

# LIBERATION WITHOUT VICTORY

In a wide-ranging conversation at his compound in Kyiv, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tells *The Atlantic* what Ukraine needs to survive—and describes the price it has paid.

By [Anne Applebaum](#) and [Jeffrey Goldberg](#)



Photograph by Christopher Occhicone for The Atlantic

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Kyiv is halfway normal now. Burnt-out Russian tanks have been removed from the roads leading into the city, traffic lights work, the subway runs, oranges are available for purchase. A cheerful balalaika orchestra was performing for returning refugees at the main rail station earlier this week, on the day we arrived to meet Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine.

The normality is deceiving. Although the Russians botched their opening campaign, they continue to bombard the capital and are now gathering in the east for a renewed attack on Ukraine. Zelensky has to prepare his country, and the world, for battles that could be deadlier than anything seen so far. The general in charge of the defense of Kyiv, Alexander Gruzevich, told us during a tour of the ravaged northwestern suburbs that he expects the Russians to try to return to the capital using intensified “scorched earth” tactics along the way: total destruction by ground artillery and air strikes, followed by the arrival of troops.

When we met Zelensky in Kyiv on Tuesday night, he told us the same thing: The optimism that many Americans and Europeans—and even some Ukrainians—are currently expressing is unjustified. If the Russians are not expelled from Ukraine’s eastern provinces, Zelensky said, “they can return to the center of Ukraine and even to Kyiv. It is possible. Now is not yet the time of victory.” Ukraine can win—and by “win,” he means continue to exist as a sovereign, if permanently besieged, state—only if its allies in Washington and across Europe move with alacrity to sufficiently arm the country. “We have a very small window of opportunity,” he said.

Anne Applebaum: Ukraine must win

It was late in the evening when we met Zelensky at his compound. The surrounding streets were barricaded and empty, the building itself almost entirely blacked out. Soldiers with flashlights led us through a maze of sandbagged corridors to a harshly lit, windowless room adorned only with Ukrainian flags. There was no formal protocol, no long wait, and we were not told to sit at the far end of an elongated table. Zelensky, the comedian

who has become a global icon of freedom and bravery, entered the room without fanfare.

“Hi!” he said, brightly, and then proceeded to complain about his back. (“I have a back, and that’s why I have some problems, but it’s okay!”) He thanked us for not filming the interview: Even though he’s been a professional television performer for all of his adult life, it’s a relief to occasionally go unfilmed.

On or off camera, Zelensky conducts himself with a deliberate lack of pretense. In a part of the world where *leadership* usually implies stiff posture and a pompous manner—and where signaling military authority requires, at a minimum, highly visible epaulets—he instead evokes sympathy and feelings of trust precisely because he sounds, in the words of a Ukrainian acquaintance, “like one of us.” He is a kind of anti-Putin: Rather than telegraphing a cold-eyed, murderous superiority, he wants people to understand him as an Everyman, a middle-aged dad with a bad back.



Volodymyr Zelensky sits down for an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg and Anne Applebaum. Kyiv, Ukraine. Tuesday, April 12, 2022. (Christopher Occhicone for *The Atlantic*)

We started the interview by reminding Zelensky, the Jewish president of a mostly Orthodox Christian and Catholic country, that his words were going to appear on Good Friday on the Western calendar and just before the first seder of Passover, a holiday that marks the liberation of an enslaved nation from an evil dictator.

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“We have pharaohs in neighboring countries,” Zelensky said, smiling. (The Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, is, in the minds of many Ukrainians, a sort of deputy pharaoh to Putin.) But although Ukrainians face a formidable enemy, they are not longing for an exodus: “We’re not going anywhere.” Nor does Zelensky plan to spend 40 years wandering in the desert. “We already have 30 years of our independence. I would not want us to fight for our independence for another 10 years.”

Russia's invasion has caused him to doubt whether it is still possible to associate religion with morality. "I do not understand when religious representatives of Russia"—here he meant the pro-Putin patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church—"say they are faithfully empowering soldiers to kill Ukrainians." Worse, "I cannot understand how a Christian country, the Russian Federation, with the largest Orthodox community in the world, will be killing people on these very days." During the Easter season, the Russians are planning "a great battle in Donbas," the Russian-occupied region in Ukraine's far east. "This is not Christian behavior at all, as I understand it. On Easter they will kill, and they will be killed."

As a result, many Ukrainians are going to spend the holy season under siege, hiding in basements. Others will not live to see the holiday at all. Just a few hours ago, early Friday morning, Russian bombs struck Kyiv again. "Ukraine is definitely not in the mood for celebration," Zelensky said. "People usually pray for the future of their families and their children. I think that today they will pray for the present, just to save everyone."

Much of Zelensky's time is spent on the telephone, on Zoom, on Skype, answering the questions of presidents and prime ministers—often the same questions, repeated to a maddening degree. "I like *new* questions," he said. "It's not interesting to answer the questions you already heard." He is frustrated, for instance, by repeated requests for his wish list of weapons systems. "When some leaders ask me what weapons I need, I need a moment to calm myself, because I already told them the week before. It's *Groundhog Day*. I feel like Bill Murray."

He says he has no choice but to keep trying. "I come and say that I need this particular weapon. You have it and here it is; we know where it is stored. Can you give it to us? We can even fly our own cargo planes and pick it up; we can even send three planes per day. We need armored vehicles, for example. And not one per day. We need 200 to 300 per day. These aren't personal taxis, just for me; our soldiers need transport. Flights are available, the whole thing can be organized, we can do all the logistics."

Later that night, one of Zelensky's advisers texted us with a list of what, exactly, Ukraine needs to repel the invasion from the east:

Artillery, 155 millimeters

Artillery shells, 152 millimeters as many as possible

Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (“Grad”, “Smerch”, “Tornado” or M142 HIMARS)

Armored vehicles (armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, others)

Tanks (T-72 tanks or similar tanks from the USA or Germany)

Air defense systems (S-300, “BUK” or western equivalents)

Military aircraft—MUST HAVE—to deblock our cities and save millions of Ukrainians as well as millions of Europeans)

It’s not that the various presidents and prime ministers who profess sympathy for the Ukrainian cause don’t want to help, Zelensky said: “They are not against us. They just live in a different situation. As long as they have not lost their parents and children, they do not feel the way we feel.” He makes the comparison to the conversations he has with the extraordinary defenders of Mariupol, the besieged port city where 21,000 civilians may have been killed so far. “For example, they say, ‘We need help; we have four hours.’ And even in Kyiv we don’t understand what four hours are. In Washington for sure they can’t understand. However, we are grateful to the U.S., because the planes with weapons are still coming.”

David Frum: What Ukraine needs now

Zelensky’s chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, spoke with us later that evening, and also expressed his confusion about the pace at which the Biden administration moves. Washington is providing new weapons every day, and President Joe Biden just made an additional \$800 million commitment to the defense of Ukraine. Yermak told us that he and Zelensky have strong relationships with many key American players—a break from the previous administration, which withdrew its ambassador just before Donald Trump’s “perfect phone call” with Zelensky (the call that triggered the first impeachment) and never replaced her. Biden, Yermak said, is “a man who can be trusted, not just a politician.” He had compliments for the secretaries of state and defense, and for leaders of Congress. And he

praised Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan: "There is not a single minute when we did not speak specifically or in substance," he said.

So everybody is great, but the weapons don't come fast enough?

"Please tell me with whom else I should speak," Yermak said.

Zelensky understands that his task is not merely to issue weapons requests and express urgency, but also to overcome old stereotypes of Ukraine as corrupt and incompetent, as well as the Russian propaganda that denies Ukraine the right to statehood. He wants to present an image of Ukraine as a modern and liberal state, one unified by a civic, as opposed to a purely ethnic, nationalism.

"The U.S., Britain, the EU, and European countries have always been skeptical of our development, of our 'Europeanness,'" he said. But now "many of them have changed their view of Ukraine and see us as equals." He has no time at all for international institutions. When he is asked about the role of the United Nations in defending Ukraine, one of its member states, from Russia, a member of the UN Security Council, he rolls his eyes and grimaces tragically. "Good thing we don't have a video," he says. "Just describe with words what you see on my face." Both Zelensky and Yermak have been thinking and talking about what alternative international institutions might look like. Perhaps there should be a list of human-rights violations or war crimes that trigger automatic responses, Yermak suggested to us. Right now, the process of issuing statements, announcing sanctions, providing responses of any kind is too complex, too bureaucratic, and above all too slow.

But if Western leaders can frustrate Zelensky, Russians send him careering toward despair. He has, from time to time since the war began, spoken in Russian and addressed Russian audiences, something he is accustomed to doing: It's what he once did for a living. His film and television production company was one of the biggest in the region, with an office in Moscow and viewers across the former Soviet Union.

His productive relationship with Russia and Russians came to an end in 2014, when people he had known for years stopped talking to him: “I just did not expect that people, a lot of partners, acquaintances—I thought they were friends, but they were not—just stopped picking up the phone.” Since then, many people he knows have changed, “become more brutal.” As Russia has shut down alternatives to state media—closing independent newspapers, television channels, and radio stations—Zelensky has found that his old acquaintances retreated further. “Even that small share of intelligent people, which was there, began to live in this informational bubble,” and he finds it very difficult to break through. “It’s the North Korean virus. People are getting absolutely vertical integrated messages. People don’t have any other way; they live in it.” He is clear about the author of the messages: “Putin has invited people into this information bunker, so to speak, without their knowledge, and they live there. It is, as the Beatles sang, a yellow submarine.”

Now, as Russian propaganda grows more baroque, he sometimes has trouble knowing how to process it. Perhaps that’s why he often leans on pop-cultural analogies: “The way they say that we’re eating people here, that we have killer pigeons, special biological weapons ... They make videos, create content, and show Ukrainian birds supposedly attacking their planes. Putin and Lukashenko—they make it sound like some kind of political *Monty Python*.”

If Ukraine is to have a secure future, he says, the Russian information barrier will have to be broken. Russians don’t just need access to facts; they need help understanding their own history, what they have done to their neighbors. At the moment, Zelensky says, “they are afraid to admit guilt.” He compares them to “alcoholics [who] don’t admit that they are alcoholic.” If they want to recover, “they have to learn to accept the truth.” Russians need leaders they choose, leaders they trust, “leaders who can then come in and say, ‘Yes, we did that.’ That’s how it worked in Germany.”

Throughout the conversation, Zelensky displayed his gifts for spontaneity, irony, and sarcasm. He didn’t tell jokes, exactly, but he said that he cannot part with humor altogether. “I think that any normal person cannot survive

without it. Without a sense of humor, as surgeons say, they would not be able to perform surgeries—to save lives and to lose people as well. They would simply lose their minds without humor.”

The same is true now for Ukrainians: “We can see what a tragedy we have, and it’s hard to live with it. But you have to live with it ... You can’t be serious about what Russian politicians and Lukashenko say every day. If you take it seriously, you might as well go and hang yourself.”

Is Putin afraid of humor?

“Very much so,” Zelensky said. Humor, he explained, reveals deeper truths. The famous television series in which Zelensky starred, *Servant of the People*, mocked the pomposity of Ukrainian politicians, attacked corruption, and presented the little guy as a hero; many of his sketches were clever satires of political leaders and their attitudes. “Jesters were allowed to tell the truth in ancient kingdoms,” he said, but Russia “fears the truth.” Comedy remains “a powerful weapon” because it is accessible. “Complex mechanisms and political formulations are difficult for humans to grasp. But through humor, it’s easy; it’s a shortcut.”

Read: [The uncanny prescience of \*Servant of the People\*](#)

Humor in Ukraine is now mainly of the darkest kind. At certain moments, Zelensky appeared stunned by the cruelty of it all. He tried to explain why he cannot feel—why most Ukrainians cannot feel—much sense of satisfaction in their underdog battlefield victories. Yes, they expelled the mighty Russian army from the northern part of the country. Yes, they killed, by their count, more than 19,000 Russian soldiers. Yes, they claim to have captured, destroyed, or damaged more than 600 tanks. Yes, they say they’ve sunk the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Yes, they changed the image of their country, and their understanding of themselves. But the price has been colossal.

Too many Ukrainians, Zelensky told us, died not in battle, but “in the act of torture.” Children got frostbite hiding in cellars; women were raped; elderly people died of starvation; pedestrians were shot down in the street.

“How will these people be able to enjoy the victory?” he asked. “They will not be able to do to the Russian soldiers what [the Russians] did to their children or daughters ... so they do not feel this victory.” Real victory, he said, will come only when the perpetrators are tried, convicted, and sentenced.

But when will that be? “How long do we have to wait? It’s a long process, these courts, tribunals, international courts.”

Abruptly, he made it personal. He has two children, he reminded us. “My daughter is almost 18. I don’t want to imagine, but if something had happened to my daughter, I would not have been satisfied if the attack had been repelled and the soldiers had run away,” he said. “I would have looked for these people and I would have found them. And then I would feel victory.”

What would he have done when he found them?

“I don’t know. Everything.”

Then, as if remembering the role history has given him, as an avatar of democratic civilization confronting the cruelty of a lawless regime, he became reflective. “You realize that you want to be a member of a civilized society, you have to calm down, because the law decides everything.”

But he feels, viscerally, what so many Ukrainians feel. “There will be no complete victory for people who lost their children, relatives, husbands, wives, parents. That’s what I mean,” he said. “They will not feel the victory, even when our territories are liberated.”

*Peter Pomerantsev contributed additional reporting.*