Russia's war on Ukraine: Speeches by Ukraine's President to the European Parliament and national parliaments

SUMMARY

On 24 February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine threw the international status quo into disarray by violating the country's sovereignty and integrity. Since then, over 1 000 civilian casualties have been reported and over 3.8 million people have been forced to flee the country. Many others are displaced within Ukraine's borders, while civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, roads and buildings, is being targeted by Russian military action. The shelling of civilians and the alleged use of chemical and/or biological weapons by Russian military forces have spurred the international community to accuse Russia of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Against this backdrop, Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been addressing parliaments around the world to plead the cause of the Ukrainian people and ask for both military and humanitarian help. He began by addressing the European Parliament, before continuing with many others, both in Europe and further afield. The latest in a line of historical leaders mobilising rhetoric in times of war, Zelenskyy’s speeches have each been tailor-made to their specific audience and have been consistent in reminding policy-makers around the world of the humanitarian tragedy unfolding as a result of the war and of the Ukrainian people's military needs.

Taking a look at speeches given by Zelenskyy to the European Parliament and several national parliaments between 1 and 24 March 2022, in the month after Russia invaded Ukraine, this briefing summarises the Ukrainian president’s main messages and offers some thoughts about the narrative used by Zelenskyy to keep Russia’s war on Ukraine at the top of national and international agendas.

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Communication strategy in uncertain times

Within a few days of the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February, Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, addressed the European Parliament. He then went on to address a number of national parliaments. Bringing the cause of the Ukrainian people into the houses of democracy, he used his words to rally policy-makers while also calling for more action from them. In his speeches, Zelenskyy has alternated moments of drama – stating for instance the number of children killed during the war and the number of people who have fled the country – with moments in which he has celebrated the bravery and courage of the Ukrainian people.

Mastering the principles of rhetoric, Zelenskyy always customises his speeches to suit the national audience. Making reference to national heroes and political figures, for instance, he has drawn parallels with events that have marked the various countries’ national memories (e.g. Pearl Harbour, 9/11, the Berlin Blockade). In the same way, he has quoted powerful men and women of the past (e.g. Winston Churchill, Golda Meir). He has compared Ukrainian cities to other cities, both in Europe (e.g. Mariupol to Genova and the ruins of Verdun), and around the world (e.g. Vancouver and Toronto). He has reminded audiences of the risk of history repeating itself. For instance, when speaking before the Japanese Parliament, he raised the spectre of nuclear disasters; and while addressing the Bundestag, he mentioned the word ‘wall’ 16 times.

Always reminding audiences of the price that Ukraine’s civilian population continues to pay, Zelenskyy systematically mentions the number of children who have been killed in the war, the number of people forced to leave their homeland, and the number of people displaced within the country. Zelenskyy always asks for safe passage for civilians fleeing the conflict and safe access for humanitarian aid. As it has become apparent that violations of humanitarian law have been taking place repeatedly, he has called – together with the international community – for respect for the lives of civilians. He has called for war crimes and crimes against humanity not to remain unpunished, and for those responsible to be brought to justice. He has called for humanitarian and military support.

Zelenskyy has called on NATO members to establish a no-fly zone and to make Ukrainian airspace safe. He has thanked many parliaments for the sanctions already established and called for stricter sanctions, in some cases for a total embargo. Zelenskyy asked Italy not to be a ‘resort for murderers’, he asked French businesses to stop their activities in Russia and not to sponsor those who wage war in Ukraine. In his more recent speeches, Zelenskyy has asked for support for post-war reconstruction, inviting Swedish architects and companies, for instance, to join a new project, and take ‘patronage’ over the rebuilding of specific cities.

Speaking both at the European Parliament and in EU national parliaments, Zelenskyy has stressed that Ukraine is the gateway to Europe, and that Ukraine is defending the principles of the international liberal order, in particular European values. For that reason, in his view, Ukraine has won the right to be a full member of the European Union (EU).

The Ukrainian president’s speeches have drawn attention worldwide. They have generally been welcomed by his audiences, and have sometimes been followed by immediate promises of support, even if, in some cases, as in the case of the German Bundestag and the Israeli Knesset, the words Zelenskyy chose were questioned for their appropriateness, or the speech was questioned for its general tone. Nevertheless, the humanitarian suffering and needs of the Ukrainian citizens caused by Russia’s war have never been questioned. Some commentators have already started analysing Zelenskyy’s communication strategy, describing it as ‘visceral’ and ‘to the point’. Some point to the ‘use of history’ to rally international support. At any rate, all commentators agree that – in keeping with his training as a lawyer and his experience as an actor, scriptwriter and producer prior to being elected president in 2019 – Zelenskyy clearly attributes great importance to communication and the power of words, in these chaotic and uncertain times.
The first address: European Parliament, 1 March 2022

On 1 March 2022, the European Parliament held an extraordinary plenary session on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was attended by the Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, and European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, Josep Borrell, and several other Commissioners. The European Parliament’s President, Roberta Metsola, strongly condemned the Russian military aggression against the sovereign and independent Ukraine. She recalled Parliament’s commitment to human rights and the fight for justice, including its support for an investigation into war crimes. Second, she stressed that the war in Ukraine represented an existential threat for Europe. She also listed all the measures and sanctions that the EU had very rapidly adopted. Metsola also looked ahead, recalling the need for the EU to end its dependence on Russian gas, impose economic sanctions on oligarchs, stop selling passports to those who are close to Putin, create a truly European defence and halt the Russian disinformation campaign. Finally, Metsola welcomed Ukraine’s application for EU candidate status and stated that aggressors never had been and were still not welcome in the European Parliament, the house of democracy.

Addressing the plenary by video-call, Zelenskyy stated that the people in Ukraine were paying the ultimate price for freedom with their own lives, simply because they aspired to have the same rights as other European citizens. He mentioned that the city of Kharkiv, host to one of eastern Europe’s oldest universities and Ukraine’s most brilliant students, had been hit by missiles and that 16 children had been killed. Zelenskyy strongly stressed the need for Ukraine to be supported by the EU, and also the benefits for the Union of welcoming the people of Ukraine. The speech was followed by a statement by Ruslan Stephanchuk, Chair of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s unicameral parliament. As he was speaking, images of the devastation in Ukraine were shown.

The same day, the European Parliament adopted a resolution strongly condemning Russia for the ‘illegal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against and invasion of Ukraine’. Parliament stated that ‘attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law and therefore constitute war crimes’. It called on the European Commission, the Member States and United Nations humanitarian agencies to provide the civilian population with humanitarian assistance. Parliament took note of numerous reports of ‘violations of international humanitarian law committed by Russian troops, including indiscriminate shelling of living areas, hospitals and kindergartens’, and noted that, since 2014, more than 14 000 people had lost their lives in a ‘conflict fomented by the Russian Federation in eastern Ukraine’. While recognising the need to continue diplomatic efforts to stop Russia’s military aggression, Parliament called for an immediate ceasefire and welcomed the adoption of sanctions, while calling for their scope to be broadened in order to weaken the Russian economy and industry.
Speeches to national parliaments

United Kingdom House of Commons, 8 March 2022

On 8 March 2022, Zelensky delivered a speech to the House of Commons, during which he invoked Shakespeare and Winston Churchill. For each of the 13 days since the start of Russia’s invasion, he described the destruction and the casualties caused by the war. He mentioned the bombing of houses, schools, hospitals and churches, including children’s oncology hospitals. He mentioned tanks firing at a nuclear power plant, and the siege of Mariupol, where people are left without water and food. He called the Russian attack on the Ukrainian people a genocide, emphasising the human price paid by children, 50 of whom had been killed on the 13th day of the invasion. He concluded by calling for more sanctions and for action to make the Ukrainian sky safe. Zelensky’s speech appealed to UK history by using several times the famous three-word phrase ‘we shall fight’ used by Winston Churchill repeatedly in his speech of 4 June 1940 to the House of Commons warning the UK Parliament of a possible German invasion.

Polish Sejm, 11 March

On 11 March, Zelensky addressed the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, the lower house of the Polish bicameral parliament. He started by recalling that relations between the two countries had improved since 2019. Zelensky said that the lives of Ukrainians had been brutally disrupted on 24 February and that since then, all borders – including physical, historical and personal ones – between Poland and Ukraine had disappeared. He thanked Poland for showing solidarity and welcoming more than one and a half million Ukrainians, mostly women and children, who had fled to Poland. He recalled the ongoing human tragedy, mentioning in particular that 78 children had already died because of the war started by Russia. He appealed to recent Polish history by recalling the words of former President Lech Kaczyński in Tbilisi in 2008, and by mentioning the 2010 tragedy near the Russian city of Smolensk, when 96 people including Kaczyński lost their lives in an aeroplane crash. He also referred to Polish Catholic tradition by quoting Pope John Paul II and referring three times to God (and God’s will), while referring to Russia as a ‘neighbour who obviously acts without God’. He pointed out that the Ukrainian fight was a fight for a strong Europe, stressing the need for common European security, including all necessary efforts to secure the Ukrainian sky.

Canadian Parliament, 15 March 2022

In the knowledge that Canada is home to the world’s second largest Ukrainian diaspora, Zelensky asked the audience and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to imagine that missiles were striking the cities of Ottawa, Vancouver, Toronto or Edmonton, as had been the case in Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk and other Ukrainian cities. Civilian buildings, including kindergartens, had been bombarded in the city of Sumy. He asked the audience to imagine trying to explain war to children. He referred to the Babyn Yar memorial site for holocaust victims – as he would also do later speaking to the Bundestag and Knesset – as well as to the threats to nuclear power plants, including the one in Zaporizhzhia. He asked the
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audience to close the Ukraine sky and provide military assistance, including aircraft. He lamented that policy-makers were taking their time instead of reacting quickly, using the excuse that Ukraine was not in NATO. As in previous speeches, he thanked the audience for having imposed sanctions on Russia but asked them to do more, namely to force companies to leave Russia and prevent those companies ‘sponsoring’ the Russian war from working in Canada. He mentioned, as in almost all his speeches, that children were the main victims of this humanitarian disaster and that 97 Ukrainian children had already been killed since the invasion had begun.

US Congress, 16 March 2022

In his address to the US Congress, Zelenskyy appealed to US history and culture. He asked members of Congress to remember Pearl Harbor and 9/11. He claimed for Ukrainian people the same unalienable right to pursue happiness as mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. Zelenskyy called for Western powers to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine, in order for there to be a humanitarian no-fly zone stopping the continuous bombing of Ukrainian cities, including Odesa and Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy, Zhytomyr and Lviv, Mariupol and Dnipro. He then referenced the US battle for civil rights, echoing Martin Luther King’s famous words ‘I have a dream’ with its Ukrainian parallel ‘I have a need’, namely to protect the Ukrainian sky. He reminded Congress of Ukraine’s military needs, including defence systems and aircrafts. That same call to establish a no-fly zone was addressed to the UK and Polish parliaments, though with different words (‘make our sky safe’).

Zelenskyy also asked for additional and stricter sanctions in order to stop the Russian military machine; sanctions to target everyone helping or supporting Putin’s aggression towards Ukraine. He called for all American companies to leave Russia, for all American ports to be closed to Russian goods and ships. Finally, Zelenskyy argued that the existing institutions had not been prepared or equipped to face aggression such as that prepared by Putin, and he called, therefore, for the creation of an ‘association – U-24, United for peace’. His idea was that this union would be able to react immediately and provide military, humanitarian and political assistance, as well as sanctions and funding within 24 hours, in order to restore peace. He finally stated that Ukraine’s fight was also a fight to preserve the democratic values of Europe and the US.

The same day, the White House announced an additional US$800 million in security assistance for Ukraine, bringing total US security assistance for Ukraine since President Joe Biden came into office to US$2 billion.

Bundestag, 17 March 2022

Zelenskyy began his address by describing the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the Russian invasion. He mentioned that the conflict had caused civilian casualties, including 108 children, as well as the destruction of hospitals, schools, churches and other civilian infrastructure. For the second time in 80 years, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Donbas were being bombed. During his speech, Zelenskyy repeated the term ‘wall’ 16 times. He argued that the war was building a new wall to divide the free people from those enslaved. He stated that sanctions were not enough to stop the war. He called for tougher sanctions on Russia, for Russia to be cut off from SWIFT, and for a total embargo on trade with Russia.

'Remember Pearl Harbor ... Remember September 11th.'
'To establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine is to save people ....
'I have a dream' – these words are known to each of you. Today I can say: I have a need.'
Volodymyr Zelenskyy, addressing the US Congress.

'Nord Stream was a weapon and a preparation for a great war.'
'Russian troops do not distinguish between civilians and military. They don't care where civilian objects are, everything is considered a target.'
'I appeal to you on behalf of everyone who has heard politicians say: "Never again".'
Volodymyr Zelenskyy, addressing the Bundestag.
Zelenskyy mentioned that Ukraine had asked to join NATO and the EU. In both cases, the answer was ‘not yet’. He added that while politicians were talking, the citizens of Mariupol were being bombarded and left without water and electricity. Civilian buildings, including hospitals and the theatre were under attack, with no way for humanitarian help to reach the city, or for civilians to leave. He argued that under these circumstances, decisions needed to be driven by high standards, not simply by economic calculations. He appealed to German history, recalling that the ‘Berlin Airlift’ had only been possible because the sky was safe, unlike the Ukrainian sky now. He considered that history was repeating itself, as the Babyn Yar site had recently been bombed by the Russian military forces. The same place where more than 33,000 Jews had been murdered by the Nazis during World War II.

Knesset, 20 March 2022

Zelenskyy began his speech to the Knesset with the words of Golda Meir, the first and only woman to hold the post of Prime Minister of Israel. He attempted to draw a parallel between Ukraine and Israel. While the conditions were very different, he argued that both countries faced the same threats: ‘total destruction of the people, state, culture’. He reminded his audience that the National Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany (NSDAP) had been founded on 24 February 1920. It was on that same day, 102 years later, that Russia had started its invasion of Ukraine, causing millions of Ukrainians to flee to Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Germany, Czechia, the Baltic States and many other countries. He argued that Russia was using the same rhetoric used by the Nazis and referred to the ‘final solution’ to the ‘Jewish question’. As he had done a few days earlier, when speaking before the German Bundestag and the Canadian Parliament, he reported that the Babyn Yar site had been hit by Russian missiles. Zelenskyy asked for military support and for strong sanctions against Russia.

Italian Parliament, 22 March 2022

On 22 March, Zelenskyy spoke before the Italian Parliament, reminding Italian law-makers of the heavy humanitarian toll that the Ukrainian population was paying because of the Russian invasion. He mentioned that 117 children had been killed since the beginning of the invasion, thousands of families ruined, millions of people displaced. He compared Mariupol, the city under siege, to Genoa, because they had similar sized populations, and asked Italian law-makers to imagine Genova under bombing and shelling. He stressed the severe human rights violations in Ukraine, and stated that Russian troops were killing, torturing, kidnapping and raping. He compared them to the Nazis in the 1940s. He also stressed that the situation could ultimately have an impact on food security for Europe too. He stated that the impossibility for Ukrainian people to work and to harvest would eventually result in an end to exports of corn, vegetable oil and other goods. He claimed that the Russian war against Ukraine was a war against Europe, because Ukraine was a gateway to Europe.

As in previous addresses to national parliaments, Zelenskyy asked for additional and tougher sanctions with no exceptions. He called for a total embargo on trade, including oil, and asked Italy to close all its ports to Russian ships. He thanked Italy for the support already offered to the 70,000 Ukrainians who had fled to Italy, including 25,000 children. For the first time, Zelenskyy spoke about post-war reconstruction, which, according to him, would require the help of Italy and the EU.

Immediately after Zelenskyy’s speech, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi took the floor and acknowledged that Ukraine was defending not only its own peace, but also the EU’s collective peace and freedom, and the multilateral rules-based order. He offered financial and humanitarian aid, as
well as assistance to the population fleeing the country. He mentioned a roadmap to bring Ukraine closer to Europe.

Japanese Parliament, 23 March 2022

Zelenskyy thanked the Japanese Parliament for the opportunity to address it for the first time ever, and for having been the first country in Asia to 'put real pressure on Russia to restore peace'. He noted that the geographical distance between the two countries had not prevented the Japanese Parliament from supporting Ukraine in its search for a peaceful solution. Speaking about the nuclear power plants in Ukraine, Zelenskyy recalled the explosion in Chornobyl in 1986 and the subsequent radiation release, as well as the human and environmental devastation that had followed the explosion. He then pointed out that on the very first day of war, 24 February, the Russian forces had taken control of the Chornobyl nuclear plant. They had then attacked the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, 'the largest in Europe'. Zelenskyy reminded the audience that Ukraine has 15 nuclear units and four operating nuclear power plants. In addition to that, other sources of energy were under Russian attack, including gas and oil pipelines, coal mines and chemical plants. Zelenskyy also referred to the potential use of sarin, as had happened in Syria.

As in all previous speeches, Zelenskyy focused on the destruction and loss of human life brought by the war. He noted that among the victims, 121 were children, and that millions of people were fleeing the country, with a further 9 million internally displaced. He called for stricter sanctions and a total embargo on trade with Russia. He said that international institutions including the UN had proven their inability to stop the war and called for their reform. Finally, as he had mentioned to the Italian Parliament the previous day, he spoke of the need to rebuild Ukraine in order to be able to return to normal life as soon as possible.

French Parliament, 24 March 2022

Exactly one month after the start of the war, Zelenskyy addressed the French Parliament as an 'honest, brave, rational and freedom-loving' people, echoing the French national motto of 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité'. He recalled once again the destruction brought by the war and the siege of Mariupol, comparing it with the Middle Ages, when people were tortured 'with famine, thirst' and killed 'with fire'. He spoke of the hospitals, including maternity hospitals, schools universities and residential buildings that were the target of Russian bombs. He compared the ruins of Mariupol to the ruins of Verdun, a reference that graphically captures the sheer horrors of war and destruction for a French audience. He accused the Russian military of failing to uphold international binding conventions, of bringing terror, and committing war crimes in Ukraine. He reported that women were being raped, migrants shot and journalists killed.

Referring to earlier negotiations with Russia within the Normandy format, in which France had taken part, Zelenskyy regretted that all the efforts had been in vain because of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. He once again stated that Ukrainians were fighting to defend their freedom and the freedom of EU capitals, such as Berlin, Brussels, Bratislava, Madrid, Paris and Rome. He said that he expected France to keep working for peace and to restore 'Ukraine's territorial integrity'. He also invited France, which currently holds the presidency of the Council of the EU, to work towards Ukraine's full membership of the EU. Zelenskyy thanked France for the help already received and for the sanctions imposed but he called for more sanctions – a package every week. He asked for
more **military support**, including tanks and anti-tank weapons, aircraft and air defence. He concluded his remarks by looking ahead to the post-war period.

**Swedish Riksdag, 24 March 2022**

Also on 24 March, Zelenskyy addressed the Swedish Riksdag, and drew a parallel between the blue and yellow colours of the Swedish and Ukrainian flags. As in all his previous speeches, he mentioned the **humanitarian tragedy** that the Ukrainian people were facing. He reminded the Swedish parliamentarians of the destruction, including of civilian residential buildings, hospitals, 200 schools, universities and kindergartens. He said that Russian military forces were not making any distinction between civilian and military targets. He warned of the danger linked to the Russian attacks on **nuclear power and chemical plants**.

As before, Zelenskyy stressed that Ukraine was fighting not only to choose its own future but also to protect **common European values**, to secure the **common European home**. For that reason, in his view, Ukraine deserved ‘to be a full member of the EU’. He argued that Russian propaganda was already speculating about the occupation of the Swedish island of **Gotland** in order to use it as a military **base** with a view to future attacks against the Baltic States. He mentioned the atrocities that his compatriots were being forced to endure because of the war, including **child abductions**, **forced transportations**, **rape** and looting. He stated that more than 10 million individuals had been forced to leave their homes, and that 3.5 million of them had fled Ukraine to find a safe haven in the EU. He called for the **war crimes** not to remain unpunished, and for the people responsible to be brought to justice. Finally, he invited Sweden and its architects and companies to join in the **reconstruction** of Ukraine after the war. More specifically, Zelenskyy invited Sweden to take ‘patronage’ over any Ukrainian city, region or industry, adding that Swedish technology and business would be needed.

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N: No other country in the world thinks that it can kill people with impunity just like that.

W: We must now think about rebuilding Ukraine after this war.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, addressing the Swedish Riksdag.