

OLENA ZELENSKA'S ENGAGEMENT ON INSTAGRAM DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE AGGRESSION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AS A TOOL OF UKRAINIAN SOFT POWER. CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines Olena Zelenska's media engagement during the first year of the war, with her Instagram profile as an example of building Ukrainian soft power. Analysing the thematic categories of Instagram posts used to build Ukrainian soft power, published by the First Lady of Ukraine on Instagram during the first year of Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, i.e., from February 24th, 2022 to February 24th, 2023. Methods: qualitative analysis of content, media discourse analysis method. The contents of Olena Zelenska's posts on her official Instagram profile during the first year of the war can be considered a tool for building Ukrainian soft power. Zelenska uses it to convey values such as freedom, truth, concern for the children and women caught in the war, but also by showcasing the highlights of the broadly defined Ukrainian culture and showing the state policy in the context of the war, but most importantly, to convey faith in Ukrainian victory. Zelenska uplifted her compatriots, brought them hope, while asking the leaders of other countries for aid. She did not enforce anything or give any orders (i.e., did not use hard power), but rather used encouragement and emotion, and lead by example, thus enticing others to share her values (soft power). The results of the study show how Instagram can become an important tool for building soft power by engaging important actors on state level.

Key words: Instagram, war, Zelenska, Ukraine, victory, culture

Not the year of the war. The year of resilience (...). The year of Ukraine, which has forever changed history and continues to change the entire world. The year of our indestructibility.

Olena Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], February 24th, 2023

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Introduction

By posting daily on her official Instagram profile from the very first day of Russian Federation's aggression on Ukraine (February 24th, 2022), the First Lady of Ukraine is "fighting on her own front line", as the Ukrainian journalist Natalia Moseichuk aptly put it (Makarczuk, 2022, p. 128). Zelenska used social media channels to reach Ukrainians both at home and abroad, as well as a broader international audience. Her official Instagram profile @olenazelenska_official is followed by 3.2 million people (for comparison, Volodymyr Zelensky's official profile has 17.1 million followers). Zelenska's followers are mainly Instagram users located in Ukraine. According to the study conducted by Democracy Reporting International, 25% of Ukrainians use Instagram (DRI, 2022, June 1st). The First Lady of Ukraine also has followers from outside Ukraine, not only among Ukrainian refugees and emigrants, but also from various international communities. The one place Zelenska was not able to reach with her message was Russia, since immediately after the outbreak of the war, Moscow banned Facebook and Instagram, and branded the local branch of Meta as "extremists" (DRI, 2022, June 1st).

When the war broke out, Olena Zelenska had already been a well-known public figure as the First Lady of Ukraine, an architect and a writer (Makarczuk, 2022, p. 10–22; Samuelson, 2022; Wilson, 2022). In December of 2018, she was even included on the list of 100 most influential Ukrainians by Focus magazine, taking 30th place (Wilson, 2022). Following her husband's victory in presidential elections, Zelenska engaged in social and community work, which included a legislative initiative to reform the catering system in Ukrainian schools, speaking at various events, such as the Ukrainian Women's Congress where she emphasized the role of women in the society and highlighted the inequalities faced by women in Ukraine; she also worked towards overcoming social barriers (Giannini, 2023). When Russia invaded Ukraine, she was able to use her public image and immediately increased her presence on Instagram where she posted updates, photos and videos. This allowed her to quickly and directly reach and engage broad audiences. Also, during the first stage of Russian aggression, Instagram was the only media activity channel available to her. She left Kyiv and went into hiding (together with her two underage children) away from her husband and the Presidential Palace (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2023, February 24th) in order to keep her family safe. Her Instagram activity has shown how social media can be used to impact the perception of an armed conflict (Zeitsoff, 2017). It was also the only way Zelenska could contribute to building Ukraine's soft power.

Before we proceed to the main subject of this study, the notion of soft power should be clarified. According to the definition provided by the creator of the concept, Joseph Nye, Jr. (2004), soft power is "the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies. Soft power is not weakness. It is a form of strength" (p. 25). The practical application of this approach is thus simply subtly making others want to pursue the same goal through their own choice, to mobilize others to collective action (Zeitsoff, 2017, pp. 5–8). This is achieved through three areas: principles, culture and policies. According to scholars, soft power can play a more important role in shaping a country's policies than hard power, the means of which are payments and sanctions, and the objectives are coercion and command (Gallarotti, 2011). Indeed, ever since the revolution in information and communication technology, the so-called *digital diplomacy* is playing an increasingly important role in diplomatic activities of numerous countries which use digital media as tools of their foreign policy (Adesina, 2017, pp. 2–7).

Let us now proceed to analysing Olena Zelenska's Instagram activity during the first year of Russian Federation's aggression on Ukraine used as a tool for building soft power.

Sources and methodology

The purpose of this study is to analyse the thematic categories of Instagram posts used to build Ukrainian soft power, published by the First Lady of Ukraine on Instagram during the first year of Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, i.e., from February 24th, 2022 to February 24th, 2023. The study is focused on that specific time frame, since Olena Zelenska's posts from that period form a cohesive message delivered on a frequent basis (with at least one post published daily).

This study was conducted as a case study. The source material was the collection of posts (488) published on Olena Zelenska's official Instagram profile during the first year of Russian Federation's war against Ukraine. From that collection, a more detailed analysis was performed on posts which contained at least one of the following key words (in any grammatical form): *war, Ukraine, victory, culture and freedom*, and which addressed those subjects. The inclusion criteria were met by 78 posts. The selected posts were thematically categorised and analysed in terms of building Ukrainian soft power.

The analysis focused on the contents of the posts (with one post being used as the research unit), disregarding the comments and graphical materials (the latter could be analysed as part of a separate study). The material was analysed using content analysis and media discourse analysis (Babbie, 2013, pp. 421–76, Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004, pp. 23–65; Pisarek, 1983, p. 23–59). The study was conducted as a qualitative analysis.

The purpose of the analysis is to answer the following research questions: are Olena Zelenska's messages posted to her official Instagram profile a tool for building Ukrainian soft power in order to change the course of the war and achieve victory over the Russian Federation? Is the First Lady of Ukraine developing soft power through 3 main channels of projecting it, i.e. 1) demonstrating principles; 2) presenting the culture; 3) showcasing the country's policies.

On the basis of the research questions, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which demonstrate principles important to Ukraine, first of all, the right to freedom.
2. Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which highlight the values of Ukrainian culture.
3. Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which showcase Ukraine's policies in the context of the war.

Study results. Verification of the research hypotheses

Although before February 24th, 2022, the First Lady of Ukraine claimed she did not like social media (Makarczuk, 2022, p. 126), the Russian aggression against her country changed her attitude and she realised social media could be used to inform the world of the atrocities committed by President Putin. Between February 24th, 2022 and February 24th, 2023, Zelenska published posts and videos on her official Instagram profile on a daily basis (one or two updates per day). The majority of her posts were written in Ukrainian, but she also published a small number of updates in other languages, including English and German.

The first post was published on her Instagram profile on the very first day of the war, with a picture of the Ukrainian flag.

The post read as follows:

"My dear people! Ukrainians. Today, I'm looking at all of you. I see you on television, in the streets and on the Internet. I see your posts and videos. And you know what? You're amazing. I'm proud to live in the same country as you (...) today, I will not panic or cry. I will be calm and confident. My children are looking up to me. I will be with them. I

will be with my husband. I will be with you. I love you. I love Ukraine.” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2023, February 24th).

It should be noted that the post was a very emotional one. Zelenska immediately recognised the potential role of social media and used them to talk to the nation. It was the only method of contact with the outside world available to her, as well as the only form of media activity. The First Lady was unable to give interviews or meet journalists (despite numerous requests she received) for security reasons – in order to keep herself and her children safe, she could not risk her place of residence being identified. Her first message was an informational one but it was also clearly aimed at uplifting the people’s spirits. Since then, she posted updates daily, adding photographs and, later on, videos. Throughout the year, the First Lady’s posts evolved, gaining length and providing more content. For instance, the post published on the first anniversary of the war, on February 24th, 2023, also talked about her charity foundation (Olena Zelenska Foundation):

“We have created this Foundation so that our friends from all over the world who want to help and support Ukraine could join us and provide humanitarian aid, to help us rebuild our hospitals... This year, we’ve learned that we can inspire the world.” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2023, February 24th).

She also posted a related video. As she emphasized later, through those activities she wanted to “counteract the Russian propaganda and the destruction of war” (Giannini, 2023).

The analysis of the First Lady of Ukraine’s official Instagram profile shows that her account employs various different types of soft power. It has become an interactive information channel, with receivers commenting on her messages (the comments are not included in the scope of this analysis); Zelenska also published links to her Telegram channel which she started at the beginning of the war (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 3rd) and to her new Twitter account (*ibidem*, 2022, July 8th). The contents of her posts also served as an antidote to Russian war propaganda. Similar to President Zelensky, his wife used “independent methods in order to give the impression of direct communication with her fellow citizens and the world” (DRI, 2022, June 1st). Zelenska engaged in the same activities as other Ukrainian public figures, e.g., state officials and heads of administrative departments. Using social media in way similar to influencers, she conveyed important messages and improved morale” (DRI, 2022, June 1st). Therefore, we can assume that the First Lady of Ukraine posted information to her Instagram profile purposefully and that purposefulness became “managerial information” leading to “decisions and actions” (Michalski, Białas, Krawiec, 2021, p. 17). All those activities have contributed to building Ukraine’s soft power.

We will now proceed to verifying the research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which demonstrate principles important to Ukraine, first of all, the right to freedom

“You just can’t concede ... parts of your territory. It’s like conceding a freedom” – Olena Zelenska said in an interview with Robin Roberts for *Good Morning America* (ABC News, 2022). “For us, this is a war for truth and human principles. For life itself” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, December 6th). Those words are an accurate reflection of the First Lady of Ukraine’s commitment to use the media to demonstrate her principles but most importantly, to highlight the right of a sovereign nation to freedom. As evident from the conducted analysis, during the first year of the war, this purpose was achieved by informational posts on the war crimes committed by Russian troops against the Ukrainian civilians. At the start of the war, Zelenska wrote:

“Tanks have crossed the borders of Ukraine, planes have entered our airspace, missile launchers have besieged our cities. Despite the best efforts of Kremlin-backed

propagandists who call it a »special operation« – in reality, it is a mass slaughter of Ukrainian civilians” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 8th).

Almost a year later she emphasised: “Today we are all Dnipro. We are all the house torn by a Russian rocket. We are all the small family worlds destroyed in it” (*ibidem*, 2023, January 14th).

Some of the posts published by Zelenska are more detailed, e.g. reporting on the mass attack against the civilians taking shelter in the Drama Theatre in Mariupol and the bombardment of thousands of apartment blocks which “burned like candles” (*ibidem*, 2023, March 16th). The detail can also have the face of a child: “This is my appeal to all independent media around the world! Tell the world this horrible truth: Russian invaders are killing Ukrainian children” (*ibidem*, 2022, March 7th). The posts concerning the suffering of the youngest casualties of the world can be considered a separate subgroup of the analysed material. The key aspect of those posts are very specific images:

“Reading about children’s casualties is the hardest. Reading about the 8-year-old Alissa who died in one of the streets of Okhtyrka, when her grandfather tried to shield her with his own body... About the 14-year-old Arseniy...” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 8th).

In another post, Zelenska wrote about an 8-year-old from Mariupol who wrote in his diary:

“I have a wound on my back and ruptured skin. My sister has wounded head. My mom has lost flesh in her arm and has a hole in her head” (*ibidem*, 2022, March 16th).

The post on 15-year-old Masha Feshchenko from the Zaporizhzhia region who “lost her leg in enemy shelling” (*ibidem*, 2022, April 13th) follows a similar vein – with that post, Zelenska started highlighting the issue of handicapped casualties of war. She also published posts on the situation of children suffering from cancer: “War has taken away their chance at life. Because even if chemotherapy drugs are available, they may not be delivered on time when air raid sirens go off” (*ibidem*, 2023, February 13th). The common denominator of the posts was that they all focused on the suffering or death of a specific child. The posts always provided the name and age, and added photos of wounded or killed children. In the interview with *Le Monde*, the First Lady of Ukraine spoke of them as follows: “This is the voice of dead children. Every child is the universe” (Chemin, 2022). On her Instagram profile, she shared drastic photos taken in Vinnytsia where Putin’s troops launched a rocket attack against civilian targets. In her post, Zelenska wrote:

“Instagram will hide this photo from you as *sensitive*. As if grief and atrocities could be erased by simply hiding them. But all who have humanity in them will see the child, the stroller, the mother... The Russian missile (...) Russia is a terrorist state” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2023, July 15th).

This way of communication, based on emotion, is also a method of persuasion, a loud appeal for compassion and elementary justice, falling within the scope of building soft power. It made the message clearer and increased the chance for reaction, as evident from the number of likes of the posts, ranging from around 10 to 55 thousand, with some posts greatly exceeding those numbers. For instance, the post published on the Eastern Orthodox Christmas Eve (January 6th, 2023) was liked 266 thousand times, and the post on New Year’s Eve (December 31st, 2022) gathered 1.9 million likes. The posts elicited such a massive response also due to their direct and evocative style, for instance the Christmas post citing the letter of a small boy named Anton:

“Father Christmas, bring our warriors weapons, clothes and food, and keep them warm. (...) Father Christmas, dad wanted to give me a new phone but he died. (...) Children should ask for toys and candy, for all those things all children in the world want. Instead, they’re asking for her dad or brother to come home. And all of them ask Father Christmas for victory” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, December 19th).

In a similar fashion, she reported on the rocket attack against the maternity hospital in Mariupol (*ibidem*, 2022, March 16th); she also posted a photo of the first baby born in the Kyiv metro. In her post she wrote: “Kids who are born in the shelters will live in a peaceful country that has successfully defended itself (*ibidem*, 2022, February 6th). It should be noted that the photo was immediately shared by international media, including BBC, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and baby products were added to humanitarian aid transports sent to Ukraine (Makarczuk, 2022, p. 124), which indicates that this form of communication resonated among international audiences (however, analysis of the effects of the appeals made by Zelenska on her Instagram account is outside the scope of this study). It should also be pointed out that the First Lady of Ukraine published a separate post on International Children’s Day (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, June 1st).

The conducted analysis also made it possible to isolate posts concerning the role of women in the war. Zelenska raised the subject of persecuted women who, next to children, are the most vulnerable casualties of war, but who also took up arms to fight for Ukraine’s victory. She posted to her Instagram profile the photos of Ukrainian female soldiers in uniforms, informing that 50 thousand Ukrainian women serve in the armed forces. “Before the war, I wrote that there are 2 million more Ukrainian women than men. This means that this war also has the face of a woman” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 1st). She expressed admiration for her brave female compatriots: doctors and nurses serving on the front lines and also working as paramedics:

“Our resistance has the face of a woman. I admire and bow to you, my fellow Ukrainian women! To those who fight in the armed forces and serve in the national guard. To those who provide medical care, rescue and feed others. To the volunteers who can always find what they need. And to those who are still doing their daily work (...) so that life may go on and triumph” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 1st).

She also reassured all Ukrainians: “You can already see the sun shining through the smokes of the shelling! Everything will be Spring, everything will be victory, everything will be Ukraine.” Zelenska also thanked the Poles for welcoming with open arms the Ukrainian women fleeing from the war:

“We will always be grateful. We will never get tired of saying «thank you». Today, on the Polish National Independence Day, we want to thank all Poles who have become more than our neighbours – they are now our true allies, friends and family (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, November 11th).

Notably, the post was published on Polish National Independence Day on November 11th, 2022 and its well-considered and carefully worded contents are in fact an appeal to the world for freedom for Ukraine.

Concerning the topic of women in the war, on March 2nd, 2022, the First Lady of Ukraine published an interesting post to her Instagram profile: *Open Letter to the First Ladies of the World* In her post, she appealed to the first ladies from around the world to spread the word that “it is not a special military operation, but an all-out war”, to tell the world “the truth about how the children of Ukraine live”, to “encourage Russians to take to the streets” and to “support the armed forces and civilians”. “Tell the world that this is not a war that is somewhere far away. This war is happening here and now” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 2nd). She also asked them to tell the truth about the war “despite the Kremlin propaganda” (*ibidem*, 2022, March 16th). The first ones to respond to Zelenska’s open letter were the First Ladies of Austria, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Canada and Israel, which she also mentioned in her Instagram posts.

Summing up, the dominant function of Olena Zelenska’s Instagram posts is informative. She also publishes appeals to international media which serve as one of the stages of soft power (according to categories introduced by Robert Potocki), i.e. raising emotions (personalisation of tragedy).

Zelenska's activity in the form of Instagram posts described above has undoubtedly contributed to building Ukrainian soft power. The First Lady of Ukraine has demonstrated to her followers and other countries the common values and principles, and the sense of justice and duty which demand that those values and principles must be observed in real life. The analysis of Olena Zelenska's Instagram posts from the perspective of media studies confirms hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which highlight the values of Ukrainian culture

As evident from the conducted studies, the First Lady of Ukraine builds her country's soft power through various cultural activities. Her official Instagram profile includes a number of subcategories of posts related to the Ukrainian language and literature, national holidays, the geographical context and the Ukrainian pop-culture.

As one of the Ukrainian journalists put it, the First Lady of Ukraine uses her Instagram profile not only to post updates on Russian war crimes, but also to "popularise the Ukrainian culture in museums around the world. She promotes our language and makes the world fall in love in the blue and yellow fashion" (Makarczuk, 2022, p. 18).

This approach, in line with the tools of soft power, is reflected even by the fact that Zelenska posts to her official Instagram profile in her native Ukrainian language rather than the globally understood English. By doing this, she clearly demonstrates her appreciation of the Ukrainian linguistic heritage, national identity and preserving tradition. Those activities align with what she has been doing before the war when she "introduced the Ukrainian language to audio-guides in world's best-known museums in Austria, Italy, Azerbaijan, Latvia, Turkey and Montenegro" (Olena Zelenska. Biography, 2022, February 23rd). The analysed posts also include, albeit not very frequently, references to Ukrainian literature:

"I have taken part in the vernissage of the Skorovoda's World exhibition commemorating the 300th anniversary of the birthday of the great Ukrainian thinker and writer, Hryhorii Skovoroda. He was a philosopher and poet who taught the people how to truly live their lives" (*ibidem*, 2022, December 3rd).

The First Lady of Ukraine also used the soft power tools by promoting Ukrainian culture, as evident from her posts referring to specific projects:

'Ukraine. *Out of Blackout* is the title of the project on the 1000 years of history of Ukrainian art. It should highlight the Ukrainian culture and its relations to Europe (...) The entire culture of Ukraine is now our exit from the blackout. We may not have electric power, but our culture gives us light. In return, we must protect our heritage against the aggressors" (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, December 13th)

and to national traditions: "May 19th is the Embroidery (*Vyshyvanka*) Day. Ukrainians have been celebrating it for years, but the war has given it a new, poignant aspect" (*ibidem*, 2022, May 19th).

During the analysed period, Zelenska emphasised the value of the national culture in building patriotism. She would do that by adding text to videos posted to her Instagram profile. For instance, under the video on Ukrainian refugees (titled "I will return"), she wrote:

"The Ukrainian refugees in Poland announce that they will return to their country once the war is over (...) because there is no place like home. I will return. These words are uttered by every Ukrainian who has been forced to flee from their home. I will return to school, to my favourite teacup in the kitchen, to my chestnuts, to my relatives" (*ibidem*, 2022, May 22nd).

During the first year of the war, Zelenska made sure her Instagram followers and readers did not forget the beauty of their homeland. She wrote about it to the first ladies

of other states: “You would not recognise Ukraine today – bustling cities have now been turned into mass graves. And we, the survivors, have grown decades older overnight, because every day we bury our children and mourn our parents” (*ibidem*, 2022, March 17th). She recalled the beauty of Ukraine just before the war and the meeting of the first ladies which took place in Kyiv in August of 2022.

This analysis should also include the themes related indirectly to pop-culture and fashion, which Zelenska also addressed in her Instagram posts during the period in question. In the fifth month of the war, the First Lady of Ukraine posted an updated informing that she had been interviewed by the Ukrainian edition of *Vogue* magazine (Zelenska @olenazelenska_official, 2022, July 26th). She posted the magazine cover with her photo and outlined the goals of her communication activities: “The First Lady is always heard. The President’s wife has the opportunity to talk to those in power. The doors of officials are always open to the First Lady” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, July 26th).

She explained that “being on the cover of *Vogue* is a great honour and the dream of many successful and influential people around the world” but also added: “The one thing I wish for them is that they don’t have to appear on the cover because their country is at war.” This was her response to the comments which questioned whether posing for a photo shoot during the war was acceptable. Her critics panned the cover as “unfeminine, too masculine” (Carbonaro, 2022). It should be noted that in response to the criticism, the #sitlikeagirl movement emerged with Ukrainians showing support to their First Lady. It should also be pointed out that the contents of Zelenska’s post do not indicate that she is interested in growing her personal popularity, trying to win new followers by entering the pop-culture setting, or being cited by the largest global media outlets. The pop cultural themes were also present in the Instagram posts in which Zelenska informed about the interviews she gave to worldwide media: the French *Le Monde* (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, June 25th), the Swiss daily *Les Temps* (*ibidem*, 2022, July 2nd), *Time* magazine (*ibidem*, 2022, July 7th), the Italian *Corriere della Sera* (*ibidem*, 2022, July 16th), the Spanish *El Pais* (*ibidem*, 2022, December 6th) and the *Financial Times* (*ibidem*, 2022, December 6th). Each update on those media activities was accompanied by the cover photos of the First Lady and gained large number likes, e.g. the post with the cover of *The Times* was liked by 38.9 thousand users). Each post also had a link to the interview. It should be emphasised that in her interviews, Zelenska never focused on promoting herself or pretend to be a celebrity; all of her Instagram communications have a clear primary objective of building Ukrainian soft power in the context of the war. She would also try to lift the nation’s spirits:

“Today is the first day of Spring. Remember how we would all greet each other on that day before the war? (This horrible sentence again). But the sun is already shining through the smokes of the shelling! Everything will be Spring, everything will be victory, everything will be Ukraine! And eventually we will win. Unity is our weapon. Unity in our love for Ukraine. Slava Ukraini” (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 8th).

Summing up, during the first year of the war, Olena Zelenska published posts related to broadly defined Ukrainian culture, thus contributing to building her country’s soft power. This conclusion confirms hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3: Olena Zelenska uses her official Instagram account to post messages which showcase Ukraine’s policies in the context of the war

This segment of the study addresses the dominant functions of the analysed posts, including appeals and debunking Russian disinformation, and determines the target receivers (mothers of Russian soldiers, foreign mass media). Olena Zelenska’s official Instagram profile includes a subgroup of posts showcasing Ukraine’s policies in response to Russian aggression and the war. The First Lady of Ukraine appealed for aid for Ukraine

in many ways, for instance by publishing an open letter in several languages (English, German, Spanish, Russian and Ukrainian) to mobilise the West to take action. "I'm begging you, do not get used to war!" (Instagram, March 27th, 2022).

She asked the leaders of various countries to provide medical care to civilians, using evocative imaging and rhetorical questions: "Is it easy to inject insulin in a basement? Or take out asthma medications under fire? Not to mention the cancer patients whose chemotherapy has been postponed" (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, March 8th, 2022).

She also appealed to the Western countries: "Tell the world the truth about how the Ukrainian children live today" (*ibidem*, 2022, March 2nd); she also informed that Russia was concealing their true losses and asked Russian mothers to protest against sending their sons to war against Ukraine. She requested the West to: "Tell the world that this is not a war that is somewhere far away. This war is happening here and now. In Europe, near the EU border. Ukraine is holding against the force that might invade your peaceful cities tomorrow" (*ibidem*, 2022, March 2nd).

In the very first days of the war, Zelenska was asking for closing the airspace over Ukraine: "I'm asking for a no-flight zone over Ukraine, so that Russian airplanes don't kill our children. All we need is for you to close the sky! Take off your white gloves already" (*ibidem*, 2022, March 8th).

Her messages were aligned with the appeals made by President Zelensky who at the time made the same requests of the leaders of the West and referred directly to his wife's words; this influenced the attitudes of Ukrainians who took action, e.g. signed petitions for a no-fly-zone to be established. Zelenska also requested humanitarian corridors (*ibidem*, 2022, March 8th). In the same vein, she asked the foreign media outlets to "keep reporting what's happening (...). Keep telling the truth. In the information war waged against us by the Russian Federation, every account is important" (*ibidem*, 2022, March 8th).

The First Lady's Instagram profile also included posts in which she warned against nuclear war: "If we don't stop Putin who is threatening nuclear war, no place will be safe in our world" (*ibidem*, 2022, March 8th).

The analysis of the contents of Olena Zelenska's post also revealed reports on public appearances of the First Lady, including what appears to have been the most prestigious one, before the United States Congress where she said:

"(...) on behalf of those who are still alive and well, and those who wait for their families to come back from the front. I'm asking for something, now I would never want to ask. I'm asking for weapons, weapons that would not be used to wage a war on somebody's else's land, but to protect one's home in the right to wake up alive in that home (...)" (Zelenska [@olenazelenska_official], 2022, July 20th).

As Zelenska started to travel abroad more and make more public appearances, she would inform about it on her Instagram profile, for instance she posted reports on her appearances at the World Economic Forum in Davos (*ibidem*, 2023, January 17th), at the conference of ambassadors of Ukraine (*ibidem*, 2023, December 23rd), on her meeting with the French Minister of Culture (*ibidem*, 2022, December 13th) and the Prime Minister of Portugal, Mr Antonio Costa (*ibidem*, 2022, December 3rd).

The efforts to build Ukrainian soft power can be found not only in the posts mentioned above, but also in the updates on the First Lady of Ukraine's meetings with political figures, such as the president of the European Commission, Ms Ursula von der Leyen in Kyiv (*ibidem*, 2023, February 2nd), the First Lady of France (*ibidem*, 2022, December 12th), King Charles III (*ibidem*, 2022, November 30th), Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (*ibidem*, 2022, November 2nd), as well as President Biden and the First Lady of the United States (*ibidem*, 2022, July 19th). Zelenska also reported her video call with the First Lady of Poland, Ms Agata Kornhauser-Duda: "Thank you, Poland! What you're doing

for us is much more than just aid. With friends like you, we're sure to win!" (*Ibidem*, 2022, May 13th). Zelenska's Instagram posts confirm that she maintained regular contacts with the wives of global leaders; the purpose of those contacts was clear: to change the course of the war and ensure the victory of Ukraine. This is a part of Ukrainian war strategy, since soft power is key to peace (Nye, Jr., 2004, p. 32).

It should be noted that the contents of Zelenska's Instagram posts as part of the "power of attraction" and an element of strategic communication (Nye Jr., 2004, p. 35) complements her husband's policy. This can also be seen in posts which are seemingly private, for instance the one published on President Zelensky's birthday which in fact directly relates to the war situation: "You're often asking me how my husband has changed over the last year. And I always answer the same: »He hasn't. He's still the same man. The same man I met when we were both 17. «" (Zelenska [@olenazelenska], 2023, May 25th).

Olena Zelenska's Instagram profile also includes a small number of posts informing of the joint activities of the President and the First Lady of Ukraine, e.g. attending the funeral of Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk (*ibidem*, 2022, May 17th). The purpose of those posts is also to highlight the state policy and to uphold morale of the war-weary Ukrainian people.

In conclusion, hypothesis 3 can also be considered confirmed. This is further corroborated by President Zelensky himself who on the first anniversary of the war wrote the following words to his wife: "My dear, I want to thank you for who you are in my life. For being here and now. For believing in Ukraine and in victory. For making me stronger. For all our years, hours and minutes, and once again, for this year. For how you have represented Ukraine" (Zelensky [@zelenskiy_official], 2023, February 6th).

Olena Zelenska's activities, amplified through social media and aligned by the informational policy of her husband, the President of Ukraine, have undoubtedly made her an important factor in Ukrainian public diplomacy.

Conclusions

The results of the analysis confirm the contribution of the Office of the First Lady of Ukraine to developing the national and international informational policy using Ukrainian soft power.

Each post published by Zelenska during the study period had a similar tone, full of faith in Ukraine's victory. The First Lady of Ukraine's Instagram profile has "gone to war", thus becoming a new media phenomenon. Furthermore, it has become an active participant of the armed conflict. Olena Zelenska used Instagram as a tool to influence the public opinion. The results of the qualitative analysis have confirmed both the overall research hypothesis and all detailed hypotheses. The contents of Olena Zelenska's posts on her official Instagram profile during the first year of the war can be considered a tool for building Ukrainian soft power. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed by the fact that Olena Zelenska's Instagram profile conveys messages of freedom, truth and concern for the women and children caught in the war. Hypothesis 2 is confirmed by the fact that Olena Zelenska's Instagram profile shows the highlights of the broadly defined Ukrainian culture. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed by the fact that Olena Zelenska's Instagram profile showcases the policies of Ukraine in the context of the war, serving in particular the purpose of Ukrainian victory.

In conclusion, Olena Zelenska has invested in her Instagram profile as a tool for building Ukrainian soft power while abstaining from using it for personal promotion. Her communications have had a clear purpose and objective of bringing peace back to her country. Zelenska uplifted her compatriots, brought them hope, while asking the leaders of other countries for aid. Her posts included persuasion characteristic for building soft

power. She did not enforce anything or give any orders, but rather used encouragement and emotion, and lead by example, thus enticing others to share her values and principles. At the same time, words (and pictures) were elements of a carefully planned strategy (which is a prerequisite for building soft power) and ultimately focused on achieving a single goal: the victory of Ukraine. In the hands of Olena Zelenska, soft power has thus proven to be an efficient tool (as it should be according to the definition of the concept).

This study certainly does not exhaust the subject. It might serve as an introduction to quantitative and qualitative analysis of the contents of Olena Zelenska's Instagram posts during the first year of the war, not only in the context of building and using soft power. Equally valuable would be an analysis of the audio-visual materials, i.e. photos and videos. A separate study would be required to analyse the correlation between Olena Zelenska's posts with the posts published by her husband on his official Instagram profile.

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