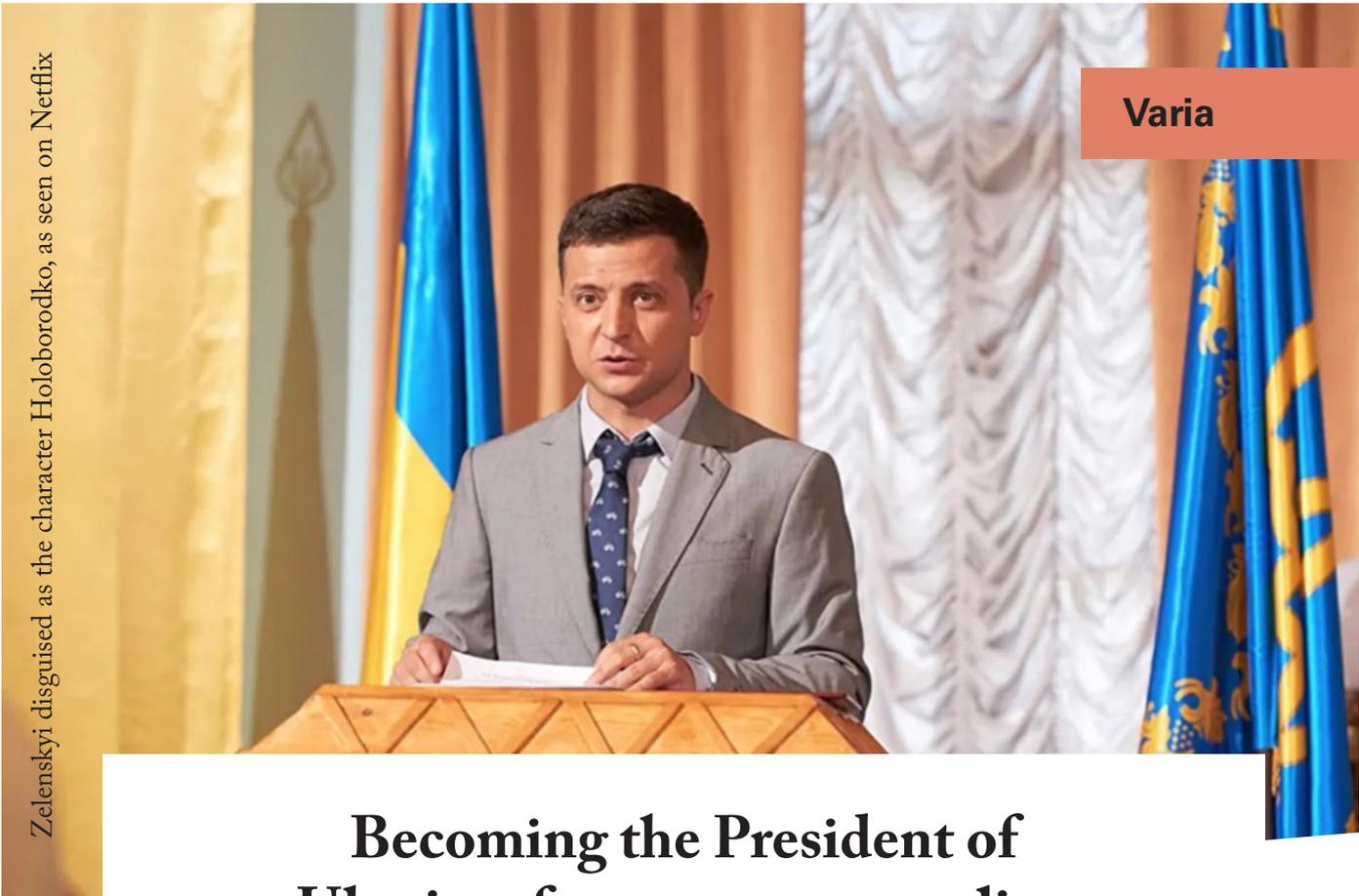


Zelenskyi disguised as the character Holoborodko, as seen on Netflix

Varia



## Becoming the President of Ukraine: from screen to reality. Zelenskyi's acting performance in the TV show *Servant of the People* as a self-fulfilling prophecy

by Ruben COOMANS and Pieter BOULOGNE

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## Abstract

When the current President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyi, ran for election, the electorate only knew him as an actor. In the widely acclaimed satirical TV series *Servant of the People*, he played an inspiring but clumsy teacher who, out of indignation at the corrupt state of Ukrainian politics, successfully makes a bid for the presidency and aims to reform his country. This TV series has been accused of being political marketing, but a systematic analysis of its marketing potential has not yet been made. This article wants to fill this gap by performing a screen character analysis. As it turns out, as a fictional being, the lead character bears a striking physical resemblance to Zelenskyi. His most striking trait is modesty. He is driven by a high sense of responsibility, guarantying his moral integrity. As an artifact, the lead character is portrayed as a part of the common people. As a symbol, he equals servitude to people, but also the historical person who plays him. It is concluded that the confusion between Zelenskyi and the lead character allows for labelling the TV series *Servant of the People* as a unique example of political marketing with the potential of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Keywords:** Zelenskyi, *Servant of the People*, political marketing, Performance Studies, screen character analysis

## Résumé

Quand l'actuel président de l'Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, se présenta aux élections, l'électorat ne le connaissait que comme acteur. Dans la série télévisée satirique largement acclamée *Serviteur du peuple* il jouait un professeur inspirant mais maladroit qui, par indignation pour la corruption du système politique ukrainien, fait le pari de devenir président et de réformer son pays. On a critiqué cette série pour son marketing politique, mais une analyse systématique de son potentiel marketing n'a pas encore été faite. Cet article cherche à combler cette lacune en procédant à une analyse du personnage. Il s'avère que le personnage principal, fictionnel, ressemble physiquement fort à Zelensky. Son trait de caractère le plus saillant est la modestie. Il est poussé par un grand sens des responsabilités, ce qui garantit son intégrité morale. En tant qu'artefact, le personnage principal fait semble-t-il partie des gens ordinaires. En tant que symbole, il est synonyme de servitude au peuple, mais aussi de l'individu réel qui le joue. L'article conclut que la confusion entre Zelensky et le personnage principal autorise à considérer la série *Serviteur du peuple* comme un exemple unique de marketing politique ayant la puissance d'une prophétie autoréalisatrice.

**Mots-clés:** Zelensky, *Serviteur du peuple*, marketing politique, performance, personnages de cinéma

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# Becoming the President of Ukraine: from screen to reality. Zelenskyi's acting performance in the TV show *Servant of the People* as a self-fulfilling prophecy

by Ruben COOMANS and Pieter BOULOGNE



**Illustration 1:** Zelenskyi disguised as the character Holoborodko, as seen on Netflix



**Illustration 2:** Zelenskyi as the President of Ukraine (This photograph is taken from the website of the President of Ukraine (President.gov.ua) and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license).

## Introduction

The invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has plunged Russia into geopolitical isolation. A major factor in this diplomatic failure has been current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, who he has rallied the international community with his addresses and video selfies and given voice to Ukrainian defiance of Russian aggression. After only two days of war, on 26 February, BBC praised him as “a convincing war leader” (Mulvey 2022). This is all the more remarkable, since Zelenskyi had not taken up any political mandates before he was elected President of Ukraine on 21 April 2019. Before, he was an actor at the height of his career.

It seems evident to draw a parallel with Ronald Reagan: he too turned to politics after acting. However, Reagan had already served as a governor before becoming the 40<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 1981. Also Donald Trump comes to mind, as prior to his political career, he was famous as the host of the TV show *The Apprentice*. Whereas it is clear that Trump’s campaign was effectively an unbridled form of political marketing (Conley 2018: 43), the role of the said TV show in his actual presidential campaign was quite restricted: immediately after he declared his run for the presidency, NBC announced former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger as the rebooted TV program’s host. It’s also important to stress that *The Apprentice* was about judging the business skills of a group of contestants. Strictly speaking, the businessman Trump was hence not performing as an actor. What makes Zelenskyi stand out from the actor Reagan and the TV personality Trump, is that his TV performance did not bring him just general fame among the electorate: it earned him the specific reputation of performing the role of president of his country, albeit in a television comedy. The most famous series about a politician that actually had a major influence on real-life politics, was the hit series *Borgen*. Its main character, Brigitte Nyborg, became the leading example to which, among other European politicians, the first female prime minister of Denmark, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, was compared (Soetaert and Rutten 2014, 716; van Ginneken 2016, 94). However, in *Borgen* it was not the actress behind Nyborg who became a political leader.

Nothing in his biography indicated that Zelenskyi would develop political ambitions. He was born in southern Ukraine under the Soviet Union in 1978 to a Russian-speaking family of Jewish descent. In 1995, he founded the cabaret Kvartal 95, with which he toured former Soviet states for several years. After having lived in Russia for six years, he returned to Ukraine in 2003, where he became a TV celebrity as an actor. Aired on *1 + 1*, a channel owned by the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi, the cabaret Kvartal 95 became a popular television show (Iwański 2019: 4-5). In the years that followed, Zelenskyi partnered with two colleagues, Boris and Sergii Shefyr, to set up his own production company, Kvartal 95 Studio (Ray 2019). In the fall of 2015, the studio released the satirical TV series *Sluha narodu / Servant of the People*, in which the President of Ukraine is played by Zelenskyi. It is noteworthy that he was more than just the leading actor: he was one of the inventors of the plot of the series (Navolneva 2019). Zelenskyi’s political commitment at this stage had been limited to openly supporting the Euromaidan (Ray 2019). Together with childhood friend Ivan Bakanov, Zelenskyi founded the political party *Sluha narodu / Servant of the People* in 2017, supposedly to safeguard the series’ title against political misuse (Iwański

2019: 5). Although rumors had been circulating since the summer of 2018 that in 2019 he would run for President of Ukraine, Zelenskyi waited until New Year's Eve to announce his candidacy. In the first round of the elections, Zelenskyi's main opponents were Yuliia Tymoshenko and then incumbent Petro Poroshenko, whom he crushingly defeated in the second round.

Already during the presidential election, the foreign media focused on the link between Zelenskyi's political ambitions and his television career. *The New York Times* headlined: 'He played a president on Ukrainian TV. Now he wants the real thing' (Kramer 2019a). In the same newspaper, Kramer (2019b) noted that the third and final season of the series was aired on the eve of the presidential elections, which brought him to accuse Zelenskyi of using the popularity of his character for personal political gain. Of course, the peculiarity of this particular election bid did not go unnoticed in the Ukrainian media either. The Ukrainian electoral committee even regarded the suspicious timing of the series' final season as political advertising, whereupon Zelenskyi was urged to pay for his airtime using his campaign funds (Rafalskyi 2019).

Zelenskyi's role in *Servant of the People* was particularly controversial because the series responds to the Ukrainian political reality. *Servant of the People* tells the story of Vasyl Holoborodko, a history teacher who becomes upset when the school has his students put up election ads. In a fiery speech, he accuses Ukrainian politics of serving only the interests of the oligarchs. One of his students films this outburst of anger, and the resulting YouTube video goes viral. Encouraged by his students, who have raised campaign money through crowdfunding, Holoborodko runs for president. After winning the election against all odds, he ends up in the world he hated so much. His one and only goal is to purify Ukrainian politics of corruption. In so doing, he encounters opposition from the political establishment, which is in cahoots with the oligarchs. Holoborodko starts appointing his own people and taking measures against corruption.

Right from its start, the series appealed to the Ukrainian audience: the pilot episode broke the audience record of television year 2015 (Navolneva 2019). Commercially speaking, it was common sense to renew the series for a second and third season, which premiered on Ukrainian television in 2017 and 2019, respectively. Prior to the second season, a full-length film, roughly corresponding with S2E8-14, was released. All episodes and the film were made available on Kvartal 95 Studio's YouTube channel, where the film received a million views in only a few days' time (TSN 2017). What's more, in 2017, *Servant of the People* became the first Ukrainian television show to be broadcast on Netflix. The third and final season also became popular on the internet very quickly: on 29 March 2019, Interfaks (2019) reported that the first season was viewed there 1.3 million times, the second 900,000 times and the third almost 700,000 times.

Among the political journalists and scientists who have tried to explain Zelenskyi's success as a presidential candidate, many have highlighted the importance of the TV series. Moscow reporter for *The New York Times* Andrew Kramer established a link between the show and Zelenskyi's presidential campaign by pointing to the billboards that could be found in Kiev the day before the first round, reading "Президент – слуга народу" ("The President is the People's Servant"; Kramer 2019b). For Viktorya Abakumova and Larisa Slinchenko (Tomsk State University), these posters prove that Zelenskyi sought to make political capital out of his role as a political hero as well (Abakumova and Slinchen-

ko 2019: 80). In turn, Elena Korosteleva (2019), Professor of International Politics at the University of Kent, saw Zelenskyi as a populist who, like his character Holoborodko, stood against the establishment. She believed that, unofficially, Zelenskyi's campaign had started a decade earlier; after all, in his comedy shows, he had been criticizing politicians for years. For the war-sick Ukrainian citizen, *Servant of the People's* portrayal of a small man who took power to change the world was a refreshing fairytale. The journalist Dmi-triy Sosnovskiy (2019) suggested that, because the Ukrainians had seen Zelenskyi handle the presidency on television, many were convinced that he would also be able to do so in reality. He described the third season as the spearhead of Zelenskyi's campaign: it differed from the previous seasons by its shortness and its seriousness, indicating that the time for laughter was over. According to *Hromadske* journalist Irina Navolneva (2019), the TV series gave Ukrainians hope that the ongoing corruption could be overcome. At the same time, she found it difficult to assess the series' role in Zelenskyi's victory. Instead, Navolneva concentrated on the idea that the Ukrainians had been longing for a new face at the top, and Zelenskyi – known from television – was found a suitable outsider. Such an interpretation is in line with the analysis of the first-round exit polls by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology: 54% of Zelenskyi's voters referred to the fact that he was a brand new face in Ukrainian politics, and only 6% motivated their vote by referring to his acting performance (Goncharenko 2019). Irina Zhezhko-Braun (2019) set out to determine how Zelenskyi benefitted from his performance as Holoborodko by looking into the series itself. She concluded that the message of the series was so straightforward that it could be analyzed without the help of a political scientist. Also appealing was the fact that Holoborodko's team worked on a voluntary basis, adopting a bottom-up approach. Thanks to these factors, the series' scenario grew into a platform for the people to unite around values such as dignity and transparency (Zhezhko-Braun 2019: 95, 100-101, 103).

The idea that *Servant of the People* impacted the Ukrainian vote for Zelenskyi to a considerable extent is commonly accepted by political scientists and even held by the screenwriter of the TV series, Dmytro Kostiuk, although he strongly denies that the show was conceived as a political marketing stunt (Mitrofanova 2019). Given this consensus, it is noteworthy that, so far, little effort has been made to carry out an in-depth analysis of the lead character of the series. Hence, the question remains to what extent there is ground to believe that Zelenskyi's performance as Holoborodko was decisive for his success as a presidential candidate, and to what extent the series facilitates a conflation of Zelenskyi with the character in question. In other words, we want to examine to what extent Zelenskyi's acting performance can be labelled as political marketing, here understood as 'the process by which political candidates and ideas are directed at the voters in order to satisfy their political needs and thus gain their support for the candidate and ideas in question' (Shama 1975: 107). What matters is not so much whether the series was intended as political marketing – which would also be difficult to prove, given the lack of testimonies – but rather the ways in which it could function as such. Additionally, the question whether this analysis strokes with the real engagement of the viewer with Holoborodko falls beyond the scope of this article.

For our analysis of Holoborodko, we use the method of the German film scholar Jens Eder (2010), who defines film characters as 'identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artifacts' (Eder 2010: 18). Eder's method builds on a theoretical framework of character engagement developed by Murray Smith in his

1995 book *Engaging characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Smith distinguishes three levels of engagement with characters: the construction of the character, called *recognition*; *alignment* with characters, being the viewer access to the actions, feelings and knowledge of the character; a moral evaluation of the character based on the values it embodies, called *allegiance* (Smith 1995: 75-85). Eder's stepwise approach is a practical application of Smith's framework which offers the benefits of clarity and understandability.

A film typically lasts about two hours and it is only within that time frame that characters can express themselves and evolve significantly (Piazza, Bednarek, & Rossi 2011: 9). TV characters, on the other hand, form a bond with the viewer over a longer period of time, during which the viewer is not constantly exposed to them. In television series, a radical transformation of characters is therefore rather exceptional, but small biographical and personal developments may occur (Bednarek 2011: 187).

Judging from our own viewing experience, we label Holoborodko as a relatively stable character during all three seasons. As such, *Servant of the People* follows the general trend observed by Bednarek (2011: 193-194) that contemporary television series tend to be "character-driven". Therefore, we assume that it is possible to analyze the lead character without exhaustivity, i.e. on the basis of a limited number of episodes. Taking into account the insight that "early episodes and series are particularly important in establishing characters and in setting up the behavior that comes to characterize them" (Bednarek 2011: 197), it seems legitimate to focus on the first six episodes, which makes for a total of circa 145 minutes of content.

The narration and the cinematic techniques it uses are the medium through which engagement between viewer and character takes place (Smith 1995: 75). According to Eder (2010: 29), film characters can be interpreted from four different perspectives, which together constitute the clock of character: "as fictional beings in the world of the film, as artifacts in the film's textual structures, as symbols in its themes, and as symptoms in the socio-cultural frameworks of its production and reception." The analysis of all these elements together, which also overlap with the character's motivation and the character constellation, enables us to create a mental character model: we approach the character in question as a subject with whom one might identify and for whom one might feel sympathy (Eder 2010: 33-35) – or, to put it differently, for whom one might consider voting in the next presidential election. To reinforce our analysis, we will occasionally draw a parallel between the television series and the political program in which Zelenskyi presented himself as a presidential candidate.

To interpret our findings, we draw on the field of Performance Studies, which specializes in describing the various high-impact performances that take place in our globalized world on a daily basis (Rutgeerts 2017: 224). As is custom in this field, we use "performance" both in a literal and a figurative sense. In both senses, it presupposes that an action "is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action" (Carlson 2004: 5). Performance is hence by definition related to a prescribed code or script. In addition, it always takes place in front of an audience – albeit an imagined one. By applying this concept to Zelenskyi's role in *Servant of the People*, we aim to yield a deeper understanding of how the television series functions in the minds of its viewers, and that of the lead actor too.

## Holoborodko as a fiction

In his step-by-step plan to bring about an analysis of a film character, Eder (2010: 23-26) approaches the character under study in the first place as a fictional being with mental and social features and qualities. He proposes to explore the domains of “corporeality”, “mind” and “sociality”.

### *Corporeality*

The domain “corporeality” (Eder 2010: 24) concerns the exterior features of the character: basic data (such as gender and age), non-verbal communication (body language) and a detailed description of physical appearances, facial expressions, gestures, movements, posture and clothing style.

The physical resemblance between Holoborodko and his interpreter Zelenskyi is striking (compare illustration 1 and 2). They are exactly the same age: both were born in 1978 (S1E03 9:46-9:50). More importantly, they have the same facial features and an identical haircut, which does not change a bit when Holoborodko is sent to the hairdresser in episode 3 (S1E03 12:02-12:10). Neither wears a mustache or a beard. Incidentally, morphologically speaking, the speaking name “Holoborodko” suggests the absence of a beard. Another striking physical feature that the character and its performer share is their height. Holoborodko is considerably smaller than his relatives and his subordinates. In the bank scene in the first double episode (S1E01-02), Holoborodko is the smallest of all people waiting. He is about as tall as the female school head, and is considerably smaller than his male students. Also his presidential staff literally looks down on him, although he has higher seniority. Both Holoborodko and Zelenskyi have a slim and athletic build.

In terms of clothing, Holoborodko has a modest style. It is telling that, when the Prime Minister lists a number of expensive watch brands for Holoborodko to choose from, such as *Patek Philippe* and *Vacheron Constantin*, Holoborodko ignorantly replies: “Не читал” (“I haven’t read them”; S1E01-02 14:41-14:52). A recurring item in the lead character’s outfit is his briefcase, which he has as a teacher and continues to use as president: the case he picks up from the ground in the pilot episode (S1E01-02 11:40) is the same as the one he opens during his speech in parliament (S1E06 15:15-15:44).

Holoborodko tends to wear his emotions on his face, often showing astonishment at the expensive lifestyle of others. For instance, he looks surprised to learn that the building he believed to be a museum is in fact his presidential villa (S1E03 21:54-21:57). At various points in the first episodes, his facial expressions also reveal that he is nervous and he is rather clumsy in his movements. Take, for instance, his first press conference: he looks around nervously and nods awkwardly (S1E01-02 33:21-33:27). Holoborodko also shows signs of stress when meeting his presidential staff: with clasped hands, he personally introduces himself to all his subordinates, smiling awkwardly. There are, however, also scenes in which he serenely and confidently asserts his political opinion. When asked at his first press conference to explain how a simple teacher raised the necessary money to run for president, he replies without flinching: “На этот вопрос я отвечу без труда” (“That’s a question I can answer easily”).

## *Mind*

The domain “mind” includes various kinds of mental qualities: perception, knowledge, evaluation, emotions and motivation (Eder 2010: 24). In this context, it is also of importance to take into account variation of the mind: towards whom or what does the character behave differently? A character’s mind can be evaluated on the basis of five scales that together form the “big five” dimensions of personality: extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and neuroticism (Eder 2010: 25).

Extraversion is “the quality of being a lively and confident person who enjoys being with other people” (Oxford University Press 2020). Holoborodko’s social nature is expressed at various points in the series. For instance, he introduces himself to his subordinates with the informal version of his official first name, Vasia (S1E03 8:07-9:44). As such, it becomes apparent that Holoborodko wants to be familiar with his staff. It is also clear that Holoborodko shares his knowledge with a sense of pleasure and self-confidence. For example, the fifth episode features a flashback in which Holoborodko impresses an old history teacher with quotes from historical figures and thus succeeds in making him vacate his post (S1E05 16:33-20:11). Holoborodko also shows confidence in his own political ideas (such as lowering the wages of the administration) and defends them with conviction (S1E06 3:30-3:49; 5:20-6:00). His speech in the face of the government, on the contrary, gives a lousy, insecure impression (S1E06 12:08-12:32). Clearly, Holoborodko’s extraversion manifests itself mainly in his social dealings with ordinary citizens. His self-confidence disappears in the presence of high-ranking politicians (with the exception of the prime minister).

According to Oxford University (2020), conscientiousness is “the quality of doing things carefully and correctly”. This character trait applies to the lead character to a great extent, as is evident from the fact that Holoborodko walks away from the table in displeasure at not knowing the fine-dining etiquette rules (S1E04 16:09-17:14). His desire to do good work is illustrated by him promising to journalists to organize a new press conference as soon as he is properly trained in the presidential matter (S1E01-02 33:20-35:58). He also attaches importance to delivering a proper inauguration speech, while the Prime Minister dismisses it as “a fussy thing” (“мелочи”) (S1E03, a.o. 7:30-8:06 and 16:21-16:31).

The trait of conscientiousness is closely related to the motivational question ‘Why does the character in this situation act the way he does?’, which concerns the character’s drives, needs, emotions, values, wishes, goals and plans (Eder 2010: 29). Throughout the series, the audience learns that Holoborodko’s behavior is not calculated. He is – quite the reverse – driven by his inner needs and values. For example, in the pilot episode, a financial discussion between the prime minister and the new president stands out: Holoborodko does not allow the prime minister to arrange his loan (S1E01-02, 22:05-22:17) and he insists on paying for the birthday present for his niece himself (S1E01-02 32:37-33:12). This reveals that it would be against his principles to allow the state to pay for his private expenses. By being on cordial terms with his subordinates, Holoborodko comes across as authentic as well. In addition, in the middle of his inaugural address, in Ukrainian, Holoborodko switches to an improvised speech in Russian (S1E04 23:12-26:28). This impulsive decision can be explained by the fact that Russian is Holoborodko’s mother tongue, in which he is able to express himself most easily (and most honestly). In this

instance, Holoborodko was guided by his intuition and his need to be sincere. Seeing as he does not seem particularly keen on being the president, the viewer may also wonder why Holoborodko is running for the presidential election in the first place. This comes down to his sense of responsibility: as his students have collected money for him through crowdfunding, Holoborodko feels obligated to grant them their wish (S1E01-02 38:12-38:39). Much of the president's behavior, particularly his rejection of various luxuries, can be explained by the importance he attaches to moral integrity. In episode 6, he himself brings up this value when he criticizes the size of his staff, which includes even a crew of masseuses (S1E06 5:28-6:05): "Чем больше в этой стране помощников, тем больше в этом государстве нужна помощь" ("The more this country has helpers, the more this state is in need of help.")

The adjective "agreeable" is given the following definition in the Oxford Dictionary (2020): "pleasant and easy to like". Accordingly, the question is whether Holoborodko is liked by his close circle, or whether he can be found pleasant to be around. Our findings are ambiguous. At the beginning of the pilot episode, when Holoborodko is surrounded by his housemates, we are presented with an unflattering image of his personality. This is in stark contrast to the modest and jovial image given in his interactions with subordinates and ordinary people: Holoborodko shakes hands with his domestic servants (S1E03 22:14-23:12) and, despite his higher status, greets his fellow travelers in the taxi bus (S1E05 4:16-4:17). However, little of this is evident in his dealings with representatives of the political elite. The speeches before parliament and the government speak volumes. Holoborodko dreams of chastising the government officials for spending money on luxury cars rather than health care or the construction of a village school (S1E06 10:21-11:58). However, he cannot replicate that speech in reality. In parliament, his speech starts off on a positive note with a comment on democracy, but his tone soon turns hostile as he starts throwing accusations around (S1E06 15:49-17:35). At the culminating point of his reprimand, he alludes to the title of the series: "Где это вообще видано, чтобы слуги [народа] жили лучше своих господ?" ("How on earth is it possible that the servants [of the people] live a better life than their masters?").

Holoborodko does not have "the quality of being able to think about or to accept" new experiences (Oxford University Press 2020). Even though he makes a bid for the presidency (under pressure from his students), he is more conservative than adventurous. There are many instances that exemplify this trait: (a) he is not open to the purchase of an expensive watch (S1E01-02 14:53-15:16), (b) he does not like the treatment he undergoes in the beauty salon (S1E03 9:50-12:22), (c) he is reluctant to use a limousine with a driver (S1E05 3:21-3:42) and (d) he fires his bodyguards because he cannot get used to them (S1E05 7:42-8:15). Clearly, his lack of "openness to experience" is related to his high moral standard, more specifically to his disgust at the luxuries normally associated with presidential office. This attitude is in line with Holoborodko's political message: the servants of the people should not rise above the people. Instead, they should continue to live the same life as before their election.

The adjective "neurotic" is defined in the Oxford dictionary (2020) as "not behaving in a reasonable, calm way, because you are worried about something." Within the research corpus, there is one scene that undeniably exposes Holoborodko's neurotic behavior: the scene in which the viewer is introduced to the lead character for the first time. He is

nervous and anything but friendly because he is afraid of being late for work (S1E01-02 5:08-7:51). In other words, Holoborodko's neurotic behavior in this case is testimony to his "conscientiousness": performing well is his top priority.

### *Sociality*

The domain "sociality" revolves around group membership (Eder 2010: 24). This term covers all "groups" to which the character under study belongs. We explore Golobordko's ethnicity, family and family life, teaching performance and work as President of Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between the lead character and other characters of the same group, their interactions and their social roles. To determine the position of a particular character in the character constellation, the totality of all the characters and the relationships that exist between them in the series, we shed light on the social motives and conflicts that connect that character to other characters (Eder 2010: 30).

Holoborodko was born in Kiev (S1E03 9:46-9:50) and prefers to speak his mother tongue: not Ukrainian, but Russian. In fact, like many fellow countrymen, Holoborodko was raised exclusively in Russian, as is evident from the fact that no Ukrainian is used in his private conversations. His pronunciation of Ukrainian is rather poor. For this reason, he wants to change parts of his Ukrainian inauguration speech (S1E04 5:34-5:44). In this ethno-linguistic respect, the lead character does not differ from Zelenskyi, who, as a descendant of a Jewish-Russian family, also has Russian as his first language and experiences some difficulty in expressing himself flawlessly in the official language of Ukraine (Ray 2019 and Iwański 2019). Incidentally, in the series, Holoborodko does not use the East Slavic *surzhyk*, a sub-standard hybrid language which is very common in Ukraine, while the dialogue of some other characters occasionally contains traces of the language (Colijn 2019). This phenomenon can clearly be observed in the language of Holoborodko's father, Petro (who goes by his Russian name 'Pyotr'; as an illustration: S1E01-02 3:25-4:33 and 7:07-7:27). The TV series also contains examples of "non-accommodating bilingualism" (Bilaniuk 2010): the language of the series is Russian, but when one of the characters engages in a conversation with a character raised in Ukrainian, both characters speak their own native language. This practice is the norm in everyday life in Ukraine (Pinkham 2019). In this way, Ukrainian also resonates in the series, which reinforces *the reality effect* (Barthes 1986). The series does not thematize tensions between Ukrainian and Russian native speakers.

Holoborodko's family life is unenviable. The schematic biography of him that the oligarchs receive states that shortly after his college years he married Olha, with whom he had his son Dyma a year later. A year after the birth of their son they divorced. According to their neighbors, the couple often had arguments about their difficult financial situation. It is important to note that Dyma lives with his mother, but Holoborodko has visitation rights (S1E03 10:59-11:19). Only in episode 8 does it become clear that the father and son meet every Saturday (S1E08 6:18-6:23).

Holoborodko has no power and no high status among his family members. This becomes clear in the pilot episode, in which Holoborodko is immediately played off against his housemates: his mother refuses to iron his shirt and his father expresses his hope that his son will get fired (S1E01-02 5:08-7:52). Holoborodko's housemates undergo a drastic

change in attitude towards the hero of the story when he becomes president, providing him with a sumptuous supper and offering toasts to his health (S1E01-02 39:13-41:38). In this scene, Holoborodko is visibly unhappy that his new job is considered more important than his niece's eighteenth birthday. The third episode opens with a repetition of the first scene of the pilot episode, although this time Holoborodko is being spoiled: his mother has ironed all his shirts, his father has prepared his breakfast and his niece has polished his shoes (S1E03 4:43-5:38). Holoborodko thinks their way of acting is strange and reacts angrily when his roommates argue over who is going to open the door. It is clear that their sudden appreciation for Holoborodko is a result of his new position, not his person.

As a history teacher, Holoborodko is praised and does not lack authority. In fact, upon his first visit to the school as the new President of Ukraine, it becomes clear that the students of class 10B are his biggest fans. Holoborodko is essentially part of the class group he is teaching and hence does not behave in a belittling way (S1E01-02 28:30-29:30). During the slideshow for the oligarchs, we hear “[Голобородько] по словам учеников просто святой” (“According to his students, Holoborodko is no less than a saint”) (S1E03 11:39-11:42).

In his work as president, Holoborodko's power status is recognized, but he himself undermines it to some extent. In fact, he puts himself on the same level as his staff and stays in close contact with the ordinary citizens of his country. In his interactions with his citizens, his behavior is strikingly similar to his attitude towards his students: he was their friend more so than their teacher. This friendliness is accompanied by an aversion to the political establishment. This leads him to reject all luxuries and, what is more, he also forbids his family from enjoying them. In the professional sphere, Holoborodko occasionally comes into contact with people who laugh behind his back and question his abilities as president.

A special category of characters in this TV series which also determines the character constellation are the ghost appearances: Holoborodko is visited by a series of ghosts of historical figures, who enter into discussion with him and inspire him to make certain policy choices. In episode 4, Holoborodko has a conversation with US president Abraham Lincoln (S1E04 19:56-20:49), who was born into a poor family and yet later became president of the US. In this scene (S1E04 19:56-20:49), Lincoln speaks the following words: “А знаете, мы с вами очень похожи. Я тоже из простой семьи, тоже в начале не верил в свои силы” (“You should know that you and I are very similar. I also come from a simple family, and at first didn't see my own strength.”). By insisting on the resemblance between the two characters, the viewer is given a powerful positive signal about Holoborodko: he will set Ukraine free, much like Lincoln abolished slavery. Another notable appearance is that of freedom fighter Che Guevara, who demands that Holoborodko re-educate the members of the government (S1E06 8:45-9:41). Holoborodko, however, does not agree with Guevara's aggressive approach – apparently, the president is too much of a Democrat to tolerate revolutionary excesses.

Holoborodko's social interactions can be summarized simply: there is a clear difference between the people he is on good terms with on the one hand, and the people with whom he has a contrasting relationship on the other. In short, Holoborodko and the common man have a positive attitude towards each other, while the president has a negative attitude towards anyone who wants to take unfair advantage of political power. The dividing line is moral-sociological, not ethno-linguistic.

## Holoborodko as an artifact

In order to analyze film or TV characters as artifacts, the question of how they are constructed technically is addressed. Central to the analysis is the *mode of representation*, as it is achieved through image and sound (Eder 2010: 26). The analysis of image must consider, among other things, the familiarity of the cast, the setting, the camera work, while the analysis of the sound rests on music and sounds. The perception that is created by a representation is called the *outcome*. What is particularly interesting is the question of how certain characteristics of the lead character are foregrounded by means of technical interventions.

As far as the cast is concerned, it is important to emphasize that Zelenskyi was already famous in Ukraine before the series *Servant of the People* was broadcast, but only in the capacity of actor. At that stage, his reputation had mainly been determined by the full-length TV show *Vechirnyi Kvartal*, in which he had systematically been denouncing corrupt politics. A number of the main characters from *Servant of the People*, notably Olena Kravets (Olha), Yevgen Koshovyi (Mukhin) and Yuri Krapov (Sanin), had made regular appearances in this TV show too (Studiya Kvartal 95 s.d.). In 2015, there were no suspicions or rumors that Zelenskyi himself would develop political ambitions.

The research corpus deals with three settings which can be considered as Holoborodko's personal space: his bedroom, his classroom and his presidential office. Remarkably, he sleeps in a single bed in his childhood bedroom at his parents' house. This room is filled with statues of historical figures as well as many books (S1E01-02 4:33-5:08), which characterizes him as a well-read historian. The series' very first shot of Holoborodko is consistent with this image: he is depicted in bed, reading *Parallel Lives* by the ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch, a collection of biographies about "the noble deeds and characters of Greek and Roman soldiers, legislators, orators, and statesmen" (Walbank 2020). At school, Holoborodko has his own history classroom, which is stocked with historical maps. Although this makes the space seem cluttered, it also testifies to Holoborodko's dedication to his craft. His presidential office, in turn, is not introduced until later in the series. Initially, he uses his predecessor's office, featuring a large painting depicting the previous president as a king (S1E05 22:49-23:05). When asked how he likes this office, Holoborodko answers: "Честно говоря, я бы здесь всё убрал" ("To be honest, I would take everything out.") (S1E06 1:27-1:36). In rejecting the decoration of his predecessor, he opposes the glorification of the president and luxury in general. This motif is addressed in similar fashion in episode 3, in which Holoborodko is offered a presidential villa as an official residence, but prefers to continue to live in his parental home. In short, Holoborodko's personal spaces characterize him as erudite, dedicated to his craft and a man of integrity.

When analyzing the camera work, we pay particular attention to shots that are not medium long shots, medium shots or medium close-ups (the most used shots in the series) and were not taken from a straight camera angle (straight-on angle). One of the most striking shots in terms of camera use shows a caravan of support cars accompanying the presidential vehicle in which Holoborodko is seated. At different occasions in the first episodes, the viewer is shown the "caravan" of cars from an extreme long shot that gets closer and closer. The scene starts with a high-angle shot (birds-eye-view) and, as it

progresses, shifts to being shot from a straight-on angle (S1E01-02 8:45-8:55; 21:33-21:42; 22:35-22:44; 24:15-24:26; 32 :14-32:23; 33:14-33:20; 37:36-37:45; 39:04-39:12; S1E03 7:18-7:30). When Holoborodko makes it clear that he no longer wants to travel in this way, we see him getting out of a taxi from a high angle (S1E04 22:15-22:18). As he walks away from the limousine in front of him, a long shot follows, showing an entire line of guards following him (S1E05 3:43-3:58). Episode 5 includes a nod to the scene with the caravan: the image of the support cars has been replaced by a (medium) long shot of the bus that Holoborodko is riding (S1E05 5:46-5:50).

Holoborodko's short stature is abundantly accentuated by means of straight-on shots. In addition, when Holoborodko comes into contact with high-ranking statesmen in official situations, he is often portrayed from a high angle, making him appear smaller. Low-angle shots are mainly used when Holoborodko is located spatially higher than other characters (on the stairs, on the terrace, etc.). The way in which his inauguration speech is portrayed is also very significant: the scene opens with a low-angle shot, but then the viewer is shown an image from the audience that was taken straight on. By the end of the speech, the lead character has thus literally reached the same level as his audience, including his students and his parents.

As for the analysis of the sound, it is noteworthy that the voice of the lead character is the very similar to that of its interpreter, Zelenskyi. The actor does not use voice distortion, nor does he put on a particular voice. More crucial, however, is the soundtrack that can be heard during the opening credits of the series. Strikingly, it is a song by the Ukrainian musician Dmytro Shurov that shares its title with the series. The song is in Russian, rhymes, and consists of the following two stanzas:

Я люблю свою страну. Люблю свою жену. Люблю свою собаку. Я всего на свете член. Почти что супермен. Но редко лезу в драку. Знает весь двор, мой приговор. «Слуга народа». У меня почти всё есть. Достоинство и честь и даже крики «браво». Персональный самолет, мне выделил народ. А что? Имею право. На животу (вот тут) набью тату. «Слуга народа».

(I love my country. I love my wife. I love my dog. On this earth, I'm just an official member. Almost a superhero. But I rarely fight. My whole neighborhood knows my verdict. A servant of the people. I have almost everything. Dignity and honor and even the exclamations "Bravo". A private jet, provided for by the people. So what? It's my right. On my stomach (right here), I'm getting a tattoo: 'Servant of the people'.)

Needless to say, the song is meant to be interpreted satirically. The first three lines describe the image that politicians like to put forward: someone who values patriotism and family values. Incidentally, this image does not apply to Holoborodko, as he is divorced. As the song progresses, it becomes clear what the "servant of the people" is really about: material prosperity, to which he believes he is entitled. It is no coincidence that the tattoo with the text "Servant of the People" will not end up above his heart, but on his stomach. In this way, the message conveyed to the viewer at the start of each episode is that – in contrast to Holoborodko – professional politicians are concerned with serving themselves rather than the people.

## Holoborodko as a symptom

Characters can consciously or unconsciously be perceived by viewers as symptoms, insofar as sociocultural causes implicitly or explicitly explain their mindset and behaviors. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the series presents, in the person of Holoborodko and his mother, a teacher and a doctor. Wages for teachers and doctors are a political issue in real Ukraine (Tihiy 2018; Raiser 2007: 2). In the series, this issue is denounced by Holoborodko's secretary, who argues that the salaries of teachers and doctors have not been paid for two months already (S1E06 0:50-0:53). It goes without saying that the low wages in the health and education sectors increase the risk of corruption in these sectors. This idea is also put forward in the series: Holoborodko quits his law degree when he discovers that his father had paid a bribe to get him into law school (S1E03 10:25-10:38). Holoborodko's school principal, in turn, is susceptible to political pressure, as she sends the students into the streets to distribute electoral propaganda. Holoborodko, on the other hand, is portrayed as an honest teacher who does not take bribes. The disgust for the political world of Ukraine that he cultivates as a teacher is perfectly understandable given the appalling treatment that he undergoes in this profession. Incidentally, the symptomatic rebellion of the teacher acquires an extra dimension in view of the program with which Zelenskyi was presented to the voter: "Професії лікаря та вчителя повинні стати престижними і високооплачуваними" ("The profession of doctor and teacher must become prestigious and well paid") (Ze! Komanda 2019).

Holoborodko, who is portrayed as the Ukrainian Lincoln, continues to manifest himself as an opponent of the political establishment as president as well. The three political proposals that he implements during the first episodes are mainly aimed at the abuse of power: the abolition of limousines, country houses and the reduction of the presidential staff should enable the state to save money that can be spent where it is most needed. Because he himself was once a common citizen, he can develop into a true servant of the people, determined to curb the self-service of the political elite. Although Holoborodko's interpreter Zelenskyi was a wealthy man before becoming the President of Ukraine, a parallel is imperative: he too made the fight against corruption a spearhead in his electoral program, under the slogan "Не боротьба з корупцією, а перемога над нею" ("Don't fight corruption, but overcome it"). His campaign promises included a confiscation of all assets of all criminals found guilty of corruption, as well as new anti-corruption organs and courts (Ze! Komanda 2019). In so doing, he claimed to target Ukraine's political establishment:

28 років нам обіцяють суспільство рівних можливостей, натомість щоразу поділяють нас за різними ознаками. Насправді є тільки один поділ: ми і вони. Ми — це Народ України. Вони — це «політичні пенсіонери», які «кочують» із влади до опозиції, із партії в партію, і постійно створюють собі вигідне місце, прикриваючись недоторканністю. (Ze! Komanda 2019)

(For 28 years we have been promised a society of equal opportunities, but each time we are divided on different grounds. In fact, there is only one division: us and

them. We are the People of Ukraine. They are “political retirees” who “roam” from power to opposition, from party to party, constantly creating favorable places for themselves under the guise of immunity.)

## Holoborodko as a symbol

Characters have the potential to become symbols. Previously, we have argued that Holoborodko’s short stature constitutes his most striking physical feature, which is further accentuated by the camerawork. It is possible to give this feature a symbolic interpretation: the fact that Holoborodko as president is literally lower than the political establishment, and not exalted above the people, is in itself a rehabilitation of the term ‘servant of the people’, which again becomes credible. Holoborodko does not look down on the people, but rather looks up to them.

It is not difficult to argue that Holoborodko, who has no political experience prior to becoming president, is a symbol of the renewal of the political elite. He distrusts the entire political elite and increasingly assigns their positions to his own confidants, knowledge in the matter being subordinate to presumed moral integrity. In so doing, Holoborodko becomes the symbol of a new political class. It is also important to note that he does not lose his sense of humor after his inauguration as President. With this ability to put his status into perspective, he creates a departure from the existing political order: the new political power does not take itself so seriously.

It is not far-fetched to state that Holoborodko also symbolizes the historical person Zelenskyi. As discussed, they are identical in terms of physical appearance and voice. In addition, a remarkable parallel can be drawn from a biographical point of view. When the Ukrainian oligarchs are briefed on Holoborodko’s life, we learn that he is the same age, and studied at the same law school as well (though Holoborodko left to study history; S1E03 9:44-10:33). One difference is that Holoborodko was born in Kiev, while Zelenskyi’s roots are in Kryvyi Rih. The fact that they both ran for president with no political experience is, of course, another striking similarity – but since Zelenskyi’s candidacy was out of the question when the series was shot, we cannot take this parallel into account here without being guilty of Hineininterpretierung.

The interpretation of Holoborodko as a symbol of a real historical person, in this case of his double Zelenskyi, seems all the more legitimate when considering that there are other lookalikes of existing national and foreign political figures in the series, such as Angela Merkel, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Vladimir Putin and Yuliia Tymoshenko. Also, three male actors play the role of existing Ukrainian oligarchs – their identification becomes possible thanks to information about the economic sectors in which they operate. For example, at the end of the first season, Holoborodko watches a commercial of the series *Svaty* (*Parents-in-law*), which is broadcast on *1 + 1* (S1E23 3:53-3:54). In this commercial, the oligarch Roizman makes a furious phone call in response to a debate with Holoborodko being broadcast on his channel (S1E23 7:40-7:44). Since *1 + 1* in actual Ukraine belongs to Ihor Kolomoiskyi, it is possible to suppose that he is depicted

as Roizman. The series' use of characters that refer to existing figures invites its viewers to relate the series to the Ukrainian society in which they actually live. Put differently, the show is not merely a fiction, but symbolizes real life, in all its concreteness.

## Conclusion

With the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyi as President of Ukraine, reality caught up with fiction: the man who became the president on television also did so in person. This could be regarded as an upside-down adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 15-16, 18): the viewer is not presented with a cultural product based on reality, as is custom in films, but rather with reality based on a scenario from a cultural product. This course of events suggests that our era is defined by *hypermediatisation*, in which, as Robert Saunders explains, 'the *real* is often superseded or at least prefigured by popular-cultural *representation*, effectively blurring the lines between the political and the popular' (2021: 5). In order to better understand this unique phenomenon, this article examined the extent to which the TV series *Servant of the People* could function as political marketing for Zelenskyi, by applying a method for character analysis from film studies to the series' lead character.

Our analysis showed that, as a fictional being, Holoborodko is identical in age, face, haircut, clothing style and ethnicity to his interpreter Zelenskyi. Information about his emotions and knowledge are provided by means of his actions, reactions and his contacts with other characters. His most striking trait is his modesty. He has a conservative disposition and is rather risk averse. He is clumsy and nervous at times, but when his historical expertise or his political beliefs are at stake, he is full of confidence. In his personal life, he is simple and rather unsuccessful: not only is he divorced, he has even moved in with his parents. As a teacher, he is adored by his students. As president, he gets along well with the common people, but not with the representatives of the establishment, as their interest is in being served by the people. Holoborodko is driven by a strong sense of responsibility, which guarantees his moral integrity. Confrontations with the ghosts of Lincoln and Che Guevara confirm that Holoborodko has the heart in the right place and is set out to serve the interests of the common people, without, however, opting for revolutionary violence. All this information can be captured by the viewer and result in character alignment. As an artifact, Holoborodko is first and foremost a character played by an actor acclaimed for his political satire. Settings such as his childhood bedroom and classroom showcase Holoborodko as a passionate historian. His aversion to the luxurious presidential office is testament to his integrity. The camera work highlights that he is not above the people, but part of them – also after being elected president. In a similar vein, the soundtrack reminds the viewer at the beginning of every episode that Holoborodko is a shining exception to the rule that politicians pursue their personal interests instead of serving the people. Holoborodko can also be analyzed as a symptom of Ukraine's mismanagement: the character is portrayed as a poor teacher who rebels against the structural undervaluation of his job. Finally, Holoborodko symbolizes servitude to the people, and ultimately also symbolizes the historical person who plays him: Zelenskyi. The identification between Holoborodko and Zelenskyi is facilitated by the reality effect – the series was set in the contemporary Ukrai-

nian society – as well as by the unusual resemblance between Holoborodko and Zelenskyi in terms of physical appearance, voice, age, ethnicity and even his circle of close colleagues.

After constructing and getting to know the character of Holoborodko, the viewer has sufficient information to build a relationship with him in order to decide whether they feel sympathy or rather antipathy towards Holoborodko – what Smith (1995) calls ‘allegiance’. The above analysis shows that Holoborodko is presented as the odd one out in the fictive Ukrainian political system, which resembles reality to a large extent. If the viewer does not agree with the political situation he encounters in real-life Ukraine, he will also react with disgust to the presentation of reality on the screen. The viewer is hence invited to identify with the hero who happens to be the only one willing to fight the existing political system.

According to the theoretical model on ‘performance’ of Erving Goffman (1956), we are all actors to perform a specific part, with a clear pre-scripted dramaturgical structure, confronting an audience of peers, whom we make believe to great extents that we coincide with these roles. The more the audience is invested in the part we play, the more it believes we actually are the self we present. This insight also applies to performances in a literal, theatrical sense, such as the one put on by Zelenskyi in *Servant of the People*. Although real human beings are always more complex than fictional characters, the latter can break free from the fictional world. Here, two factors are decisive: external realism (“the degree to which the elements of stories reflect our real world experiences”) and narrative realism (“the plausibility and coherence of the story itself”; Giles 2010: 448, 453). If famous soap opera actors are regularly mistaken for their characters in real life (see e.g. Weaver 2018), then it is reasonable to assume that a certain portion of the viewers of *Servant of the People* have found it natural to picture Zelenskyi as the real President of Ukraine. In other words, the producers of *Servant of the people* “made believe”; they “created the very social realities they enact” (Schechner 2013: 42). As Carroll (2019) has put it: “It is never clear where the character Holoborodko ends and the candidate Zelenskyi begins.” Thanks to the moral standards of Holoborodko and his striking resemblance to Zelenskyi, the television series *Servant of the People* could become a self-fulfilling prophecy: a process through which an originally false – or literally fictitious, in this case – projection led to its own confirmation.

Now that Zelenskyi is the actual President of Ukraine, he is in a way enacting or embodying the performance that was prescribed for him in *Servant of the People*. A meta-performance of this nature adds to the theatrical dimension which according to Schechner (2013) inevitably underlies all human activities: a performance is never completely spontaneous, but always partly learned or rehearsed – in the case of Zelenskyi also in a very literal way. His main role in *Servant of the People* can be seen as part of the proto-performance (training, rehearsal) leading to the actual (public) performance that is his presidency.

The impression of a given performance, be it in fiction or in reality, is never final. According to Narrative Theory, people continuously assess the narratives that circulate in their world. As Baker (2006: 141-162) reminds us, in doing so, they are able to reject narratives, even if they are heavily invested in them, when they find incoherence (internal inconsistency) or a lack of fidelity (concerning the value of the values). The fact that Zelenskyi’s presidency has been associated with a series of scandals, e.g. the appearance of his name in the Pandora Papers in 2021 (Cunningham and Francis 2021), has severely damaged his image as an actor who’s stepping into the footsteps of *Servant of the People*’s morally superior lead character. In December 2021, just 31 per cent of Ukrainians

supported him (Fitri 2022). However, as a result of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, Zelenskyi's identification with Holoborodko – however crucial it may have been for his election – has lost all its political relevance: given the tragic course of recent history, his political significance now fully depends on the way he stands up against the aggression of the Russian Federation, rather than on a marketable TV-performance. According to a new national poll conducted by the Ratings Sociological Group, after only one week of war, his popularity rating went up to more than 90 per cent (Fitri 2022).

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