

# Why Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy Succeeds

By Don Sutherland

Despite enormous odds and great danger, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has led Ukraine's defense from Kyiv. Back on February 24th, as Russian tanks and troops poured into Ukraine from Russia and Belarus, President Zelenskyy could have fled the country much as Ashraf Ghani did when the Taliban advanced onto Kabul. He didn't.

Instead, he rallied his troops. Those troops thwarted a Russian plan to rapidly topple Ukraine's democratic government and replace it with a puppet regime. The war is now in its 54<sup>th</sup> day, and Ukraine continues to resist the Russian invasion.

What is the secret to President Zelenskyy's success?

A large part of that success very likely stems from the now widely-known reality that Zelenskyy is a rare transformational leader. He is a historic figure of the likes of a Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and John Kennedy. Such figures are uncommon in history.

Transformational leaders have an abundance of courage and an unwavering commitment to their cause. But their real power comes from their ability to communicate. Communication builds support and supporters. Without supporters, transformational leaders would be no more than solitary prophets preaching to an indifferent world.

Jay Conger, one of the world's leading scholars on transformational leadership explained, "We know from research on transformational leadership that at the core of effective leadership is the creation of values which inspire, provide meaning for, and instill a sense of purpose" in people. President Zelenskyy does this exceptionally well. Indeed, the enormous difference in leadership quality between Russia and Ukraine is perhaps a critical element that increases the probability of Ukraine's post-war survival as a sovereign state.

A closer look at how President Zelenskyy communicates is instructive. In a speech before the Estonian Parliament on April 13th, President Zelenskyy framed the Russian invasion in memorable terms. He explained:

*For thirty years, the nations of Europe have enjoyed peace, freedom and shared opportunities for development. Now, Russian revanchism has destroyed all the good that has worked for decades for peace in Europe, for the stability of life of European nations.*

These words were simple. They were purposeful. They had power. Estonians who suffered under Soviet oppression have first-hand knowledge of what "Russian revanchism" means for their country and in their lives. They don't need to be reminded of the suffering and hardship it brings. Global audiences understand the benefits of peace, freedom, and prosperity.

In each speech, Zelenskyy devotes time to tie Ukraine's struggle for survival with seminal moments from the historical experience of his audiences. In doing so, he forges common ground

that connects their countries to Ukraine and its ongoing struggle. He brings people together for a higher purpose—not only the survival of Ukraine, but also the fate of the free world.

In asking for weapons, he signals that Ukraine is willing to fight for its people and national survival. His request implies that victory is possible with such assistance. These points sustain hope among international audiences and, more importantly, the willingness to help Ukraine in its fight.

His regular requests for weapons and daily speeches convey to Ukraine's people that their President is doing everything possible in his position to bring them success as they battle an inhumane foe that has attacked civilians and civilian infrastructure alike.

The regularity of his speeches are as powerful for their symbolic value as they are for the message he brings to his audiences. They demonstrate ongoing and tireless effort on behalf of Ukraine. Such symbolism provides powerful motivation for Ukrainians to endure, to carry on, and to persist until they win. Ukrainians understand that they are fighting for their nation's and people's survival. They also recognize that they are at the front lines in the fight for a peaceful, secure, and free world. In that world the dignity and life of every person matters.

It is now more than 50 days since Russia unleashed its unprovoked and brutal invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine still lives. More and more countries are standing with Ukraine. President Zelenskyy has demonstrated that leadership matters. His transformational leadership gives Ukraine its best chance to secure a future that includes freedom, democracy, and prosperity. Without it, Ukraine would almost certainly have crumbled in the face of the Russian onslaught and its future would have been lost to Russian oppression.