first stage of Zelenskyy's term in office and was, in my view, underestimated. After the outbreak of a large-scale war against Ukraine, the situation became even more tense and uncertain. The use of all types of weapons, except nuclear weapons, is what is happening in Ukraine on a daily basis. In addition, Russia actively mobilizes information weapons to reduce the support Ukraine receives from its partners. All of this produces further risks not only to Ukraine's territorial integrity and state sovereignty, but also to the democratic world as a whole. The strengthening of European populist forces that lobby on Moscow's behalf shows that modern populism is not only about responding to societal demands. It is also about shaping the public demand via the latest communication technologies to undermine the political systems of states and establish global hegemony. Given this, the case of Ukraine is a litmus test of the readiness and maturity of the global civil society to defend its rights and freedoms amid global uncertainty and the challenge of populism.

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