March 15, 2022

Dear Client,

At this moment, it is hard to think or see beyond the conflict in Eastern Europe. In a world that seemingly exists on headlines and soundbites, we try to research and understand the situation on a deeper level.

Over the centuries, the region that is modern Ukraine has been occupied and/or controlled by nomads, Vikings, Mongols, Turks, Greeks, Romans, Poles, Russians, and the Soviets.

Most recently, Ukraine established itself as an independent nation with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. As is often the case in nation-building, the first few decades are some of the most challenging as the people seek an identity.

**1994** - Ukraine joins a collaborative partnership with NATO. It gives up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for a signed agreement from Russia, the U.S., and the U.K. to protect its sovereignty.

**2004** - Disputed elections in Ukraine in 2004 set off the “Orange Revolution” protesting corruption and Russian influence.

**2008 -** Ukraine begins to pursue membership in the NATO alliance and talks to form ties with the European Union.

**2014 -** Protests erupt in Kyiv’s Maidan Square over withdrawal from EU talks. More than 100 protestors are killed; the Moscow-backed Ukrainian president flees to Russia. Malaysian Flight 17 is shot down over the Russian-backed area in southeastern Ukraine – all 298 onboard perished. Russia seizes control of the Crimean Peninsula and annexes the territory.

**2019** - Ukraine passes a constitutional amendment to pursue NATO and EU membership.

**2020 -** Ukrainebecomes a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner, cooperating on missions and exercises**.**

**2021 -** Russia builds up a massive military presence along Ukraine’s border. Russian President Vladimir Putin orders troops into separatist-held parts of Donetsk and Luhansk and recognizes the regions as independent.

**2022** - February 24, Russia begins a full assault on Ukraine by land, air, and sea.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The two leaders at the center of this conflict have interesting and very different backgrounds. These varied backgrounds are playing into the way they are conducting themselves and communicating their respective positions.

**Vladimir Putin**

Born in 1952, and the only surviving child of a factory worker and a homemaker. When Vladimir was young, his family lived with two other families in a Leningrad (St. Petersburg) apartment. Even though religion was illegal, his mother secretly had him baptized an Orthodox Christian.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Vladimir studied law at Leningrad State University before entering the KGB. He served fifteen years as a foreign intelligence officer, six in East Germany. He returned to his university as protector of Leningrad State University with responsibility for the institution’s external relations. Putin officially retired from the KGB as lieutenant Colonel in 1991 when he joined the first democratically elected Mayor of St Peterburg’s team where he quickly earned recognition for his ability to get things done.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Putin moved to Moscow in 1996 to join the presidential staff where he was also quickly recognized and promoted. In 1998, Boris Yeltsin made Putin director of the Federal Security Service, the domestic successor of the KGB. A year later Yeltsin, in search of an heir, appointed Putin prime minister. Yeltsin suddenly resigned later that same year and named the 47-year-old acting President. Putin won the 2000 election.

**Volodymyr Zelensky**

Born in 1978 to Jewish parents, his mother, an engineer, and his father, a professor and computer scientist. When he was a small child, his family relocated to Erdenet, Mongolia, for four years before returning to Kryvyy Rih, where Zelensky entered school. In 1995 he entered Kryvyy Rih Economic Institute and in 2000 he graduated with a law degree.

While in law school, Zelensky became active in theater, and this would become his focus. He was the founder and head of a comedy troupe, Kvartal 95, known for improv. The group spent time performing in Moscow and constantly toured around post-Soviet countries. Zelensky stared in several films, before a pivotal role in the television show *Servant of the People.* In the series, Zelenskyy's character was a high-school history teacher in his 30s who won the presidential election after a viral video showed him ranting against government corruption in Ukraine.

Life imitating art, the production company Kvartal 95 registered a new political party called *Servant of the People.* After months of ambiguous statements, on 31 December, Zelenskyy announced his candidacy for president of Ukraine on a New Year's Eve television show. Four months later he won the election in a landslide - 73%.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Putin clearly has a much larger military and the unspoken threat of a nuclear arsenal, but Zelensky has a powerful weapon as well; his name is Mykhailo Fedorov. Fedorov is the 31-year-old Ukrainian Minister of Digital Transformation. One of Zelensky’s primary election promises was to upgrade the technological and communication infrastructure of Ukraine, thus the Minister of Digital Transformation.

Last Fall, Fedorov made a pilgrimage to Silicon Valley to share the country’s vision and invite investment. In the days leading up to the invasion and since Fedorov and his team have been connecting directly with some of the world’s biggest tech leaders (50+) to get support for Ukraine and severely limit Russian access. He convinced Elon Musk to position dedicated communication satellites over Ukraine, Apple has suspended product sales in Russia, and Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have begun cracking down on content shared by Russian media. Netflix has also stopped airing Russian state TV channels in the country.

1. Ukraine’s 30-year struggle for independence. Sourced from - https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history

/article/follow-ukraine-independence-struggle-visual-timeline [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Vladimir Putin Biography. Sourced from - https://www.notablebiographies.com/Pu-Ro/Putin-Vladimir.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Vladimir Putin. Sourced from - https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Putin [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Sourced from - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volodymyr\_Zelenskyy [↑](#endnote-ref-4)