

Zelensky, Yermak and Ukraine's wartime governance

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A peculiar political system has emerged during the five years of Volodymyr Zelensky's rule in Ukraine, with virtually all power concentrated in the hands of the head of state and the Office of the President of Ukraine (OPU) which he controls. The Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament) and the Cabinet of Ministers have been marginalised, and the most important decisions in the country are made at Bankova Street, where the president and his administration are based. This is partly a consequence of the characteristic prevalence of informal governance mechanisms over formal ones in Ukraine, which includes the role of the president being greater than laid out under the constitution.

Under Zelensky's rule, and in wartime conditions, this model has reached extreme proportions, resulting in the unprecedentedly strong position of Andriy Yermak, who serves as the head of the OPU. Zelensky says he is an outstanding manager and publicly declares full confidence in his actions. However, Yermak's status raises doubts as to who is really making some of the most important decisions – a president who was elected with 73% of the vote, or an appointed official.

Constitutional division of power

The Ukrainian Constitution defines the country's political system as semi-presidential. Formally, central power lies with the Verkhovna Rada, which appoints the government and can pass a vote of no confidence in it. The Verkhovna Rada is the only body authorised to issue legislative acts with the force of law. Even during martial law, the president is not permitted to rule by decree with the force of law. The decrees and regulations issued by the president can only be of an executive nature, adhering to the constitution or acts passed by parliament. The president balances the parliament to some extent, for example, by using his or her veto power to suspend legislation which the parliament has passed.

In practice, these checks and balances often fail, and under certain political conditions (such as when pro-presidential forces gain a majority in parliament), the head of state can gain the upper hand over the legislative power. This is exactly what happened after the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, when Zelensky effectively gained full control of the country (see below).

The President's Office has a unique position within the system of state institutions. Formally, it is an auxiliary entity tasked with providing organisational, advisory, and expert support to the president. It is headed by a chief (*kerivnyk*), who reports only to the president and coordinates the work of



subordinate bodies and services. In 2020, the *kerivnyk* gained a new prerogative: overseeing the implementation of the president's decrees and regulations.

Although these instruments do not in themselves grant the chief of the President's Office formal permission to directly interfere with the work of other government bodies, they provide enormous opportunities for 'soft' influence on political processes through informal oversight of the activities of these bodies and institutions, meetings with key officials, and most importantly, direct access to the president. The extent of the *kerivnyk*'s power and influence depends on their relationship with the head of state and the leaders of these entities. Yermak has fully exploited these opportunities, achieving a position of influence unparalleled by any of his predecessors.

Ze!Team and 2019

The checks and balances system has never functioned properly in Ukraine mainly due to the political situation after the election, the dynamics between the various groups within the ruling camp, the dominance of individual regions, oligarchs vying for political influence, and the evolving aspirations of the Ukrainian public. The present system is a result of the circumstances under which Zelensky and his party, Servant of the People (SN), came to power in 2019, the war, the legislation in force under martial law, and the diminishing influence of big business and the media.¹

When the future president introduced his dream team in 2019,² it included several of his friends from Kvartal 95, the film studio he had founded: Ivan Bakanov, who served as the head of the

Security Service of Ukraine from 2019 to 2022, Serhiy Trofimov (deputy head of the President's Office between 2019 and 2020), and Serhiy Shefir (the president's chief aide responsible for contacts with oligarchs from 2019 to 2024). Andriy Bohdan, a former lawyer for the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky and a high-ranking official in Mykola Azarov's government from 2010 to 2014, was chosen to manage the administration. Bohdan served as Zelensky's guide in domestic politics. Yermak had not yet become a central figure in the emerging power structure.

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Parliament's term(ination) and the marginalisation of the cabinet

On 20 May 2019, Zelensky dissolved the parliament ahead of schedule. Servant of the People won the elections in July 2019 and secured an absolute majority with 254 deputies, enabling the party to govern independently. The party was expected to bring a new quality to politics by distancing itself from the old elites and introducing fresh faces. In reality, though, it was a rather incoherent, inexperienced group dependent on the president's popularity and easy to control. The first months of its governance were characterised by a 'turbo regime,' as legislative projects were processed at breakneck speed. In many cases the process was too fast for the deputies to read the bills carefully.³ This method of organising the Verkhovna Rada's work led to the marginalisation not only of the parliament but also of Servant of the People itself. The authoritarian and often brutal style of politics practised

¹ S. Matuszak, 'Ukrainian oligarchs and their businesses: their fading importance', *OSW Commentary*, no. 517, 13 June 2023, osw.waw.pl.

² "Дрімтім" Зеленського: інтерв'ю з Русланом Рябошапкою та Олександром Данилюком', *BBC News Україна*, 19 May 2020, [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com).

³ T. Iwański *et al.*, 'Neither a miracle nor a disaster – President Zelensky's first year in office', *OSW Commentary*, no. 334, 20 May 2020, osw.waw.pl.

by Bohdan, who frequently insulted deputies, was not helpful. The parliament lost its autonomy and became a voting machine executing the orders of the President's Office.⁴

The Cabinet of Ministers also suffered degradation. The technocrat government led by Oleksiy Honcharuk, appointed in August 2019, was supposed to fulfil Zelensky's promises to bring new people into politics and surround himself with experts. However, this had specific political implications: the cabinet, which was effectively appointed by the President's Office, lacked strong support from the party, and thus from the parliament, so the president and his inner circle started to play an even greater role. The cabinet proved to be ineffective – the experts recruited from business or non-governmental organisations lacked experience in both bureaucratic work and the political battles necessary to push through their own initiatives.

Andriy Yermak: the beginning

Bohdan's micromanagement of the political process caused increasing frustration among the deputies and government members. Yermak had served as an aide in the presidential administration since 2019 and was responsible for organising meetings and managing the head of state's schedule. He capitalised on the frustration caused by Bohdan. Like most of Zelensky's team, Yermak had little experience in politics. He was a copyright lawyer and first met the future Ukrainian leader in 2011–2012, when Yermak's law firm provided legal services to Inter Media Group, where Zelensky served as general producer.

Yermak was taking on important tasks, particularly in international relations, and was thus steadily increasing his direct access to the president. He participated in talks with Donald Trump's representatives, and he is credited with effectively defusing issues in US–Ukrainian relations.⁵ Yermak co-coordinated the prisoner exchange with Russia and played a key role in preparing the Normandy Format summit in Paris in December 2019.⁶ His successes in informal diplomacy reinforced his belief that personal contacts and quick decisions work better than slow, bureaucratic procedures. These achievements also clearly impressed the president who, faced with increasing problems with the combative Bohdan, appointed Yermak to head the President's Office in February 2020, despite allegations he has unclear ties to Moscow.⁷

In the first quarter of 2020 they had to face their first major challenge together – during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zelensky and Yermak fell ill simultaneously. Their shared

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experience of isolation and Yermak's assistance in managing the crisis further strengthened their relationship.⁸ During this period, the requirement to hold competitions for positions in the state administration was suspended, creating yet another tool for strengthening the influence of the President's Office over other state bodies.

⁴ 'Богдан про "Слугу народу": "Там є божевільні люди, психічно хворі"', *Українська правда*, 16 September 2019, pravda.com.ua; Р. Кравець, 'Бунт на кораблі. Як "Слуга народу" пішла проти волі Зеленського і Богдана', *Українська правда*, 20 September 2019, pravda.com.ua.

⁵ О. Тороп, 'П'ять років Зеленського. З ким він прийшов до влади, як звільняв своїх друзів і хто зараз його команда', *BBC News Україна*, 20 May 2024, bbc.com.

⁶ K. Charwyło, T. Iwański, 'No breakthrough at the Normandy Four summit in Paris', *OSW*, 10 December 2019, osw.waw.pl.

⁷ М. Савчук, '«Формула Єрмака»: бізнес-зв'язки головного переговорника Зеленського з політичною елітою Росії', *Радіо Свобода*, 3 October 2019, radiosvoboda.org.

⁸ О. Тороп, 'П'ять років Зеленського...', *op. cit.*

The president's team breaks apart

When Andriy Yermak assumed his position as the head of the President's Office, a prolonged reshuffle began, affecting both the government and the President's Office. In March 2020, Denys Shmyhal, a manager and technocrat with no strong political backing, was appointed as prime minister, replacing Oleksiy Honcharuk. Shmyhal's cabinet differed significantly from the previous one, consisting largely of experienced officials and individuals skilled at working at the highest levels of government. Many of these individuals were appointed at Yermak's initiative, such as Yulia Svyrydenko (Deputy Economy Minister, who since November 2021 has served as a Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister) and his long-term acquaintance Oleksiy Reznikov (Defence Minister).

Yermak gradually introduced his own people into the President's Office. He clashed with Serhiy Trofimov, Bohdan's first deputy, who was responsible for regional policy. Trofimov's position was undermined by the poor performance of Servant of the People in the local elections, which gave Yermak a reason to remove him from his position in November 2020, and eventually, to oust him from the President's Office in March 2024. Yermak also hired his own protégés as a counterbalance to the team that had been put in place by his predecessor. In summer 2020, he installed Oleh Tatarov as his deputy. Tatarov had served as a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the brutal crackdown on the Maidan protests in 2013 and 2014. In his role as deputy, he duplicated the tasks performed by Bohdan's associate, Yuriy Smirnov, who was ultimately dismissed from the President's Office in May 2024. Tatarov became Yermak's right-hand man, responsible for coordinating the secret services and law enforcement agencies, and used his position to exert pressure on investigators.⁹ Mykhailo Podolyak was also given an equivalent role to that played by the head of media communication, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, who was eventually removed from the President's Office in January 2023 due to allegations of having an ostentatiously luxurious lifestyle at the time of war. Yermak also successfully managed to marginalise and then dismiss Serhiy Shefir, Zelensky's longtime mentor and business partner, who had long been considered impossible to remove.

In the President's Office, Yermak surrounded himself with people he already knew and trusted, such as Oleksiy Kuleba and Mykola Tochytskyi.

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He formed a kind of parallel government with them, in which Tatarov is in charge of policies concerning the law enforcement agencies, Rostyslav Shurma handles economic affairs, Ihor Zhovkva and Tochytskyi are responsible for foreign policy, Kuleba oversees regional policy, and Iryna Mudra is in charge of the justice system.¹⁰ This 'shadow cabinet' carries out the tasks set by Yermak and his deputies.

Further proof that the President's Office enjoys a stronger position than the Cabinet of Ministers may be found in the fact that from the beginning of the war until July 2023, the Verkhovna Rada passed over 90% of the bills submitted by the president, compared to just 35% of those submitted by the government.¹¹ Yermak has also installed his associates as important state officials. He made Andriy Kostin the Prosecutor General and Andriy Pyshnyi the Director of the National Bank of Ukraine, both of whom had co-founded the NGO Vidchuy with him.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ V. Lebediuk, 'Political Dynamics in Ukraine After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion', *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs* 2023, no. 4, p. 97.

Wartime concentration of power

The outbreak of full-scale war further spurred the centralisation of power in the hands of the President's Office. This process gained momentum due to a heightened sense of threat and the social and political consolidation around a president who remained in Kyiv and became a symbol of resistance. This led to a further weakening of the parliament, including both the opposition and the government. Further contributing to the marginalisation of the Verkhovna Rada were the measures introduced in response to the Russian invasion in order to improve the security of its operation. These measures included the suspension of sessions during the first months of the war, the absence of televised broadcasts, and restricting journalists' access to the sessions. All this negatively impacted the transparency of the decision-making process and the quality of debate. While the secrecy of parliamentary meetings can be justified by security concerns, objectively speaking, the Verkhovna Rada increasingly became a tool in the president's hands. Zelensky ceased regular meetings with members of the Servant of the People grouping; since the start of the invasion, only one such meeting has been held, on 21 February 2024. Reportedly, Zelensky himself remarked that if the Verkhovna Rada were to disappear one day, no one in Ukraine would notice.¹²

The war has also weakened the oligarchs, who had traditionally wielded significant influence over Ukrainian politics. Many of them

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have lost significant portions of their assets due to the war or nationalisation. They have also been significantly affected by the economic crisis¹³ resulting from the invasion. Furthermore, since parliament's role has been reduced, their opportunities to influence the government through deputies have declined.

The managerial-presidential system, advanced phase

Yermak is often referred to as the 'vice president',¹⁴ not the first but not necessarily the second person in the state¹⁵ and as the prime minister, foreign minister, and chief of the administration – all in one¹⁶ He is unmarried and has no children so, according to media reports,¹⁷ he sometimes spends entire days at Bankova Street, where he oversees the daily operations of the President's Office, organises meetings for the head of state, controls communication channels, and monitors the flow of information.¹⁸ Critics have attempted to discredit him by exposing inconvenient facts about his

¹² Р. Романюк, Р. Кравець, 'Ні влади, ні опозиції. Чим живе український парламент під час війни', Українська правда, 27 April 2023, pravda.com.ua.

¹³ S. Matuszak, 'Ukrainian oligarchs and their businesses: their fading importance', *op. cit.*

¹⁴ О. Тороп, С. Хоменко, 'Віцепрезидент Єрмак. Як помічник Зеленського став ключовою фігурою в українській владі', BBC News Україна, 18 May 2023, bbc.com.

¹⁵ Д. Бобрицький, К. Бердинських, 'Не перший, але й не другий. Як голова ОП Андрій Єрмак отримав повноваження, що поступають хіба президентським. І то не завжди', New Voice, 2 October 2021, nv.ua.

¹⁶ S. O'Grady, D.L. Stern, I. Khurshudyan, 'Zelensky's chief aide flexes power, irks critics — and makes no apologies', The Washington Post, 18 May 2024, washingtonpost.com.

¹⁷ P. Starobin, 'Ukraine's real power broker. Is Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's right-hand man, handing war-torn Ukraine over to the oligarchs?', Business Insider, 18 December 2023, businessinsider.com.

¹⁸ The Bihus.info portal reported that the President's Office commissions analyses from the company Mediateka, owned by Oleksandr Marikovskiy, an MP representing Servant of the People. These analyses frame criticism of the president as either attacks by bots or as the opposition's populism. See P. Мельник, 'Bihus.Info: Медіазвіти для Офісу Президента називають критику влади «атаками», а відповідальність покладають на «опозиційні ЗМІ»', Детектор медіа, 16 January 2024, detector.media.

family: his brother was charged with attempted corruption (the case was quietly dismissed¹⁹), and his father was unsuccessfully linked to Russia's FSB.²⁰

Yermak does not declare any political ambitions. He has even stated, "My only dream, my only ambition is to be the shadow of the president, to be wherever the president wants me to be".²¹ He rarely leaves Zelensky's side, accompanying him on most foreign trips, meetings with local politicians, and public appearances. He also takes care to eliminate competition for the president. Yermak is credited with playing the main role in the dismissal of the popular General Valeriy Zaluzhny, the only person who enjoyed greater public trust than the president.²² It is likely that it was Yermak who orchestrated the dismissal of Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov in May 2024 due to Kubrakov's excessive independence in contacts with external partners.²³

In addition to staffing decisions, Yermak coordinates key foreign policy tasks, sidelining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He chairs groups dealing with imposing sanctions on Russia, securing international security guarantees for Ukraine, organising the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland, and talks with the United States.

It remains unclear where Yermak's decisions end and Zelensky's begin, though people from the president's inner circle insist that Zelensky has the final say.²⁴ The dynamics of their relationship is also uncertain; whether it is based on personal trust and friendship or whether they treat each other as means to an end: Yermak viewing the president as a necessary political patron, and Zelensky seeing his subordinate as indispensable in helping him govern the state.

Undoubtedly, a significant feature of the system they have built is the personalisation of tasks and power: an individual's position does not depend on the official role they hold but on a particular status derived from merit, connections, or general usefulness.²⁵ This status determines the degree of the person's media activity, foreign contacts and autonomy. These boundaries must not be crossed, as Kubrakov learned the hard way.

Yermak fatigue

The Ukrainian public is increasingly aware of the issues associated with the system of governance that has developed during the war. According to a survey conducted in June 2024, 43% of Ukrainians believe that the quality of democracy under President Zelensky has deteriorated, with 28% attributing this decline to the actions of those in power, 11% to the war, and 3% to both of these factors combined.²⁶ Half of the respondents believe that Zelensky has failed to fulfil the promises he made during the election campaign. However, people tend to be less critical of Zelensky himself than of those around him – 50% cite the presence of his corrupt and dishonest aides as the main reason for these problems, and 32% blame the lack of reliable people on his team. Only 27% attribute the issues

¹⁹ О. Тороп, С. Хоменко, 'Віцепрезидент Єрмак...', *op. cit.*

²⁰ А. Шеремет, '«Втомився слухати цей бруд». Єрмак відповів на звинувачення у «співпраці» батька з ФСБ', Бабель, 28 October 2020, babel.ua.

²¹ S. O'Grady, D.L. Stern, I. Khurshudyan, 'Zelensky's chief aide flexes power, irks critics — and makes no apologies', *op. cit.*

²² А. Hrushetskyi, 'Direction of affairs in the country and trust in political, military and public figures', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 15 February 2024, kiis.com.ua.

²³ О. Подать, 'Рада звільнила міністра Кубракова: він каже, що Шмигаль та фракція не попереджали', Інформатор Україна, 9 May 2024, informator.ua.

²⁴ M. Tucker, 'Court of Zelensky rocked by aide's 'thirst for power'', The Times, 7 June 2024, thetimes.com.

²⁵ R. Romaniuk, R. Kravets, 'St Andrew the First-Called Apostle: how Andrii Yermak became Zelensky's right-hand man', Українська правда, 25 June 2024, pravda.com.ua.

²⁶ А. Hrushetskyi, '5th anniversary of the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky: how the situation with democracy and the economy in Ukraine has changed and the desired form of government', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 4 June 2024, kiis.com.ua.

to his incompetence.²⁷ Yermak ranks low in trust surveys, with 56% of respondents expressing distrust towards him.²⁸

Western partners are also showing signs of fatigue with Yermak. There are concerns abroad that the concentration of power within the President's Office could threaten democratic processes in Ukraine.²⁹ Some Western diplomats believe that Yermak's activities diminish the president's authority, raising questions about who is truly making the decisions.³⁰ This situation is ironically underscored by the fact that in 2024, *Time* magazine listed Yermak among the 100 most influential people in Europe, but not Zelensky.

Prospects for the system of power

Despite the mutual loyalty between Zelensky and Yermak, the president holds a crucial advantage over his chief of staff: he is Yermak's superior and can remove him from office with a single signature. The lack of public trust in Yermak suggests that he would struggle to emerge as an independent political leader. His dismissal could also benefit Zelensky by helping to restore his image both domestically and internationally. Therefore, Yermak's influence will persist only as long as the president wishes. Nevertheless, Yermak's dismissal would certainly adversely affect the presidential camp's efficiency.

The existing system of power is partly a result of the extraordinary circumstances the Russian invasion has brought about. In these conditions, a strong and effective decision-making centre can be beneficial, even if it does not fully align with constitutional principles. Once the war ends, the dynamics of social and political events is likely to lead to a new balance of power. This new deal will depend on the outcomes of the presidential and parliamentary elections, and on the new personal and oligarchic alliances that will be forged following the elections.

²⁷ A. Hrushetskyi, '5th anniversary of the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukrainians' perception of the President's fulfillment of pre-election promises', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 5 June 2024, kiis.com.ua.

²⁸ 'Оцінка ситуації в країні, довіра до соціальних інститутів, політиків, посадовців та громадських діячів, ставлення до виборів, віра в перемогу (червень 2024р.)', Разумков Центр, 25 June 2024, razumkov.org.ua.

²⁹ 'Concerns about Yermak's influence on Ukrainian democracy discussed by analyst', New Voice, 10 June 2024, english.nv.ua; M. Tucker, 'Court of Zelensky rocked by aide's 'thirst for power'', *op. cit.*

³⁰ S. Shuster, 'Inside Andriy Yermak's Quest for Peace in Ukraine', *Time*, 25 June 2024, time.com.