

Article

# Selfies and Speeches of a President at War: Volodymyr Zelensky’s Strategy of Spectacularization on Instagram

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## Abstract

The spectacularization of politics is not the exclusive patrimony of the media in their news coverage. Leaders from all over the world have successfully incorporated this “communicative style” into their own strategies, a style that finds a suitable space in visual social networks such as Instagram, in dynamic formats such as video, and in crisis contexts. This article analyzes the “spectacularization” of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s through Instagram. The methodological proposal is based on the study of the 5W in relation to the digital image and investigates the leading role, the staging, the space, and the technical resources of the videos. Thus, a content analysis is applied to a sample of 143 videos published by the president on his official profile in February–March 2022, when the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began, and in September–October 2022. We observed that Zelensky uses video in an intense and “spectacular” way: He exploits his figure in a professional style, strategically combines careful staging with amateurism, and uses resources such as subtitles to internationalize his discourse.

## Keywords

celebritization; Instagram; politainment; political communication; pop politics; social media; spectacularization; Ukraine; war; Zelensky

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

The war that began in February 2022 between Russia and Ukraine has been the subject of great attention by western media, who have put their focus on the president of the invaded country, Volodymyr Zelensky. During the conflict, this president, an actor by profession, has managed to expand his popularity in Ukraine beyond borders and build a powerful leadership through images—especially videos—that have been key to informing and mobilizing during the conflict, taking advantage of the capacity of social networks to make anything go “viral” (Specia, 2022). According to experts, Zelensky has drawn up an effective communication strategy that conceives social networks as one more part of the battlefield, the

success of which is based on five pillars: the personal story that drives him, his mastery of speech, his staging in heroic style, permanent streaming through video selfies, and the projection of his image as an atypically close leader (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2022). All these features are linked to a communicative style of growing importance, based on the so-called “spectacularization of politics,” or politainment, which is part of the digital landscape of our days.

The first analyses carried out by political communication professionals on the great impact of Zelensky’s publications on Instagram, the visual network par excellence, have proposed to examine the profile of the Ukrainian president on this platform. Coming from an academic point of view, our research aims to shed a little more light

on this recent and still developing phenomenon, complementing studies from before the war that already assess the strategic and successful use of the digital image by Volodymyr Zelensky. In this article, videos published by the leader both during the first days of the war and eight months later are examined to verify the existence and evolution of features of a political spectacularization present in his audiovisual messages with the war scene as a backdrop.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Political Spectacularization on Instagram

For some time now, political communication has been equated with a plethora of terms and expressions from the world of entertainment. In this sense, it has been metaphorically suggested that politics is nothing more than a representation, a drama in which various characters intervene, governed by a script and a singular story that is staged to provoke emotions in a group of spectators (Arroyo, 2012). Although this parallelism is not new and could be traced back to the context of classical Greece, the truth is that it is still valid in the collective imagination and the academic literature of our day. Del Rey Morató (2011, p. 109) brings up this historical thread when he states that, today, “as in the Athens of Pericles, power depends on rhetoric,” one more leg of the show understood as something “that is offered to the eye or to the intellectual contemplation and is capable of attracting attention and moving the spirit by infusing it with delight, astonishment, pain or other more or less vivid or noble affections” (Espectáculo, n.d.).

The spectacularization of contemporary politics is associated with mediatization, that is, the scenario characterized by the central and indispensable weight of the media in the political sphere (Mazzoleni, 2008). More specifically, behind this process is the preponderance of television, which parties have used to communicate with a massive audience since the 1960s (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). How politics has mutated in order to adapt to television grammar is labeled as “politainment” and is reflected, for example, in the appearance of candidates in entertainment programs such as talk shows (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022) or in the transience and instantaneity typical of audiovisual language transferred to speeches. Politainment, the reverse of infotainment (Ferré-Pavia, 2013), is also present in the prominence given to entertainment, emotion, trivialization, and the personalization of messages (Durántez-Stolle & Martínez-Sanz, 2019). Entering the agenda and receiving the attention of the spotlights goes through prioritizing a light approach to the issues, focused on the leaders and their personal traits, on humanized stories, and spectacular anecdotes that break with the ordinary. The role of the leader is fundamental, but political training or the ability to manage public resources is not enough for him to succeed; it is also necessary that

he has communication skills, aesthetic appeal, telegenic and rhetorical skills, and other similar qualities (Berrocal-Gonzalo, 2004). That is why some authors speak of “pop politics” (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009) or celebrity politics (Richardson, 2015) to refer to this communicative scenario.

Online pop politics (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) would be the continuation of this style in the virtual sphere. In a hybrid communicative scenario (Chadwick, 2017), where traditional media complement and coexist with social networks, the latter has allowed numerous actors to gain autonomy and voice in the public sphere. Not only have citizens once marginalized and reduced to the role of a passive audience been given visibility through the use of 2.0 platforms, but so have political parties gained this visibility and learned how to captivate the electorate using these tools, especially since the electoral campaign of the 2008 US elections (Bimber, 2014). One of the strategies identified by various studies of online political communication is the spectacularization of the content of involved actors, which is closely linked to the use of image and video (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). The visual format plays a central role in the construction of the political image (Schill, 2012) and its captivating nature allows political actors to create almost personalized bonds with the audience (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020). From the point of view of the latter, another resource related to the use of the image in the context of politainment in the online sphere is memes, the power of persuasion of which are no longer ignored by parties (Zamora et al., 2021).

Instagram maximizes the ability of candidates to self-represent and can thus easily lead to their spectacularization. In this social network, candidates can make themselves known professionally or from a personal point of view through the deliberate selection of the elements they include in their images, such as symbols or location (Bellido-Pérez & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2022; Gordillo-Rodríguez & Bellido-Pérez, 2021). Instagram’s visual nature is the key to its success among parties and candidates at the international level (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020) because it allows these users to build an image of leadership based on positive attributes such as honesty, sincerity, credibility, kindness, or leadership ability (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). In this way, Instagram functions as a “virtual billboard” (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 22) where self-referential staging is displayed and programmatic content is left aside (Ferré-Pavia & Codina, 2022).

Spectacularization on this platform can be identified based on four key features: the importance and focus given to the visual (the image), the simplification of messages, intense personalization, and the strategic use of private life (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). As a consequence, politicians are immersed in a process of celebritization (Oliva et al., 2015) that they take advantage of to humanize their figure (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017) and activate empathy and citizen

mobilization (Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017). The characteristics of Instagram, associated with image and visual performativity, favor this “construction of authenticity” that can lead to the depoliticization of content (Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

## 2.2. *The Spectacular Communication Strategy of Volodymyr Zelensky: From Peace to War*

The current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is a significant example of a leader who has known how to read and take advantage of social networks from a “spectacular” point of view, using them at the service of his political cause. This communicative strategy has not been limited to the war context that constitutes our study period. Its precedent dates back to 2019 when Zelensky acceded to the presidential mandate through national elections. These elections are precisely his political debut; until then Zelensky was mainly known in his country for his work as a producer and actor, having starred in the successful series *Servant of the People*, in which he plays the president (Ryabinska, 2020). Zelensky’s media notoriety meant that, once he made the leap to politics from the world of entertainment, his candidacy was widely supported by the population, who valued the figure of an outsider at a time traditional parties were viewed with growing discredit (Rohozinska & Shpak, 2019). This is how the fictitious president became real and the *Servant of the People* party went from the small screen to the Verkhovna Rada, setting itself up as a paradigm of celebrity politics and evoking the role of figures such as Ronald Reagan in the US.

Volodymyr Zelensky’s campaign for the 2019 presidential elections was focused on the digital sphere, to the detriment of traditional media (Liubchenko et al., 2021). Communication with Ukrainian voters had a special role on Instagram, a platform on which Zelensky was already popular and afforded him multiple advantages. Among them were its mostly young audience and the low degree of polarization compared to other platforms such as Facebook (Dorosh et al., 2021). In this regard, both Instagram and Facebook had more prominence than Twitter, where Zelensky’s electoral communication played a very secondary role (Tkachenko et al., 2020). These differentiated preferences can also be attributed to the visual nature of Instagram, given that the image and video were the formats par excellence with which the candidate launched his messages to the public (Dorosh et al., 2021). Zelensky’s television experience, and his rhetorical and staging skills, fit with the preferred choice of this type of audiovisual message, marked by an emotional style based on attraction, theatricality, and entertainment (Likarchuk et al., 2022). This particular style, together with the constant appeal to the participation of the audience in networks, has earned Zelensky’s strategy the qualification of a “performative populist social movement” by some authors (e.g., Hamel, 2020). In short, he used a connective logic based on the

spectacularization typical of a president who has built his political position off a television profile and not so much on an ideology, which has turned out to be a successful formula to generate engagement in the digital arena and, ultimately, votes in the offline public sphere (Doroshenko, 2022).

More recently, the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought Volodymyr Zelensky under the international spotlight. The war has not severed the link between the president and his social networks; rather, it strengthened it, becoming Zelensky’s preferred channel of communication with the population. The investigations that have been carried out so far confirm that Instagram continues to establish itself as the most important platform in Zelensky and his communication team’s strategy. Through this tool, the president has raised awareness and mobilized citizens beyond Ukrainian borders, and kept the media and other politicians informed in real-time of the progress of the war and the decisions made. In short, he can control the narrative without intermediaries, on his own terms—something that is not possible in traditional media—and to a great probability of “going viral” (Olivares et al., 2022).

Through videos where he displays emotion, empathy, and charisma, Zelensky generated great support among international public opinion. He called on the Ukrainians to resist the aggression and appealed to the solidarity of the rest of the countries. His speeches make use of specific references to attacked cities, towns, villages, people killed and their respective stories, all the while employing powerful words such as “justice, truth, evil, courage, tyranny, democracy, power, leadership, friendship, betrayal and God” (Dyczok & Chung, 2022, p. 149), generating closeness. Some level of performativity is also used in which both verbal and non-verbal resources are important.

Mastering the story and controlling the discourse in a war is crucial, and it has been so especially since the mass media have coexisted with conflicts. Today, as the war between Russia and Ukraine is showing, social networks are the digital extension of the physical battlefield. In this “21st-century war,” aspects such as the cult of celebrity and the democratization of information become relevant since the audience can share their opinions and participate directly in the war by turning to one leader or repudiating another (Serafin, 2022). At the same time, it’s important not to lose sight of the fact that not only information is democratized but so is disinformation, by all parties involved (Donofrio et al., 2023). New ICTs present challenges due to the multiple threats of hybrid warfare since traditional propaganda is now channeled without control at all levels (Arcos & Smith, 2021; Yevstafiev & Manoilo, 2021).

For all these reasons, the role of social media and ICTs in conflicts and crises is a subject that has roused the interest of the academic community, which has investigated contexts as varied as the war in Syria (Rohde et al., 2016), the Palestinian conflict (Wulf et al., 2013), the

dispute over Jammu and Kashmir (Gabel et al., 2020), the war for Karabakh (Chernobrov, 2022), among others.

### 3. Methodology

The main objective of this work is to detect the features of political spectacularization that characterize the videos published by Volodymyr Zelensky on Instagram. A secondary purpose is to compare the strategy of spectacularization by Zelensky at the beginning of the war and several months later, to check if there is any evolution in his digital communication. Based on these premises, it has been decided to approach the object of study from a quantitative approach. Specifically, the content analysis technique is used (Igartua, 2006), a method that “studies and analyzes communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner with the purpose of finding measurement variables” (Busquet & Medina, 2017, p. 231).

The quantitative analysis protocol of spectacularization in audiovisual messages on Instagram is directly inspired by the model proposed by López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2018, 2019, 2021) for the study of political photography and video on social networks. The proposal of these two authors is based on the classic 5W in journalism and translates into five variables of the same name adapted to the characteristics of visual messages: The variable “what” examines the theme of the image and its functions; “who” explores the protagonists and attributes of the leader; “when” represents the staging; “where” refers to the space; “how” refers to the technical aspects and the rational or emotional character of the content. Table 1 summarizes the result of the adaptation of the aforementioned methodological proposal to our case study.

For this research, the variable “what” has been dismissed, since the theme of all the publications is the war itself. Other minor modifications have been made to the original model to adapt the categories to the particularities of the sample; for example, the cinematographic staging is added as an original tag.

The sample on which the analysis has been applied consists of a total of 143 registration units, which corresponds to the videos shared by President Zelensky on his personal official Instagram profile (@zelenskiy\_official) during two different periods:

- From February 24 to March 8, 2022, both days inclusive, 13 in total, 72 publications are extracted in video format. These dates correspond to the first days of the Russia–Ukraine war.
- From September 25 to October 10, 2022, both days inclusive, 16 in total, 71 videos are collected from Volodymyr Zelensky’s account. At this point, 229 days after it began, the conflict is still ongoing.

The videos were manually extracted, uploaded, and managed through the Google Sheets tool. The first selection

took place on March 20, 2022, while the second took place on October 10 of the same year.

### 4. Results

From February 24 to March 8, 2022, Zelensky posted a total of 138 posts on his official Instagram account, which means an average of 10.6 posts per day. Of these, 72 are videos (Figure 1), so this tool prevails over photography and constitutes 52.17% of the publications during that period. The prominence of the video format increased with the progress of the war since between September 25 and October 10, 2022, the president of Ukraine disseminated 107 posts, 71 of which were videos, that is, 66.36%. However, the number of daily publications is reduced to an average of 6.7.

The results presented in the next section derive from the analysis of the 143 videos published in the two periods under analysis and are divided according to this time criterion to observe similarities and differences over time. References to the first period include the days of February and March; the expression “second period” is used for publications selected between September and October.

#### 4.1. Protagonism and Leadership Attributes: A Protective Statesman

The personalization of political messages is one of the features associated with spectacularization and includes a sense of “omnipresence of the leader” and a construction based on personal or professional attributes. Concerning the first aspect, it is observed, in effect, that most of the videos in the sample of the first period are of Zelensky himself (95.83%). Of these, the president shares space with other people—foreign politicians or members of the government—in 5.8% of cases. The remaining small percentage of videos where Zelensky is absent shows civil society (2.78%).

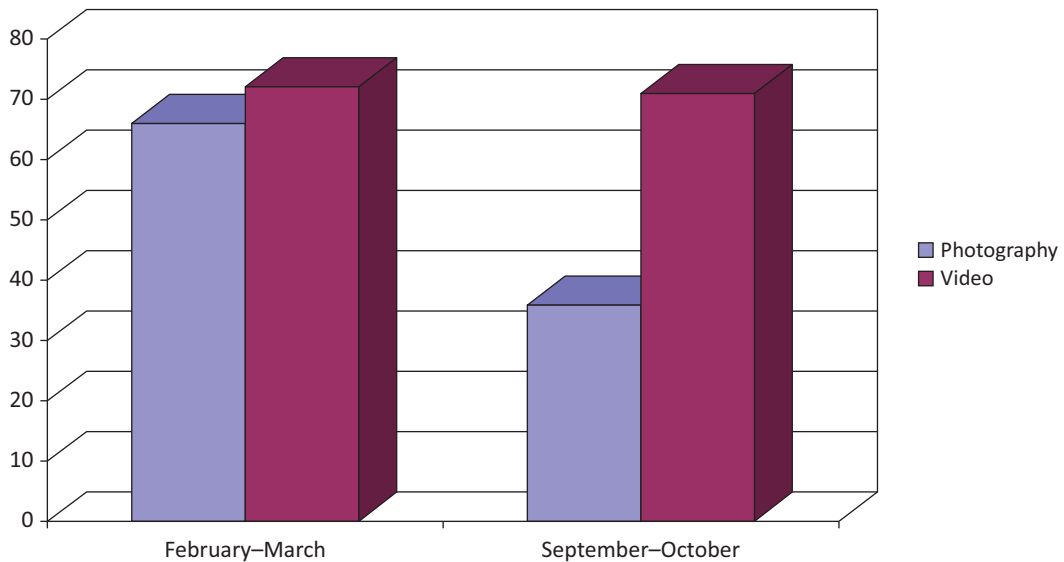
Analyses of videos from the second period reveal that the president is still their main focus, although with a slight decrease in percentage. Zelensky is present as the “protagonist” in 84.51% of these videos, of which 35% also show international politicians or citizens. Civil society takes a more important “role” in publications done in September and October (8.45%); other videos appear without a clear leading character (7.04%).

Regarding attributes, Zelensky uses Instagram to promote his professional life and not from a personal point of view. Results obtained from an analysis of videos from the first period show that the president presents himself above all as a statesman (75.36%) in the many speeches with which he addresses Ukraine and the world in the first days of the war (Figure 2) and telematic meetings with other leaders. On the other hand, the heroism of his figure is suggested in 11.59% of the cases, for example, when he spreads selfies recorded on the street to show the people and Russia that he has not fled and will

**Table 1.** The 5W of spectacularization in digital video: The case of Volodymyr Zelensky.

	Variables	Categories
Who	Protagonist	Zelensky Civil society Other
	Other characters (YES/NO)	Civil society Government's members Other politicians Other
	Attributes	Statesman Crowd leader Hero Protective Communicator Personal Other
When	Staging	Institutional Strategic spontaneity Amateur Cinematographic Other
Where	Space	Official Public Media Private Other
How	Video length	Equal to or less than 30 seconds Equal to or less than 1 minute Equal to or less than 3 minutes Equal to or less than 5 minutes More than 5 minutes
	Source of the images	Government Zelensky Civil society External institutions Media Other
	Predominant shot	Full/mid shot Wide Close-up Other
	Predominant angle	Neutral High angle shot Low angle shot Other
	Lightning	High key Low key Neutral Other
	Use of music (YES/NO)	
	Use of subtitles (YES/NO)	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the model of López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021).



**Figure 1.** Videos and photographs published in the two periods under analysis.

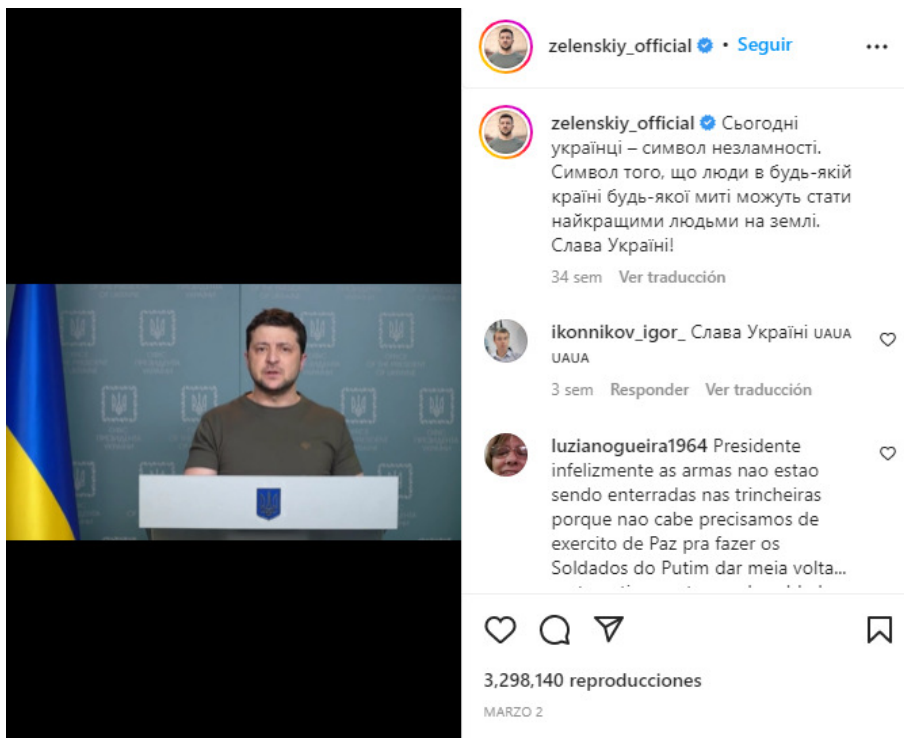
not flee the country (Figure 3). Other notable attributes are those of protector (4.35%), as when he speaks to sick civilians or soldiers, and communicator (8.70%), a side that he displays in his relations with the media.

The second period, again, reveals differences from the first. The percentage of videos associated with the attribute of the statesman is reduced to 56.67% and, instead, the protective or compassionate character of Zelensky is valued (35%). During the course of the war, the leader often addresses the Ukrainian people directly, without intermediaries, to comfort them and create

closeness. The videos labeled with the attribute of heroism are 8.33% of the sample.

#### 4.2. Staging: From Professionalization to Strategic Amateurism

Given that most videos from the first period are formal speeches, the staging is usually in accord with institutional standards (79.17%), that is, Zelensky is shown well framed, with a neutral angle, and illuminated by spotlights, in a classic political scenario where official symbols



**Figure 2.** Role of statesman with institutional staging (March 2, 2022).

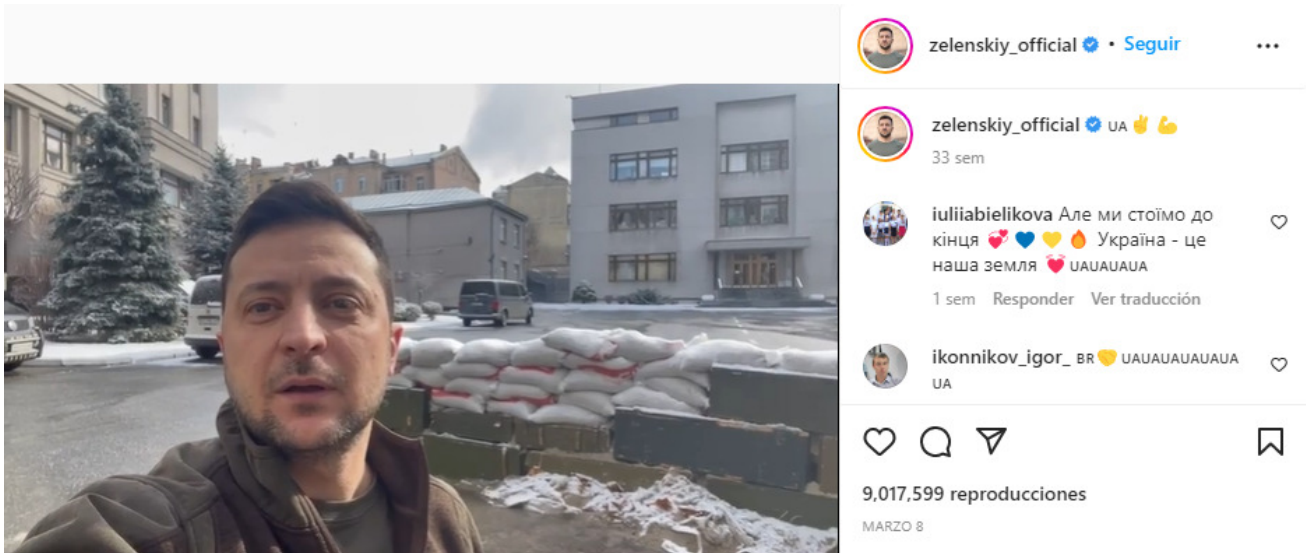


Figure 3. Role of hero with amateur staging (March 8, 2022).

usually appear. Contrasting with this professionalization is the relevant presence of videos of an amateur nature (15.28%) recorded with a mobile phone, without juxtapositions or filters, and with reduced image quality. In some cases (1.39%) “strategic spontaneity” is used, a style in which the visual elements are planned in detail, even though the appearance of the final video is that of a spontaneous one. This cinematographic staging borrows its name from cinema and television, where elements and techniques like image quality, music, and montage are typically used in post-production to enhance the narrative (Figures 4 and 5). Although this type of publication is less prevalent (1.39%) on Zelensky’s Instagram, the greater their complexity, the stronger their impact. Finally, it has been detected that 2.78% of the videos do not fit with the other detected categories, since it is a new format based on animated infographics (Figure 6).

We then move to the second period: At this stage of the war, Zelensky changes his strategy and moves away from more “sophisticated,” “professional,” and “institutional-looking” videos to greater amateurism. Thus, the “institutional-looking” videos decrease from 79.17% to 35.21% and the “amateur” videos increase from 15.28% to 35.21%, so both categories are balanced. Cinematographic staging also acquires a significant role (18.31%), followed by the aforementioned category of animated infographics (8.45%) and strategic spontaneity (2.82%).

4.3. Spaces: Officiality Without Giving Up the Street

The management of spaces is another aspect to take into account in the political spectacularization of the digital image. In the sample of the first analyzed period,

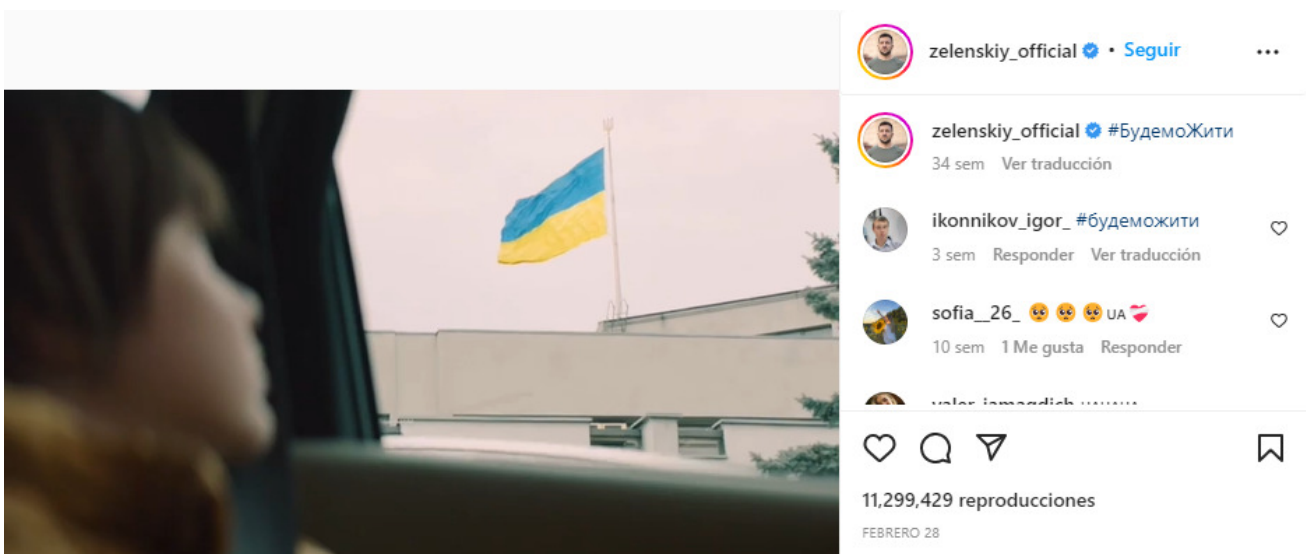


Figure 4. Cinematographic staging of an institutional spot shared by Zelensky (February 28, 2022).

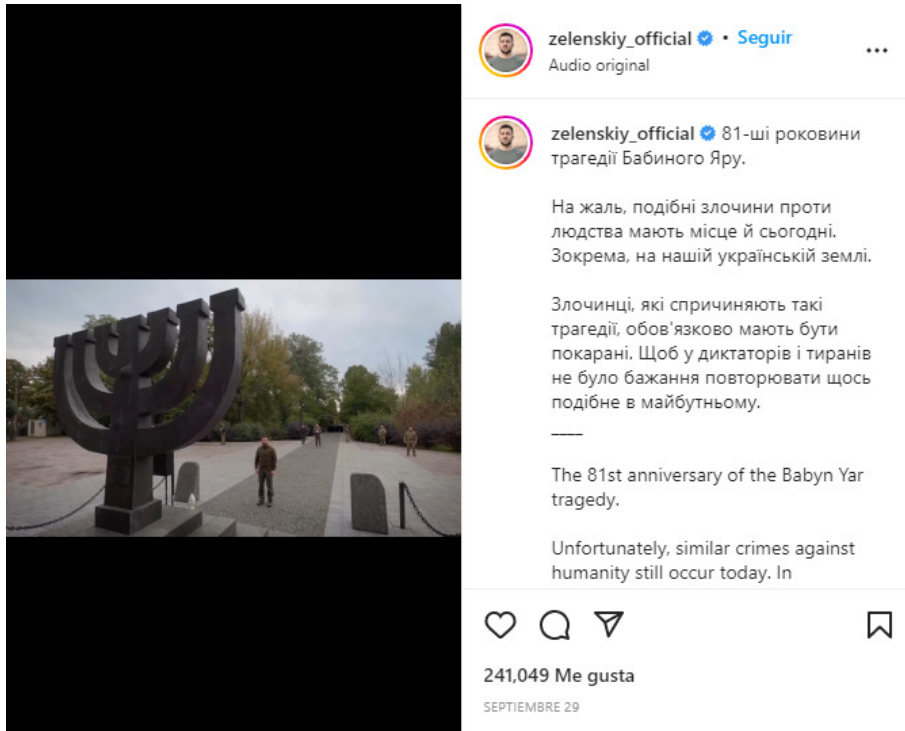


Figure 5. Cinematographic staging of Zelensky in a protector-compassionate role (September 29, 2022).

91.67% of videos were recorded in official places: Zelensky’s office, the press room of the presidential palace, foreign institutional spaces, among others. Only 8.33% of the scenes were filmed in public spaces, on the street, or in other types of non-institutional buildings (Figure 7).

In contrast, the most recent sample is made up of 63.38% of videos taken in official spaces, 19.72% were filmed in public places, and 11.27% have a private space as their background. The other category (videos which cannot be labeled as official, public, or private) is identified in 5.63% of the cases. We see, therefore, that places

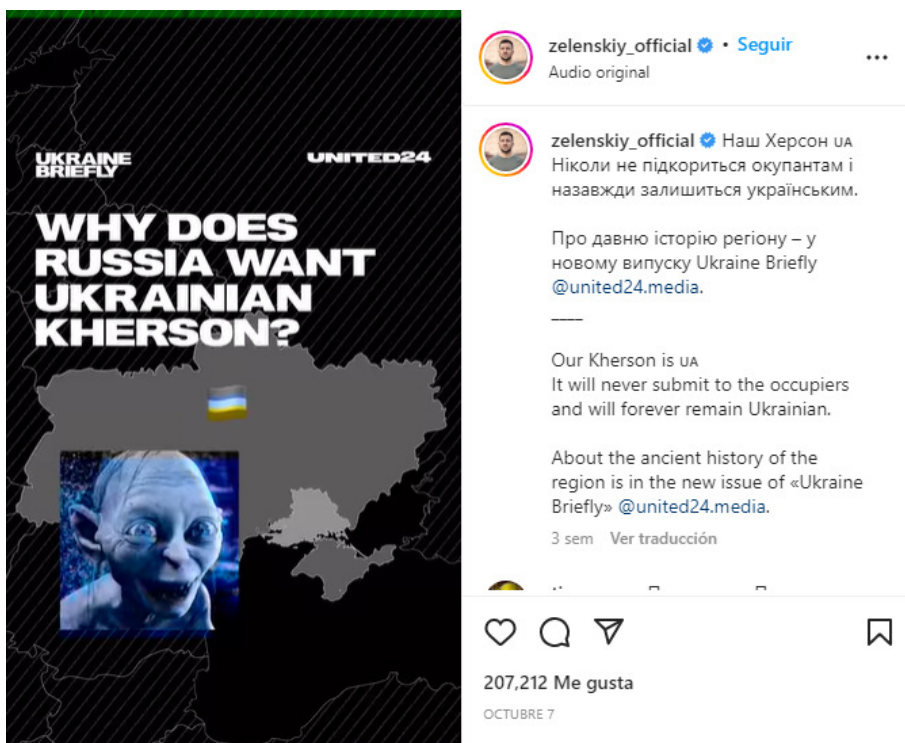


Figure 6. Animated infographic made with images from the media (October 7, 2022).



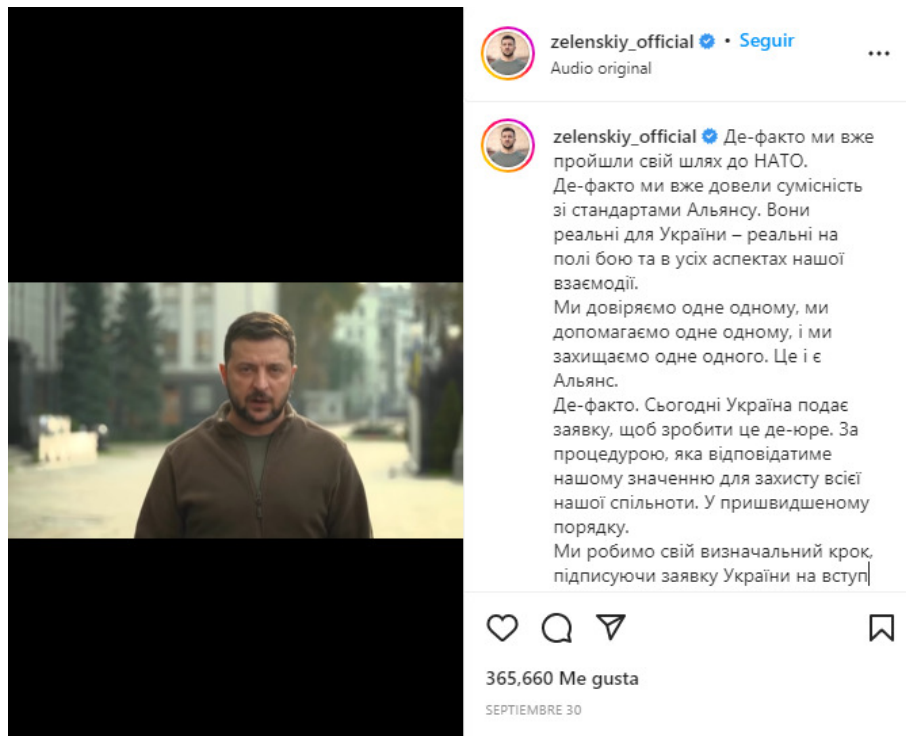


Figure 7. Zelensky in a public space with a staging based on strategic spontaneity (September 30, 2022).

used in the second period are diversified compared to the first.

#### 4.4. Technical Resources: The Versatility of Video at the Service of the Message

Talking about technical resources implies analyzing the duration of the videos, the source of the images used, the types of shots, their angle and lighting, as well as the use of subtitles and music. These aspects denote the degree of professionalization of the content, its adaptation to the characteristics of Instagram, and ultimately, the level of spectacularization through which the political leader can captivate the audience.

Regarding the duration, it is observed that 61.11% of the pieces from the first period under analysis last 5 minutes or more; 16.67% of the videos last between 3 and 5 minutes, followed closely by those that last between 1 and 3 minutes (11.11%) and are more in line with the platform standards. Videos of a short nature are the exception: 6.94% last between 30 seconds and 1 minute and 4.17% are 30 seconds or less in length. From the second period under analysis, the proportion of videos lasting between 1 and 3 minutes increases (28.17%), but the majority continues to exceed 5 minutes in length (57.75%). Some videos still last between 3 and 5 minutes (11.27%), while very short pieces barely have a presence (2.82%).

If we look at the source of the images, in February and March the largest proportion (80.56%) of them are of the Ukrainian government itself, following our observation that the majority of the sample are official

speeches. Although much less frequently, images produced by Zelensky himself with his cell phone (15.28%) and audiovisual material from citizens (2.78%) are also used. Finally, in certain cases, the source is a media outlet (1.39%). The analysis of the second period reveals that Zelensky reiterates his presence on Instagram using images of “government origin” (33.80%) and of his own authorship (32.39%). Videos from external institutions are also frequently used (21.13%), 9.86% are reserved for the media, and only 2.82% of images originate from civil society.

When it comes to framing these images, in videos from the first period, medium or full shots predominate (80.56%). Occasionally, spaces are recorded using full shots (4.17%), the frame containing various elements; somewhat more frequently, the scene is framed in a close-up (15.28%), especially when Zelensky records his face up close with his mobile. This last type of shot predominates in the second period (47.89%), followed by medium to long shots (36.62%). Wide shots remain an exception (9.86%).

Regarding lighting, in the sample from the first days of the war, there are no videos in low-key lighting or that are poorly lit; the opposite is prevalent (70.83%), followed by videos that take advantage of neutral or natural light (29.17%). Finally, the vast majority of the videos (84.72%) are shot from a neutral angle (front, at eye-level). Only in the amateur videos does the angle appear high (2.82%) or low (12.50%). In the second period under analysis, the camera angle remains neutral for the most part (60.56%), leaving aside high-angle shots (2.82%) and, somewhat more frequently,

low-angle shots (30.99%). However, given that, in this portion of the sample, Zelensky publishes fewer “official” speeches and more selfies, the videos tend to have more neutral lighting (59.15%) and use high key lighting less often (32.39%).

To finalize the analysis of the technical resources, results are obtained on the use of subtitles and music. The latter is not usually used in the first period and is only heard in videos whose staging is cinematographic (2.78%). As for subtitles, a third of the videos include them (33.33%). These are pieces that have been published twice, once without subtitles and another with English subtitles to increase their impact (Figure 8). The sample for September and October includes more music videos (26.76%) and more videos with subtitles (42.25%).

In Table 2 we have synthesized the aforementioned results to clearly see the changes in the two periods.

## 5. Conclusion

Political spectacularization, or politainment, is a clearly identifiable style in the publications of President Zelensky during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Instagram is exploited in an intense, strategic, and successful way, and Zelensky takes advantage of its visual potential to promote his image as a leader, reporting to the citizens in times of emergency, make war reports, internationalize the conflict, persuade public opinion, mobilize the Ukrainian and world population, attack and hold the enemy accountable, and call for help from other countries. The war, therefore, is the main axis of his speech, and he speaks

about it in a digital communication style that has helped to show himself as a committed and involved president in the war context. Contrary to what some studies refer to concerning the use of Instagram as a political communication tool in recent years (Cartes-Barroso, 2018; Moreno-Díaz, 2022), the moving image is used in this case more than the static image. Thus, the growing importance of video over photography is confirmed, the former being a format that accentuates the effect of reality and space–time proximity to events.

One of the most notable characteristics of Zelensky’s communication linked to spectacularization is hyper-leadership: His figure, almost always without company, is present in the overwhelming majority of the videos broadcast. Only occasionally is the leading role shifted to the civilian population or shared with members of the government, citizens, or other politicians. This intense personalization occurs in a professional way, in the form of individualization and not privatization (Van Aelst et al., 2011): The intimate life and the most personal side of Zelensky does not transcend, unlike that of other international leaders such as Alexander van der Bellen and Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, 2020; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). On the contrary, it is his political activity that is at the center of his communication strategy, a common trend in the political use of Instagram (Filimonov et al., 2016; Peng, 2021; Pineda et al., 2020). In any case, the data indicates that in September and October, Zelensky opens the door a little more to share space with other actors.

Another clear feature of the “spectacular” in Zelensky’s videos is the management of spontaneity



**Figure 8.** Amateur staging (selfie) with English subtitles and a natural use of light (October 7, 2022).

**Table 2.** Summary of the results based on the proposed methodological model (percentage concerning the sample of videos published in the corresponding period).

	Variables	Categories	First period	Second period
Who	Protagonist	Zelensky	95,83%	84,51%
		Civil society	2,78%	8,45%
		Other	1,39%	7,04%
	Other characters	Civil society	0%	19,05%
		Government's members	25%	0%
		Other politicians	75%	76,19%
		Other	0%	4,76%
	Attributes	Statesman	75,36%	56,67%
		Crowd leader	0%	0%
		Hero	11,59%	8,33%
		Protective	4,35%	35%
		Communicator	8,70%	0%
		Personal	0%	0%
		Other	0%	0%
When	Staging	Institutional	79,17%	35,21%
		Strategic spontaneity	1,39%	2,82%
		Amateur	15,28%	35,21%
		Cinematographic	1,39%	18,31%
		Other	2,78%	8,45%
Where	Space	Official	91,67%	63,38%
		Public	8,33%	19,72%
		Media	0%	0%
		Private	0%	11,27%
		Other	0%	5,63%
How	Video length	<30 seconds	4,17%	1,41%
		<1 minute	6,94%	1,41%
		<3 minutes	11,11%	28,17%
		<5 minutes	16,67%	11,27%
		>5 minutes	61,11%	57,75%
	Source of the images	Government	80,56%	33,80%
		Zelensky	15,28%	32,39%
		Civil society	2,78%	2,82%
		External institutions	0%	21,13%
		Media	1,39%	9,86%
		Other	0%	0%
	Predominant shot	Full/mid shot	80,56%	36,62%
		Wide	4,17%	9,86%
		Close-up	15,28%	47,89%
		Other	0%	5,63%
	Predominant angle	Neutral	84,72%	60,56%
		High angle shot	2,78%	2,82%
		Low angle shot	12,50%	30,99%
		Other	0%	5,63%
	Lightning	High key	70,83%	32,39%
		Low key	0%	2,82%
		Neutral	29,17%	59,15%
		Other	0%	5,63%
	Use of music	Yes	2,78%	26,76%
No		97,22%	73,24%	
Use of subtitles	Yes	33,33%	42,25%	
	No	66,67%	57,75%	

and amateurism, which evolves throughout the war. Although the dominant staging is institutional, especially in the first period of February and March, the leader deliberately and occasionally uses the selfie format (of poorer quality in terms of resolution, framing, lighting, etc.) to articulate more directly and naturally with the public, which is somewhat risky, but effective. Given the success achieved with this type of piece, Zelensky ended up giving the same prominence to amateur selfies as to official speeches. Strategic spontaneity is also put at the service of closeness with his followers, through pieces as careful as they are simple, which are optimal for a platform like Instagram (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). In the same way, the management of spaces is interesting; although the actions generally take place in official places, public spaces are used strategically to show Zelensky close to the people.

The first days of the war are characterized by a certain waste of this social network when Zelensky abuses long, rigid, and sober videos in the use of resources such as music. On the other hand, in the second period under analysis, differences in this sense are appreciated; more short videos appear that are more dynamic, natural, and with music. Another prominent resource is the subtitles, which have also appeared more frequently in recent months to carry the message to a global audience beyond Ukraine's borders.

Although the main objective of this research was not to analyze the reception and impact of Zelensky's videos on Instagram, during the development of the work we have been able to observe some trends that we believe are interesting to mention so that future research can continue to deepen. The most striking is the significant impact in terms of likes, comments, and views that the president's publications have obtained, which in some cases reach millions. Traditional television news programs have been fed by these videos in an interesting hybridization process (Baptista et al., 2021). Secondly, although most of the videos published online by Zelensky are institutional speeches, the most successful formats are the most amateurish and easy to produce. This suggests that a more exhaustive production does not necessarily imply greater public interest and that the close nature of the selfie helps to connect with the audience. In this way, it seems that the staging is configured as one of the most valued 5W.

In short, this case study is paradigmatic of how spectacular narratives are inserted into the digital communication strategies of political leaders, especially in contexts of turmoil and uncertainty, such as war. The image and, specifically, the video in its short version is a fundamental tool in this sense, as it serves to channel messages that reach the audience with emotional force, humanize the politician, and generate a feeling of closeness and constant contact. Although "professional" and more "institutional-looking" videos continue to be a key element, in the case of Volodymyr Zelensky they strategically coexist with a more natural, amateurish

style of videos that suit the dynamism of Instagram and break with the usual orthodoxy. It is worth continuing to delve deeper, from an academic point of view, into how political spectacularization is manifested in the online communication of leaders from all over the world, especially through a booming format such as video (Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2022), and check whether this selfie-style amateurism is a resource for personal and political expression (Kasra, 2017) that is decisive when it comes to generating engagement among an electorate increasingly saturated with images.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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