

Mykhailo Minakov

## **From Servant to Leader**

Chronicles of Ukraine under the Zelensky Presidency, 2019–2024

With a foreword by John Lloyd

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Mykhailo Minakov

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## Annotation

President Zelensky is not only a showman and politician. He is also a political phenomenon through which history revealed something very important about Ukrainian society. This book is dedicated to Ukraine under the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky. It consists of columns, originally written for the expert blog *Focus Ukraine* and the *Kennan Cable* publication series of Wilson Centre's Kennan Institute. Put together, these columns constitute a chronicle of a society surviving oligarchy, pandemic, and war with dignity and resilience—in spite of all the challenges of recent and current history.



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# Foreword

## The Good Servant

John Lloyd

In an essay written while sheltering from Covid in 2020–2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote an essay—*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*—published on July 12, 2021. Much of it sought to prove that Ukraine and Russia had grown together—linguistically, religiously, culturally—throughout the centuries, until, in the 2000s, malign actors, who included radicals and neo-Nazis, encouraged by Western forces which turned the new leadership into “willing hostages,” began to tear Ukraine away from Russia, discriminating against the many Russians living in Ukraine, forcing them into a narrow Ukrainian nationalism in which Russian speakers were suspect. Putin wrote, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is *comparable in its consequences to the use of mass destruction against us*” (my italics).<sup>1</sup>

This was a huge inflation in the danger the Russian President claimed to see in Ukraine's efforts to deal with him as one sovereign state to another. His description of the threat in such a manner makes it clear, in retrospect, that he posed this as the most extreme danger an attack would bring—and thus raised the need to defend Russia militarily against it. The invasion, when it came a little over eight months from the essay's publication, could thus be framed as a necessary defense against a regime led by Nazis (their leader in the cunning disguise of a Jewish comedian) which had committed itself to a war against Russia which threatened its extinction. The attack against such a foe was his essay ‘proved,’ a necessary defense. That attack came on February 24th, 2022.

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1 Putin, V. (2021). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. *President of Russia Official Website*, July 12, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

Putin had seen the Jewish comedian—Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine for the past five and a half years—as one he could brush aside, probably kill, in the first days of a strike on Kyiv. He was elected in the largest vote any President of Ukraine had achieved because he was not a creature of the old system: the fact that he was a favorite figure on television—playing, in a series called “Servant of the People,” the part of a teacher suddenly elevated into the presidency—also helped. In office, with a new party calling itself by the name of his show, he lived up to the ideal of service by his efforts to reduce both an all-pervasive corruption and the immense power of the billionaire oligarchs. On the day of the attack, several Western ambassadors offered him a swift passage out: he refused at once.

Mikhail Minakov, in this collage of reports and reflections written for the Wilson Centre’s Kennan Institute through the years of Zelensky’s rule, illuminates with great clarity the passage of the Ukrainian president—nervous novice leader in 2019, weary and burdened in 2024, yet always giving heart to a country trapped in a flesh-grinding war, holding out the promise of freedom in the midst of ruins and death.

Freedom, and with it an attachment to democracy and a strong civil society, plays well to a country which, unlike most of the other former Soviet states (the small Baltic countries, now in the European Union and NATO, the main exception), has resisted the attempts by various leaders to return to autocracy. Minakov makes clear that Zelensky and the group around him—many former colleagues from his TV career—were the bringers of a new form of politics. He also knows it to be a partial new-ness, with corruption, oligarchic pressure and jockeying for power within the governing apparatus and around it still much in evidence.

Former leaders, such as Petro Poroshenko (president, 2014–2019), support the war effort—but contribute to the criticism of Zelensky, which has seen his ratings—still the highest of any major figure—decline. Social media, fake news, and leaks to journalists give critics weapons to use against a leadership that increasingly worries that the Western allies—without whose support and weaponry the war would be lost—are themselves under increasing