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Towards an Antiwar Transnational Populism? An Analysis of the Construction of ‘the Russian People’ in Volodymyr Zelensky’s Wartime Speeches

Seongcheol Kim 

Institute of Intercultural and International Studies, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany
Email: seongcheol.kim@uni-bremen.de

(Received 13 March 2023; revised 12 July 2023; accepted 2 October 2023;
first published online 24 November 2023)

Abstract

This article examines how the identity of the citizens or ‘the people’ of Russia is constructed in the wartime speeches of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. Drawing on a discursive approach to populism using post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA), the article first identifies in Zelensky’s eve-of-invasion address an antiwar transnational populist construction of a common antiwar interest of ‘ordinary people’ in Russia and Ukraine against the Russian government’s overtures towards war. After the full-scale invasion, this construction initially carried over into Zelensky’s appeals to ordinary Russians as being under threat from and capable of resisting their own government, before his messaging shifted towards ascribing collective responsibility for the invasion to Russian citizens, following the revelation of the Bucha war crimes. Ultimately, antiwar transnational populism remained a short-lived and contextually bounded phenomenon, limited to an initial phase until early April and briefly resurfacing in Zelensky’s appeal to ‘indigenous peoples’ of the Caucasus and Siberia in late September 2022.

Keywords: antiwar politics; Russian invasion of Ukraine; transnational populism; Ukraine; Volodymyr Zelensky

In the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky quickly became one of the most recognizable figures in world politics. Zelensky had been elected president in 2019 following a remarkable trajectory from actor and comedian known for the hit TV show *Servant of the People* to a presidential candidate for a newly formed political party with the same name, recording the largest margin of victory in the history of Ukrainian presidential elections with over 73% in the runoff (compared with 24% for incumbent Petro Poroshenko). Zelensky’s election campaign was widely characterized as populist,

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appealing to ‘the people’ against ‘the oligarchs’ allegedly being served by ‘the politicians’ (Ash and Shapovalov 2022; Baysha 2022; Viedrov 2022; Yanchenko and Zulianello 2023). In constructing ‘the people’ (in the plural, люди) as a culturally heterogeneous and atomized entity (Viedrov 2022), Zelensky’s populism arguably ran contrary to ideational definitions that ascribe to populism the image of a homogeneous and pure ‘people’ (Mudde 2004). Rather, the Zelensky phenomenon has especially lent itself to analysis from a discursive approach that understands populism as a political logic of constructing a popular underdog in antagonistic demarcation against a power bloc, however this division might then be normatively coded or performatively embellished (Laclau 2005). It is from this perspective that Zelensky’s famous speech addressing Russian citizens on the eve of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 might be read as a moment of *antiwar transnational populism*: namely, by interpellating the ‘people’ on both sides of the Russian–Ukrainian border – for all their stark differences – as those who stand to suffer most from war and calling on ‘simple, ordinary people’ within Russia to stop their own government’s overtures towards invading Ukraine.

If this was a moment of antiwar transnational populism, to what extent did it carry over into Zelensky’s communication after the full-scale invasion, as the Ukrainian president took up the increasingly recognizable speaker position of a military commander-in-chief regularly appearing in wartime briefings before domestic and international audiences alike? This article sets out to investigate how populism, especially in a transnational guise, might be adopted specifically by the leader of an invaded country to appeal to the citizens of the aggressor state in the context of a full-scale war of aggression. In doing so, I draw on a dynamic understanding of populism as a ‘series of discursive resources’ (Laclau 2005: 176), as a political logic of constructing a bottom-versus-top frontier of ‘people’ versus power that can be put to use by political actors in various discursive combinations and articulatory moments – an approach that has already found extensive application not only in studies of Zelensky’s rise to the presidency (Baysha 2022; Viedrov 2022), but also in the small but growing literature on transnational populism (De Cleen et al. 2020; Moffitt 2017; Panayotu 2021). In addition to unpacking a notable aspect of Zelensky’s wartime communication and the extent of its continuity from his eve-of-invasion appeal, an analysis of his construction of the citizens or ‘the people’ of Russia in the face of Russian aggression can potentially contribute towards identifying an antiwar subtype of transnational populism at work, alongside anti-imperialist (Latin American) or Eurodemocratic (DiEM25) varieties identifiable based on existing scholarship. Here, a Laclau-inspired discursive approach drawing on post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA) can contribute a nuanced perspective for tracing the specific moments and phases in which antiwar transnational populism can be identified in Zelensky’s wartime communication as well as the continuities and shifts over time.

In the following, an overview of the discursive approach to populism presents conceptual considerations on transnational populism and its relevance for the specific context of Zelensky in the face of Russian aggression, followed by a methodological section outlining the PDA approach and the data corpus of Zelensky’s wartime speeches. In an empirical vein, the article first develops an analysis of Zelensky’s eve-of-invasion speech as a starting point for an inquiry into antiwar

transnational populism in Zelensky's wartime speeches when appealing to Russian citizens after the full-scale invasion. The analysis finds that the antiwar transnational populism of Zelensky's eve-of-invasion speech continued in his initial appeals to ordinary Russians as threatened by and capable of resisting the war waged by the Russian government, with the revelations of the Bucha war crimes in early April constituting a turning point after which he ascribed collective responsibility for the invasion to ordinary Russian citizens in light of their collective silence. Within this second phase, in turn, antiwar transnational populism briefly resurfaced in Zelensky's appeal to the 'indigenous peoples' of the Caucasus and Siberia, in particular in the context of short-lived anti-mobilization protests in Russia in late September 2022.

Populism and the transnational: a discursive approach

Over the years, a discursive approach to populism based on Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory has crystallized as a major current within the growing field of populism research. From this perspective, populism is a political logic of constructing a popular underdog in antagonistic demarcation against a power bloc (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In the terminology of Laclau's discourse theory, populism entails privileging the logic of equivalence over difference to construct a collective subject cutting across differential identities, crystallizing in the name of 'the people' as a catch-all ('empty') signifier representing an equivalential chain of various demands against an 'elite'. Populist discourses can thus take on a wide range of contents, depending on how the popular subject and its Other(s) are constructed (see also Kim 2022). Following a discursive approach, what is nonetheless a distinguishing feature of all populisms is the bottom-versus-top 'architectonics' of underdog versus power (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017): 'the people' is constructed as an underdog subject pitted against those 'at the top' and excluded from exercising the sovereignty promised to it in a democracy (see also Canovan 2002). This bottom-versus-top logic of populism is certainly combinable with – but conceptually distinct from – a nationalist or nativist one of in versus out or national versus foreign, as seen in far-right populisms that ascribe to 'the people' both an underdog position and an ethno-cultural essence.

One possibility that emerges from such a conceptualization of populism is that 'the people' might also be constructed as a transnational underdog straddling state borders. De Cleen et al. (2020) and Panayotu (2021) likewise draw on a discursive approach following Laclau to analyse the DiEM25 project launched by Yanis Varoufakis as a paradigmatic case of (left-wing) transnational populism, appealing to 'the citizens' or 'the peoples' of Europe blocked from the exercise of sovereignty at the EU level by transnational political and economic elites. Notably, this construction does not deny differences (including national ones) internal to this transnational popular subject – indeed, references to 'peoples' in the plural suggest a multiplicity of already constituted national *demoi* – while also invoking all 'citizens' or 'people' of Europe (as the plural of 'person') as constituting the sovereign subject of collective democratic rights at the EU level. While Moffitt (2017), De Cleen et al. (2020) and Panayotu (2021) all note this tension between the transnational (i.e. 'the people' as superseding national boundaries) and the international (i.e. a multiplicity

of nationally situated ‘peoples’), the transnational dimension is nonetheless arguably a distinguishing feature of DiEM25 vis-à-vis other notable examples that remain primarily at the level of the international, such as the interstate linkages between nationally rooted Latin American left-wing populisms via formats such as ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – a construct whose collective identity relies on common opposition to economic and political domination by the US; see also De la Torre 2017).

While the example of Hugo Chávez’s left-wing populism has been noted for its international linkages and references to underdog ‘peoples’ against US imperialism (De la Torre 2017; Moffitt 2017), an additionally transnational dimension could arguably be identified here, too, whenever Chávez referred not only to underdog ‘peoples’ as nationally situated *demoi*, but also to disadvantaged masses of ‘people’ everywhere¹ – including within the US itself. For example, Chávez’s programme of providing reduced-cost fuel for low-income households in the US via the Venezuelan state-owned company Citgo has been cited as an example of ‘citizen diplomacy’ (Featherstone 2006), appealing to a common identity of poor, underprivileged ‘people’ across state borders by virtue of their poor and underprivileged status rather than their belonging to one or more underdog national communities (‘peoples’). What is notable here is the deployment of transnationally inflected populism in the context of antagonistic interstate relations: Chávez constructs an equivalential link between underprivileged ‘people’ (as the plural of ‘person’) in Venezuela and the US while opposing the US government as an imperialist oppressor. In an analogous vein – albeit in the very different context of Russian military aggression against Ukraine – the question is whether transnational populism might also be taken up by the leader of an invaded country to appeal to the citizens (or ‘people’ in the plural) of the aggressor state against their government. The case of Zelensky in the face of Russian invasion is an especially interesting one given the Ukrainian president’s distinct positionality – performatively enacted to great effect in his successful presidential campaign (Onuch and Hale 2022; Viedrov 2022) – as a Russian-speaking Ukrainian from the blue-collar city of Kryvyi Rih who is sensitive to the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the country: a subject position potentially well suited for also appealing to ordinary Russians against the hostile actions of the Russian government, especially when considered in addition to his relative familiarity to TV audiences in Russia from his previous career as a media entrepreneur and comedian.

At the same time, the context facing Zelensky in February 2022 was a complex one for numerous reasons: while he had been elected in 2019 on the promise of restoring peace and resolving the Donbas conflict – leading some observers to speak of an ‘anti-polarization’ (Ash and Shapovalov 2022) or ‘back-to-normality’ populism (Viedrov 2022) – his efforts to renew the peace process had stalled with little in the way of tangible progress, while attracting simultaneous criticism from some for legitimizing ‘terrorists’ and from others for not doing enough to re-integrate separatist territories on the basis of the Minsk Agreements (Ishchenko 2022). The run-up to the full-scale Russian invasion arguably came at a time when the Ukrainian president was beleaguered domestically, having antagonized both the (pro-EU) Poroshenko and (pro-Russian) Medvedchuk camps – two of the main opposition blocs in parliament – with his media reforms targeting

their TV channels in the name of fighting ‘oligarchs’ (in addition to personal sanctions against Medvedchuk, Putin’s long-time friend and Ukraine’s most prominent pro-Russian politician at the time). In this manner, Zelensky’s anti-oligarchy populism had also undergone a shift: from attacking the ‘oligarchy’ primarily for its perceived inability to restore peace (and propensity to divide ‘the people’ over identity issues) to now focusing the attack on ‘oligarchs’ in the media sphere (Onuch and Hale 2022), which amounted in effect to alienating opposition forces on both sides of the geopolitical divide. In this context – coupled with an escalation of bellicose rhetoric from the Kremlin accusing ‘Nazis’ of committing ‘genocide’ in the Donbas – the choice of adopting antiwar transnational populism was certainly a possibility, but one that did not necessarily promise an easy way out: it would signal a return to the inclusionary pro-peace messaging of Zelensky’s presidential campaign, but in a context where that message was looking increasingly spent after nearly three years in office. After the onset of the invasion, moreover, the question would be whether Zelensky would continue to appeal to a common antiwar interest of ordinary Ukrainians and Russians or, on the contrary, accuse the latter of complicity in their government’s aggression: in discursive terms, whether an equivalential link would be constructed between ordinary Ukrainian and Russian citizens or between Russian citizens and their government.

In light of these considerations, an analysis of Zelensky’s wartime communication and, in particular, his appeals to the (non-military and non-governmental) citizens or ‘the people’ of Russia can be instructive in probing the possibilities and limitations of a specifically antiwar transnational populism emerging in the context of a full-scale war of aggression. In this exploratory vein, the analysis can contribute to identifying an antiwar subtype within the still developing literature on transnational populism, in addition to the likes of anti-imperialist (Latin American) and Eurodemocratic (DiEM25) as identifiable based on the aforementioned studies. In particular, antiwar and anti-imperialist transnational populism (such as the Chávez example for the latter) arguably share a similarity in discursive structure when it comes to the leader of one country appealing to the ordinary citizens of a would-be aggressor or oppressor state (whatever specific contents are tied to this attribution and however the merits of such a construction might then be evaluated) against their own government.² Whether this indeed came to pass with Zelensky in the face of Russian aggression is a question to be explored in the ensuing analysis; as previously noted, his eve-of-invasion speech with its appeal to a common antiwar interest of ‘simple, ordinary people’ in Russia and Ukraine already points to a starting point for such an inquiry. In the following section, I outline the methodological framework and data corpus for conducting this analysis.

Data and methods

The basic premise of post-foundational discourse analysis, following the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001 (1985)), is that social identities are constructed relationally via articulatory practices that place discursive elements in meaning-making relations to each other. The two basic operations by which this takes place (following the most basic version of PDA, which is the one used here; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000) are the logics of difference and equivalence. All

identities are, by definition, predicated on difference: *A* is *A* because it is distinct from *B*, *C*, *D* and so on. With the logic of equivalence, differential elements are articulated as equivalent against a common opponent or ‘constitutive outside’ that makes their equivalence possible: for instance, *A* is distinct from *B*, *C* and *D*, but united with them in a chain of equivalences of $A \equiv B \equiv C \equiv D$ against *Z*. Relations of equivalence between the differential elements *A*, *B*, *C* and *D* are thus predicated on an antagonistic demarcation against *Z* that goes beyond simple difference: *Z* is not only not *A*, *B*, *C*, ..., but also positioned collectively against *A*, *B*, *C*, ..., and this negative dimension of common opposition to something is what enables the equivalential chain $A \equiv B \equiv C \equiv D \mid Z$, with the vertical bar $\mid$ designating here the demarcation effect sustaining the equivalence.

Populism, following Laclau’s (2005) discursive approach, entails forming a chain of equivalences of differential demands (e.g. ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘higher wages’ etc.) and/or subject positions (e.g. ‘workers’, ‘businesspeople’, ‘unemployed’ etc.) around the name of a popular underdog or ‘people’ following a bottom-versus-top antagonistic demarcation against a power bloc or ‘elite’. Here, Laclau’s theorization provides the advantage of drawing on the ‘methodological holism’ of PDA (Marttila 2015), whereby the conceptual building blocks of discourse theory such as difference and equivalence become analytical tools for the empirical study of phenomena such as nationalism or populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). The interplay of difference and equivalence means that, in a populist discourse, the identities of ‘workers’, ‘businesspeople’ and so on maintain their differential particularities, but the logic of equivalence is privileged over that of difference insofar as the populist construction posits their unity in the name of a ‘people’ against a common outside (e.g. ‘the elite’, which may itself be constructed equivalentially: ‘bankers’, ‘politicians’, ‘multiculturalism’ etc.). Unpacking the equivalential construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in this manner to the level of differential and equivalential relations between individual elements makes it possible to identify the interplay between populism with its bottom-versus-top antagonistic demarcation and other -isms such as nationalism or nativism with its in-versus-out demarcation of national versus foreign. Transnational populism, in turn, would entail an equivalential construction of a popular underdog cutting across national differences so as to construct ‘the transnational people’ following a bottom-versus-top antagonistic demarcation against an ‘elite’ (De Cleen et al. 2020: 308). An anti-war transnational populism, following the considerations outlined previously, would entail constructing such a transnational popular underdog cutting specifically across the would-be aggressed and aggressor states in common opposition to an ‘elite’ held to be responsible for war (or the threat thereof).

In the following, a corpus of 12 speeches made by Zelensky with references to Russian citizens during the first year of the full-scale invasion was analysed by the author in the Ukrainian or Russian original (see Table 1 for an overview), beginning with Zelensky’s aforementioned speech in the early hours of 24 February 2022. The speeches were selected based on an initial search for references directly addressing Russian citizens via the website of the Office of the President of Ukraine – which has transcriptions in the original language – in addition to the author’s own monitoring of Zelensky’s speeches in the context of the invasion; in case of slight differences between the spoken and written word, the original

Table 1. Overview of Data Corpus

Source description	Date	War context
Appeal to Russian citizens	24/02/22	Eve of invasion
Press statement	24/02/22	Day 1 of invasion
Daily briefing	26/02/22	Day 3 of invasion
Daily briefing	06/03/22	Day 10 of invasion
Daily briefing	11/03/22	Day 15 of invasion
Daily briefing	03/04/22	Two days after Bucha revelations
Daily briefing	06/04/22	Five days after Bucha revelations
Daily briefing	14/08/22	Russian summer offensive in eastern Ukraine
Daily briefing	22/09/22	Day after Russia mobilization announcement
Appeal to ‘peoples of Caucasus’	29/09/22	Week after Russia mobilization announcement
Daily briefing	31/12/22	Russian winter offensive in eastern Ukraine
Daily briefing	15/01/23	Russian winter offensive in eastern Ukraine

video recordings of the speeches were used as the version of record for the analysis. I conducted the discourse analysis by manually coding the transcription of each speech – in particular, the analytically relevant parts with references to Russian citizens – for relations of equivalence (which already presuppose relations of difference, which are hence not coded) and the accompanying antagonistic demarcation effects. Discursive elements that are set in equivalence to each other were marked in **bold**, with the elements that they are set in antagonistic demarcation against in *italics* (with the demarcation effect designated by the vertical bar |). For example, take the following passage from Zelensky’s eve-of-invasion speech: ‘|War| is great misery, and this misery has a big price. In all senses of the word. **People** lose **money, reputation, standard of living**. They lose **freedom**. But most importantly, they lose **their close ones**’ (see the Supplementary Material for all the analysed speeches). Here, the elements marked in bold are articulated equivalentially as collectively under threat from the prospect of war. By thus tracing the articulatory relations between discursive elements, a PDA approach can unpack the meaning constructions at work in these speeches.

Zelensky on the eve of the invasion

In the earliest hours of 24 February 2022, the Team Zelensky YouTube channel (the same one in use since the presidential campaign) uploaded a video in Russian titled ‘Address by Volodymyr Zelensky to the Citizens of the Russian Federation’. In it, Zelensky – making his last public appearance to date in a suit and tie – began by declaring that due to the Russian president’s latest refusal to engage in telephone talks, he wishes to ‘address all citizens of Russia, not as president’, but rather ‘as a citizen of Ukraine’: a citizen of a country against which the Russian government, ‘your leadership’, has ordered the movement of nearly 200,000 troops amassed

along the border – a move that ‘can become the beginning of a major war ... at any moment’ (Zelensky 2022a). Against this menacing backdrop, Zelensky (2022a) declared that, contrary to the Russian government’s allegations, ‘The people of Ukraine want peace. The government of Ukraine wants peace’; furthermore, he argued, the people and government of Ukraine are simply demanding what matters to all people everywhere, including those in Russia: namely, ‘the right to determine by itself its own future, the right of every society to security and the right of every person to life without threats. This is all important for us. ... I certainly know this is important for you, too.’ When Zelensky (2022a) then pronounced his oft-quoted soundbite, ‘We don’t need war, neither cold nor hot nor hybrid’,³ the ‘we’ here could be understood based on the preceding sentences as referring to ordinary Russians and Ukrainians alike, linked in a relation of equivalence as two collective subjects that, for all their stark differences (and divergent futures), are held to have in common a shared opponent or threat – in this case, the threat of war launched by the Russian government.

Zelensky thus constructed this equivalential link between Russian and Ukrainian citizens around a common interest that all ordinary people have in peace and security – just as ‘you are demanding security guarantees from NATO, we are also demanding security guarantees, of Ukraine’s security, from you’ – whereas war means ‘great misery’ and stands in the way of such guarantees:

War deprives everyone of guarantees. No one will have security guarantees any more. Who will suffer from this more than anything? People. Who does not want this more than anything? People. Who can prevent this? People. Are these people among you? I am sure: public figures, journalists, musicians, actors, athletes, academics, doctors, bloggers, stand-up comedians, TikTokers, and many others. Ordinary people, simple, ordinary people: men, women, older people, children, fathers, and especially mothers. Just like people in Ukraine, like the government in Ukraine, no matter how much they try to convince you of the opposite. (Zelensky 2022a)

Here, Zelensky constructed a chain of equivalences of ‘simple, ordinary people’ from all walks of life in both Russia and Ukraine who are alike in one fundamental regard: namely, in standing to lose the most from war and – for those in Russia in particular – having the power to prevent it by standing up against the Russian government’s overtures towards war. Zelensky’s appeal thus pointed to an antiwar transnational populism, interpellating ‘people’ across national borders – in this case, those of two states on the brink of full-scale war – as an underdog collectively threatened by war launched from above by an aggressor government that must be resisted (especially by those within the aggressor state). In doing so, Zelensky assumed the position of an ordinary Ukrainian citizen addressing ordinary Russian citizens – appealing also to his personal experiences, such as his own ties to the Donbas: from Donetsk, where he bonded with locals while cheering on the Ukrainian national football team at Euro 2012, to Luhansk, the city of his best friend’s parents – in order to forge horizontal relations of equivalence at the level of ordinary citizens across Russia and Ukraine in common opposition to the threat from above: namely, war ordered by the Russian government. In

concluding his speech, Zelensky (2022a) repeated the rhetorical question posed by the 1961 Soviet antiwar song ‘Do the Russians want war?’ with the response: ‘But the answer depends only on you, citizens of the Russian Federation.’

Zelensky’s speech is a remarkable piece of political rhetoric that, although followed just hours later by the full-scale Russian invasion, quickly went viral on YouTube and was even reported by (regime-loyal) Russian news outlets such as Lenta.ru and RBK in the early hours before the invasion. What is notable and bears emphasizing is that Zelensky’s construction of an equivalential link between ordinary Russians and Ukrainians consisted solely in a common antiwar interest of ‘people’ in the plural (люди) on both sides against the Russian government, while refraining from any kind of appeal to cultural or historical proximity and, indeed, explicitly rejecting the Kremlin narrative that Russians and Ukrainians constitute one singular people (народ): ‘But this doesn’t make us one whole. It doesn’t dissolve us into you’ (Zelensky 2022a). Indeed, Zelensky accentuated the differential relation between the peoples (as national *demoi*) of Russia and Ukraine, with their divergent futures – ‘We are different, but this is no reason to be enemies’ – while relying on an antiwar and populist appeal to forge a transnational equivalence between ‘simple, ordinary people’ in terms of the sheer gap between their fundamental interest in avoiding war and the Russian government’s menacing overtures towards it over the heads of its own people. In this manner, Zelensky articulated his appeal as a last-gasp attempt at diplomacy by appealing directly to the Russian people, while concluding on an ominous note by implying that if war does break out, it will have been because ‘you’ as the citizens of Russia collectively failed to prevent it. Seen this way, once the Russian invasion began several hours later, there were at least two directions in which Zelensky’s construction of Russian citizens’ role in the invasion could develop: emphasizing their collective complicity in letting the war happen or, on the contrary, appealing to their power to stop it from below together with Ukrainian resistance against the invaders (this being the antiwar transnational populist option).

After the full-scale invasion: antiwar transnational populism until Bucha

In an initial phase from the beginning of the full-scale invasion until early April 2022, Zelensky – now stepping into the increasingly recognizable speaker position of a military commander-in-chief with his daily briefings on the state of the country’s defence against invasion – continued to interpellate ordinary people within Russia as themselves under threat from and capable of resisting the war from below against their own government. In his late morning press statement in front of journalists on 24 February, Zelensky called for Ukrainian national unity in the face of Russian invasion and reserved a brief appeal (in Ukrainian) to the ‘citizens of Russia’: ‘The Russian state stands on the path of evil. But a lot still depends on the Russian people. The citizens of Russia today will determine themselves which path each of them is on. It is time for all those in Russia who haven’t lost their conscience to go out and declare protest against this war, against the war with Ukraine’ (24 Kanal 2022a). As he had done some 12 hours earlier, Zelensky appealed to ordinary Russian ‘citizens’ against ‘the Russian state’, yet the former’s scope for action against the latter had clearly narrowed: in Zelensky’s words, the Russian

state had definitively chosen ‘the path of evil’ and it was now up to Russian citizens as individuals to decide whether to follow this path or not. Zelensky proceeded to call on Ukrainians to appeal to any relatives, friends or contacts in Russia so that Russians know ‘the truth’ about the invasion, holding out hope that public opinion in Russia could still be influenced via horizontal cross-border channels of communication at the level of ordinary citizens. While the stakes had shifted in the past 12 hours – from preventing a full-scale invasion to opposing one already underway – the underlying logic of Zelensky’s appeals to Russians thus remained similar: the only way to stop this war was through the collective agency of ordinary people rising up against an autocratic regime by starting to live and act in truth (an argument reminiscent of Václav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless*), with the help of communicative interventions by ordinary Ukrainians via transnational channels open to them.

This morning-of-invasion appeal established a performative pattern whereby Zelensky, in the middle of his subsequent daily briefings in Ukrainian to the domestic public in military dress, included periodic appeals in Russian to Russian citizens as part of his official communication on the nation’s defence against invasion. On 26 February, towards the end of his daily briefing, Zelensky appealed to Russians (switching from Ukrainian to Russian) by pointing to ‘thousands of victims, hundreds of prisoners who can’t understand what they were sent to Ukraine for. ... The faster you tell your government that the war must stop quickly, the more of your people will remain alive’ (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022a). In this vein, he noted that ‘We are seeing that there are indeed actions of your citizens against the war ... I thank you for this reaction’, thanking by name antiwar journalists such as Leonid Parfyonov, Dmitry Muratov, Yury Dud and ‘thousands of other Russians whose conscience is sounding loudly’ (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022a). In exhorting Russian citizens to ‘stop those who are lying to you, lying to us, lying to the entire world’, Zelensky articulated this transnational equivalence between ‘you’ and ‘us’ around the promise of peace against ‘those’ at the top in Russia standing in its way: ‘We can live in peace – in global peace, in human peace’ (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022a).

As the antiwar protests in Russia were increasingly and visibly suppressed, Zelensky’s appeals to Russian citizens took on a heightened, almost menacing, sense of urgency. In a remarkable appeal during his 6 March briefing, Zelensky argued that ‘the citizens of the Russian Federation’ are facing ‘exactly the same choice’ as Ukrainians resisting the invasion: namely, ‘between life and slavery’, between the ‘freedom’ and ‘prosperity’ Russians have experienced in the past and the ‘poverty’ and ‘repression’ that will only get worse (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022b). Again, Zelensky constructed an equivalential link between ordinary Russians and Ukrainians against a common threat and indeed as a common struggle against this threat – namely, the prospect of subjugation by an autocratic Russian regime as part and parcel of its war effort at home and abroad – while insisting that the time ‘to defeat evil’ is now, when Russians opposing the war run the risk of ‘dismissals or police vans, not gulags; material losses, not executions’ (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022b). In reiterating the need to act for the common aim of peace (‘We Ukrainians want peace!’ ‘Don’t be silent!’), Zelensky intensified the personal stakes for ordinary Russians by constructing a wide-ranging

equivalential chain of threats linked to the war: economic hardship, political repression and the worst of both worlds of 1990s-style pauperization and 1930s-type autocratization. On 11 March 2022, in an appeal to ‘thinking Russians’, Zelensky warned that ‘the government of Russia’ is knowingly and surreptitiously leading the country ‘back to the nineties’, to the ‘time of shock and poverty’ and not least of ‘very limited possibilities for ordinary people’ (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022c). The emphasis on the threat of mass economic hardship and political repression is notable here as an extension (and intensification) of the chain of equivalences vis-à-vis Zelensky’s (2022a) eve-of-invasion speech, which had referred to the depriving effects of war in general terms (‘People lose money, reputation, standard of living. They lose freedom’).

It is worth noting that, as in the eve-of-invasion speech, Zelensky’s construction of an equivalential link between ordinary Ukrainians and Russians did not appeal to some imagined brotherhood of these peoples, but rested solely on the common threat of war waged from above and the negative implications from it for ‘people’ on both sides – thus pointing once again to the function of antiwar and populist appeals for sustaining the transnational equivalence. The channels of communication with Russian citizens were articulated in this vein not as resulting from positive affinities (historically rooted or otherwise), but as a matter of necessity for the sole common aim of stopping the war. The nuances of this message came to the fore in an online interview granted by Zelensky to Russian (mostly high-profile oppositional, apart from *Kommersant*) journalists on 27 March 2022 – an unparalleled instance of dialogue with Russian media at the highest level following the full-scale invasion. Here, Zelensky openly acknowledged that his attitudes towards Russia, ‘even towards the people’ (народ), had ‘strongly worsened’ since 24 February but that doing everything for peace was necessarily ‘for the children’, even though ‘people [люди] won’t forgive each other for anything’ on either side after all the horrors of war (24 Kanal 2022b). In this vein, Zelensky also reaffirmed the importance of antiwar dissent within Russia, arguing that ‘the war will not end’ until ‘people from different professions’ break through ‘the information curtain’ at an everyday level and bring about a societal consensus that the war was ‘a big mistake by the Russian government that brought catastrophe to the Russian people’ (24 Kanal 2022b).

In his appeals to Russian citizens during this phase, Zelensky interpellated them as under threat from and capable of resisting their own government, but also as ultimately responsible for their country’s path – and thus possessing a collective agency as the sovereign subject of the state, even within an autocracy – just as he had ended his eve-of-invasion speech with the claim that the question of war or peace ‘depends only on you’. As the war carried on and the horrors of the invasion intensified, the question would be whether Zelensky’s construction would maintain this equivalential link to ordinary Russians as a source of resistance against the invasion or shift towards ascribing them complicity in the latter.

After Bucha: the question of collective responsibility

In effect, public revelations of Russian war crimes (designated as such by the National Police of Ukraine and Amnesty International), including mass killings

and torture of civilians, in Bucha and other towns near Kyiv signalled a shift in Zelensky's construction of ordinary Russians' place in the invasion. In his 3 April 2022 briefing, Zelensky declared that he 'want[s] every mother of every Russian soldier to see the bodies of the people killed in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel', rhetorically questioning, 'What did the Ukrainian city of Bucha do to your Russia?' to provoke such horrific crimes against 'ordinary peaceful civilians in an ordinary peaceful city' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022d). If Zelensky had previously appealed to a common antiwar interest with 'ordinary people' within Russia, it was now precisely 'ordinary people' on the Ukrainian side who were victims of war crimes on a shocking scale by ordinary Russian soldiers who 'killed consciously and with pleasure', leading Zelensky to ascribe collective responsibility to 'your Russia' for producing such 'evil'. Here, he directly addressed 'Russian mothers' who surely 'could not have been unaware of what is inside your children', in addition to 'all the leaders of the Russian Federation' who are responsible for 'how their orders are executed' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022d). In this manner, Zelensky constructed an equivalential link between Russian society and its leadership alike as bearing collective responsibility for war crimes. On 6 April, Zelensky declared that these crimes are 'the ultimate argument for every citizen of Russia to finally decide whether you're for war or peace' and to 'demand an end to war' if they do not want to be 'equated with Nazis for the rest of their lives' – a predicament that concerns all 'ordinary citizens' of Russia, 'not only public figures' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022e). Zelensky's argument here was that Bucha had revealed the true nature of 'the current Russian state' to the world as being responsible for 'mass murder' and that anyone inside Russia who does not actively 'demand an end to war' is making themselves complicit in 'Nazism' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022e).

These interventions signalled a shift in Zelensky's communication towards Russian citizens insofar as the previous equivalential construction of ordinary Ukrainians and Russians against the Russian government now gave way to an equivalential construction of ordinary Russians with their government's crimes against Ukrainians. The signifier 'Bucha', which came to stand for a chain of equivalences of Russian atrocities in Zelensky's early April briefings and in Ukrainian public discourse more generally, constituted a turning point in this regard. Coupled with the dying out of antiwar protests within Russia under conditions of harsh repression around this time, the question that Zelensky had been posing to Russians all along – will you do what it takes to speak out and stop this war? – came to be answered increasingly in the negative. After the Bucha revelations and in a subsequent context followed by Russia's brutal conquest of Mariupol, the collapse of Turkish-mediated peace negotiations, and high death tolls from Russian bombings of civilian targets in Kremenchuk and Vinnytsia in the summer, Zelensky further intensified the equivalential construction of Russian citizens' collective responsibility for the war by demanding EU-wide visa restrictions against Russian passport-holders. In his 14 August 2022 briefing, Zelensky justified this demand by arguing that 'when evil takes on such a scale, people's silence approaches the level of complicity and the refusal of real struggle against evil becomes help for it. So if you have Russian citizenship and you're silent, it means you're not resisting, it means you're supporting' the invasion (Office of

the President of Ukraine 2022f). It is worth noting that this shift was occurring within the terms of Zelensky's message ever since the eve-of-invasion speech: the onus of responsibility for stopping this war was on 'you' the citizens all along and you chose to remain silent, even with every new escalation of 'evil' along the way.

This message came to the fore following the Russian government's announcement of so-called partial mobilization (following the successful Ukrainian counter-offensive) in September 2022. In his 22 September briefing, Zelensky informed Russian citizens that they were being sent to die because 'one person in Russia decided so' (i.e. Putin) and 'you are co-participants in all these crimes ... because you were silent, because you are being silent' – leaving mobilized Russians with the choice to 'protest, resist, run away, or surrender' if they wanted to avoid death (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022g). At the same time, he noted, 'There have been protests against mobilization in the cities of Russia – albeit not massive ones, but they took place' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022g). Here, he singled out the 'people in Dagestan, in Buryatia, in other national republics and oblasts of Russia' as sources of protest given their disproportionate targeting for mobilization and the flaring up of anti-mobilization rallies in these regions (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022g). In this manner, a differential construction emerged in Zelensky's construction between titular Russian nationals and the ethnic minorities of the Caucasus and Siberia in particular – at least for the ultimately short-lived duration of the anti-mobilization protests – with the latter group being ascribed a greater willingness to resist a war that was not theirs. In a separate video statement on 29 September 2022, against the backdrop of visible outbursts of protest in Dagestan and Buryatia, Zelensky addressed the 'peoples of the Caucasus' in Russian in front of a Kyiv monument to Imam Shamil, a 19th-century Caucasian independence leader against Russian rule who lived in internal exile in the city. Here, Zelensky (2022b) constructed an equivalential link between the 'peoples of the Caucasus' and the Ukrainian resistance against Russian invasion around a shared experience of Russian aggression – 'The Caucasus knows what this means. The Caucasus has seen it' – and the common threat of Russia's war of 'lies, terror, and annihilation of indigenous peoples' directed against them. In this vein, he called on the 'peoples of the Caucasus' and 'all peoples in the territory of Russia' to 'resist in order to not die' in a war started by 'one person' and imposed on them from above: 'Dagestanis don't have to die in Ukraine – Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, Circassians, and any other people [народ] that ended up under the Russian flag' (Zelensky 2022b). In this manner, what resurfaced was Zelensky's earlier antiwar transnational populism of constructing an equivalence between Ukrainians and those within Russia resisting the invasion, albeit specifically in relation to non-titular (non-state-organized) minority peoples as victims of a war that was not theirs (by a state that was not theirs) and as equally under threat as Ukrainians from the Russian government's transnational project of 'annihilation of indigenous peoples'. This messaging, however, remained short-lived with Zelensky's one-time appeal on 29 September in the context of ultimately fleeting anti-mobilization protests in Dagestan and elsewhere.

In the subsequent course of the war, characterized by virtually no organized antiwar protest within Russia and heightened targeting of Ukrainian civilian

infrastructure by Russian forces, Zelensky has continued to interpellate Russian citizens as complicit in their government's aggression while warning them of the consequences of this complicity. In his 31 December 2022 briefing following the latest Russian attacks on civilian targets, Zelensky declared to Russian citizens that 'your leader' was ultimately 'burning your country and your future' and that 'No one will forgive you for the terror' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022h). On 15 January 2023, following the deadly Russian bombing of an apartment block in Dnipro, Zelensky warned 'all those in Russia – and from Russia – who even now couldn't pronounce even a few words of condemnation of this terror' that 'Your cowardly silence, your attempt to wait out what is happening, will only end with these terrorists coming after you too' and 'there will be no one to defend you' (Office of the President of Ukraine 2023). Following the logic of Zelensky's previous appeals (especially in his early March briefings), these were the same consequences that were at stake from the beginning and that Russian citizens had now consigned themselves to as a result of their collective silence.

Conclusion

What emerges from the analysis is that the antiwar transnational populism of Zelensky's eve-of-invasion speech initially carried over into his appeals to Russian citizens until early April, constructing an equivalential link between ordinary Russians and Ukrainians against war waged from above by the Russian government and calling on Russian citizens to rise up against the latter. Bucha constituted a turning point in this regard, with Zelensky subsequently constructing an equivalential relation between Russian war crimes and ordinary Russian citizens as bearing collective responsibility. This line of argument intensified in the summer with Zelensky's demand for EU entry restrictions for Russian citizens in the aftermath of Russian bombings of civilian targets in Kremenchuk and Vinnytsia. By the time so-called partial mobilization was announced in Russia in September, Zelensky's message was that ordinary Russians had consigned themselves to their fates by having remained silent – with a brief exception here being his appeal to the peoples of the Caucasus and Siberia in particular to rise up against an externally imposed war. The analysis thus shows that antiwar transnational populism remained a largely fleeting and contextually bounded phenomenon, characterizing Zelensky's initial messaging towards ordinary Russians before revelations of widespread war crimes in early April – which altered Zelensky's construction of ordinary Russian citizens' place in the invasion, albeit within the terms of his previous construction of war or peace as a collective choice – and momentarily again as an appeal specifically tailored to non-titular 'indigenous peoples' of Russia in the context of anti-mobilization protests in late September.

These findings contribute towards understanding one aspect of Zelensky's war-time communication and the possibility of an antiwar subtype of transnational populism more generally, providing a basis for further investigations. The nuanced shifts in Zelensky's references to Russian citizens can be contextualized in relation to key developments of the war as previously noted and could be further linked to other aspects of his transnational wartime communication, such as his (mostly video) addresses to national parliaments around the world. Here, the question

would be how chains of equivalences with other ‘peoples’ or ordinary ‘people’ in other countries are constructed and whether elements of antiwar transnational populism can also be found in this context. What is nonetheless notable about the appeals to Russian citizens in particular is their performative incorporation into Zelensky’s daily military briefings and their discursive structure (in the initial phase until early April 2022) of cutting across the aggressed/aggressor state divide at the level of ordinary ‘people’ against the aggressor government – articulating this equivalence precisely not around cultural affinities, but rather a shared underdog position vis-à-vis the aggressor government.⁴ This discursive structure arguably constitutes a common feature between Zelensky’s initial antiwar transnational populism in the initial phase and oft-cited examples of anti-imperialist transnational populism from other contexts (such as the aforementioned case of Chávez), even as they differ greatly in content. A discursive perspective is particularly useful in this vein for parsing the structural similarities and differences across subtypes within the still developing literature on the phenomenon of transnational populism.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.48320/03A7E751-7DC4-4E1A-8986-20EE2C8658E5>.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Lazaros Karavasilis, Kostiantyn Yanchenko, two anonymous reviewers as well as colloquium participants at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen for their comments. The author acknowledges financial support by the German Research Foundation (‘Between Populism and Radical Democracy, between Party and Movement: On the Discursive Afterlife of the Movements of the Squares’, DFG grant number 469527186).

Notes

1 In English and numerous other languages including Ukrainian and Russian, ‘people’-as-masses in this sense (люди, as opposed to ‘peoples’ *qua* state-forming communities, народи/народы) is best understood as the plural of ‘person’; there are languages, however, that have singular equivalents (e.g. ‘gente’ in Spanish and Italian). This is also the distinction between *plebs* and *populus* that Laclau (2005) emphasizes as a constitutive polysemy in the ‘people’ of populism.

2 The structural similarities notwithstanding, the antiwar and anti-imperialist subtypes notably differ in ideological inflection: while the latter are mostly found on the left, Zelensky’s is self-avowedly centrist (Viedrov 2022), with some even pointing to a non-ideological ‘valence populism’ (Yanchenko and Zulianello 2023).

3 Notably, the (regime-loyal) Russian newspaper *RBK* reported this quote as follows: ‘Zelensky declared that Kyiv “doesn’t need war, neither cold nor hot nor hybrid”’ (Volkova 2022) – thus differentially breaking up the equivalential construction of this ‘we’ as referring only to the Ukrainian government (‘Kyiv’).

4 A question for future research – made difficult by continuing challenges for opinion polling and field research in Russia – would be how such appeals have been received in Russian public opinion.

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