

*Combating Corrupt Governments Through the Imagination of Public Sphere:
Textual Analysis of TV Series “Sluga Narodu”*

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Abstract

Former comedian Zelenskyy successfully became the president of Ukraine through the comedy series “Sluga narodu.” It is worth exploring the public meaning of this pop culture phenomenon for people suffering similar structure searching for a paradigm for salvation. This article uses concepts of public sphere such as forums, private citizens, connection, public opinion, authoritative representatives, legitimation to conduct textual analysis for this TV series. This paper found that it is the people, who build the base of democracy from humanistic perspectives by insisting truth, human dignity and integrity with firm belief in autonomy through virtues, morality and ethics, to overturn nightmares from poverty and corrupt to happiness and prosperity. The saviors come from “we the people” rather than elites, experts, or foreign powers.

Keywords: Servant of the People, Public Sphere, Democracy, Corruption

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Introduction

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, former comedian and the actor playing president in TV Drama *Servant of the People* (*Sluga narodu*), successfully became the President of Ukraine through the comedy series. It offers a good opportunity to study the relationship between popular culture and imagination of democratic reformation. By exploring the public meaning of this pop culture phenomenon, people suffering similar structure can search for a paradigm for salvation. Fans, with public spirits in mind, see popular culture as ways for communication, collaboration, production, and resistance (Fisk, 2010).

Popular culture, public consciousness and democracy are connected to help the Zelenskyy phenomena. In the text of the three seasons of this TV series, the corruption system is almost invincible. The network and system is embedded not only to the nation, the establishment, but also individuals' values in this TV series. The spirit of comedy is to show the absurdity of reality and salute the values which are needed to reverse the invincible enemies and phenomena: Oligarchs in Ukraine, Ukrainians' universal and long-term compromised values with the corrupt government, the degenerate political elite of perpetual reincarnation, the deteriorating failure to discover the truth, the oligarchy's shameless lies to steal national resources without limit, dysfunctional public opinion and checks-and-balances in political systems.

Defining democracy focuses too much on the process of choosing leaders may fail to discuss how alternative choices and outside of the process, are possible. Huntington (2012) explains that studies of political campaigns explain institutional strategies to reach political decisions are popular; however, more factors of the quality of democracy should be explored. For examples, the nature of democratic institutions, the way how they function, and the reasons why they develop and collapse. Huntington explored how the third wave of democracy happened and reverse waves of democracy collapse (2012).

This study argues that citing classic theories about the spirits of democracy such as will of the people and common good should be explored in this study. For example, how the will of the people as sources of authority for government and the purposes of the government for common good might be the decisive power to challenge the ongoing failing governmental system after Ukrainians did choose a non-traditional politician as their president both in this drama and reality.

In addition, when national crisis breaks out, whether the people of Ukraine could demonstrate that the public has the power to conduct autonomy for their nation is important. Otherwise, when heteronomy happened, nationals may face consequences such as revolution, divisions of a nation or invasion from other nations. These questions are more likely to get answers from classic political theories about the rise or fall of democracy and how democratic education and universal suffrages of a republic are related for freedom and equality. Similar concepts could help answer the following questions about how this TV series described its context to solve the crisis of Ukraine such as the idea of humanism.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a native Russian speaker with a law degree, pursued a career in comedy and created the production company Kvartal 95 from which *Servant of the People*, TV series was produced and aired from 2015 to 2019 and gain immensely popular. In this dram, Ukraine as a failed nation, its democratic system is corroded by the never-ending

greedy and white lies. To meet needs of the public, a political party with the same name as the TV show was created in March 2018 by Kvartal 95.

In this comedy series, Zelenskyy played a fictional Ukrainian president but he finally turns drama in to reality. In 2018, he announced his candidacy in presidential election and won the election with 73.23 percent of the vote in the second round in 2019, defeating then President Poroshenko. The party, Servant of the People, won the absolute majority in the following congress election which he dissolved after he inaugurated as the sixth president.

As current president of Ukraine, Zelenskyy refused to escape from War zone of Kyiv when Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022 and media predicted that Russia was going to win the war within weeks. After the war broke out more than one year, Zelenskyy wins more international military and financial support to maintain its independence and is expected to take back the Russian-occupied territory. In this hardship phase of Ukraine, fans of this TV series are joking by saying Zelenskyy's leading Ukraine to fight with Russia's invasion by uniting his nation is now the fourth season of Servant of the People.

In the really world, Transparency International indicated growing security risks and authoritarian threats may make conditions of corruption worse. Issues underlined high-level corruption is closely linked to political instability, weakened institutions and – in the most extreme cases – violent conflict. It warns that governments undermine democratic processes, crack down on civic space and restrict media freedoms in a vicious cycle of corruption and authoritarianism (Transparency International, 2022). Table 1 listed Ukraine as 116 out of 180 on the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with a score 33 out of 100. It's a long road for Zelenskyy's dream to come true.

Figure 1. Corruption Perceptions Index for Ukraine

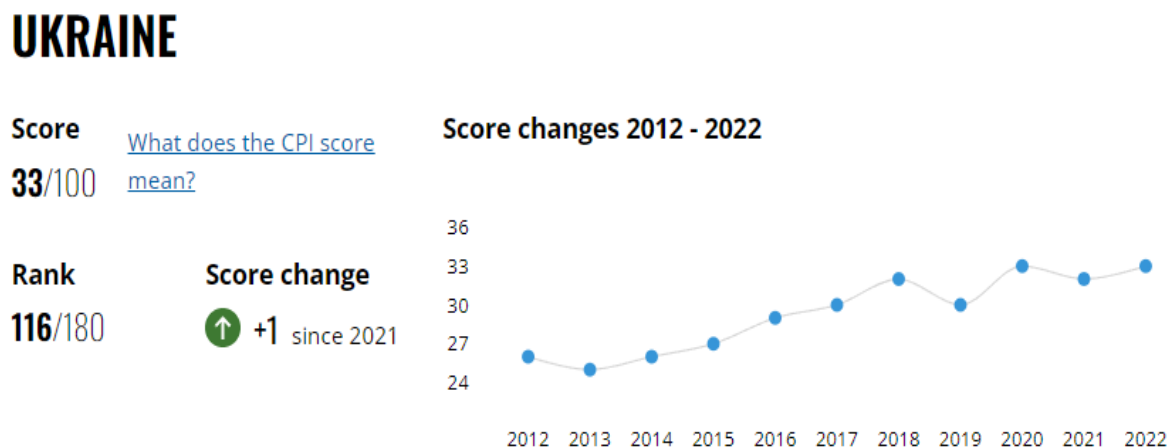


Figure and data retrieved from Transparency International 2023.
<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/ukr>

Textual Analysis of TV Series as Combating Corrupt Governments Through the Imagination of Public Sphere

Text are analyzed through following concepts and constructs of public sphere: forums, private citizens, conversion, public opinion, authoritative representatives, legitimation and people's will with the common good. Possible solutions to fight corrupt systems are further explored as follow: professional knowledge of governing the country and important issues in society, people with values are able to judge this knowledge and common good under the

classic theories of democracy, social media plus media people with conscience are some of the cores that provide this shared knowledge and goodness. Corruption and its cycle in Ukraine failed the public sphere. However, the protagonist in this drama emphasizes truth, values, dignity, and confidence is the one to conduct mission impossible to break through the social structure and lies.

Sun (2002) recommend one should start from the economic and cultural aspects to solve corruption as a problem. Fisk explained that fans' preferences can be demonstrated as cultural connotations and challenges to consensus and the relevance of fans represents the connection of loyalty to different social groups. The symbols may escape from everyday norms and authentic control. The strength of spirit and identity of fan to produce meanings and content are similar to that of the status of experts, scholars, and officials. Fans Challenge society's existing collective memory and knowledge. Dominance and resistance may rise from popular culture. Dominance needs to be earned and maintained. Through continued dominance, resistance from the opposition momentum can be strengthened if popular culture can form information and symbols from opposition perspectives. An old symbolic society and its maintenance is challenged by the new symbolic production of rationalization, negotiation, and resistance (Fisk, 2010).

Findings

Based on analysis of corruption from Caiden (1988), corruption systems in this drama are described as: Political scandals and corruption criminals include enterprise oligarchs, bureaucratic elites, political figures, justice systems, and every class and walk of life. Crimes usually are large-scale misappropriation of public funds, improper distribution of public assets through public bidding processes, granting economic privileges based on special interests and extensive political donations and bribery.

Due to capital scarcity in this drama, criminals compete for domestic markets and public funds; officials usually are ineffective bureaucracy and lack patriotism. For them, corruption becomes a way of life. In addition, massive payments of public funds are made to special interests, privileged beneficiaries and political donations. Bribes are exchanged for favoritism and discrimination under the bias of the ruling party. In this drama polts, Ukraine is about to collapse and immense of refugees are gonna run away as the country is predicted to turn anarchy.

This paper found that, in this man-made catastrophe in this drama, the saviors for dire Ukraine to combat corrupt governments come from “we the people” rather than elites, experts or foreign powers. The function of democracy turns into a joke. When the process of democracy totally failed, it is the will of people and the definiton of the common good to solve the crisis. The public who build the base of democracy from humanistic perspectives by insisting truth, human dignity and integrity with firm belief in autonomy.

Autonomy defined here as taking one's own consciousness as the starting point to recognize, grasp, and understand the object or reflect on specific perspectives of oneself, in contrast to objectivity (Wu, 2007). To pursue subjectivity, concepts such as identity, independence, autonomy, and being subjective, should be considered, Wu explained . In this drama, through virtues, morality and ethics, the leader with the background of a history teacher from high school overturns people’s nightmares from poverty and corrupt to bring happiness and

prosperity to the public. The protagonist, Vasiliy Goloborodko's closing line after the end of the entire drama is as follows:

We don't have a privilege to choose the country of birth, nor the language, nor the time of coming to this world. We only have one choice: to be humans!

Wu (2006) explains that humanism broadly refers to a doctrine that affirms the value of human nature, advocates for the development of individuality and intellectual liberation, and establishes a human-centered worldview. It emphasizes inherent rights such as personal freedom and dignity, cares about human suffering and happiness, and affirms the central importance of humans. Humanism gradually expanded to encompass theories and practices concerning the study and education of humans, philosophy of life, moral norms, social ideals, and political science (Wu, 2006). He explained that after entering the modern era, Western humanists became dissatisfied with the dominance of Catholicism; in continental Europe, this dissatisfaction gave rise to existentialism; in the United Kingdom, influenced by the empiricist tradition, utilitarianism continued to develop; in the United States, a discourse of pragmatism emerged. He emphasizes that Pragmatism combines empiricism, utilitarianism, and materialism, with the purpose of life being the pursuit of the secular; therefore, the continued development of pragmatism will inevitably lead to individualism.

These words can be interpreted as reforms appeal to us Ukrainians should be treated with the dignity of human beings; therefore, “we the people” should be able to demonstrate the capacity for “our” own autonomy in this drama. Therefore, in the narratives of fourm will be how to define who we are, why we make what choices, and what makes us instead of instigation or manipulation by hate, fear, benefits or relief.

The ideal of liberalism gradually emerged with the concept of freedom of the nationals, replacing the earlier political authoritarian practices that subjected people to the arbitrary will of government authorities (Dewey, 2011). In the TV drama analyzed here, the dilemma turns to be: the people are subjected to the control of Oligarchs, a small group of conglomerates. Through Oligarchs’ manipulation and deceitful tactics against the people, Ukrainians turn country bumpkins or “yokels,” described by the protagonist.

Here how the protagonist asks Ukrainian people stop stealing and respect themselves and further explain how Ukrainian people become yokels from innocent babies after self-reflection (Boldfaces added by the author):

*I'll explain. **We are to blame. People like you, Yana, like me. All of us. We are to blame. It starts at birth. With a bribe at the maternity ward. With a bribe at the maternity ward. It's a must. Pay the doctor. No bribe, go back inside. Then we bring the baby home, where it's still a Ukrainian. Once it starts to think, it becomes a yokel. He first sees his dad. Dad is sitting watching TV, of course, and says: "These A-holes are to blame for everything, these bastards, these damn politicians!" While saying this, he counts the 200 hryvnias he got at a rent-a-rally yesterday protesting against these bastards and putrid lawmakers. If dad doesn't, someone will in his place. I think we are all born Ukrainians. So, once we are born, it means we deserved it. We, our parents, or ancestors. No difference. This person was also born a Ukrainian.***

Above is the truth about A circle of Yokel from the protagonist's narratives. Pursuit of truth and we find back ourselves and freedom. Here are the protagonist's words about values of truth by describing lies are daily life encounters for Ukraine from the text:

*It's an easy and comfortable lie. And if you lie, all the news guys and propaganda pricks will carry your lie around the world immediately. Such things spread quickly, like plague. **One day, a moment will come when you'll have to say the truth. But nobody will believe you then.** That's why here in this office and in this chair. There must be a man, me or someone else, it doesn't matter who never lies. The guarantor of the truth.*

However, politics are full of lies when the inappropriate demands come with IMF loans. No politicians in Ukraine agree with the protagonist to tell the truth and all lie to their citizens about the IMF deal prerequisites. Below is the narrative from the text about maintaining autonomy of Ukraine and demanding for respects when IMF asked Ukraine to accept nuclear waste as EU waste storage as requirement for loans (boldface added by the author):

***We are not beggars.** I want to thank the head of the IMF and the board of directors for their time and for a very constructive conversation. It is with a feeling of deep gratitude that I want to say...Get lost. And this condition is obligatory. Am I being clear? We're not beggars. We're not migrant workers. I want you to remember once and for all. we are not a borderland between the Orcs and the Elves.*

We are a normal, strong beautiful and rich country. And if we're down right now that doesn't mean you have to take advantage of us. But I am grateful to you really, I am. For opening my eyes so that I could see that we really are...standing on the edge of the abyss.

But we still have a chance to become a great country. We are a nation of open minded intelligent and talented people. And when we realize that...when we realize that we have to respect ourselves...realize that stealing and scamming is shameful...That we just have to roll up our sleeves and start grinding away. Not yell shame and treason at the drop of a hat. You can't build Ukraine up with talk alone. When we stop trying to out patriot each other dividing Ukrainians into us and them, and unite instead. Only then will Glory to Ukraine be heard, not just here. but in the whole wide world. But for now, get lost.

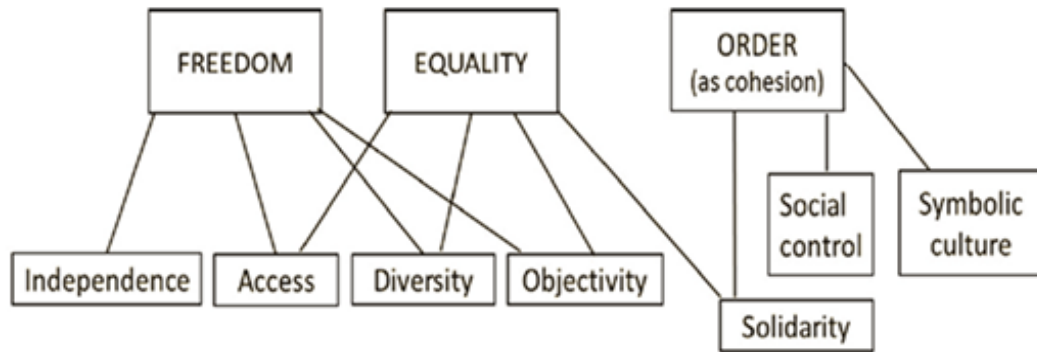
Here are the words from the Prime Minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko, antagonist later turned ally in the drama, was forced to expose that the protagonist and his private dealings that they deceive Ukrainians that the Prime Minister is dead.

...for the first time in 25 years or maybe even in the entire history of this State, You got an honest person.

“Stop stealing” “Stop white lies.” Praising honest, truth, believe yourself, and asking for respects are common themes in crucial discussion. Since the six important elements of public sphere are failing to ask for accountability from politicians and political party. The protagonists ask the people to support him as a human worth to respect and reform by

changing themselves and get united as a nation. As a democratic education, Ukrainians are asked from the President in the drama to act differently as they interacted with the other politicians before.

Figure 2. Remade by the author is from Media Performance



Mass Communication and the Public Interest by Denis McQuail, 1992.

The figure above explains the relationship among freedom, equality, and order to explain media performance for three sectors. This study uses this figure to discuss how media as the forum is to serve the needs of the people to satisfy their freedom, equality and order which are usually related to the political, economic, social, cultural domains. The text of this TV series portrays the classical perspective of Western democracy, which emphasizes the success of individual freedom.

For the perspective of freedom, pragmatic American scholar Dewey raised the question of the future of democracy, specifically how democracy can achieve security when the majority of people find themselves in an economically insecure environment and are economically dependent on the will of others (Dewey, 2011, 1946).

Combining Figure 2 and Table 1, the idea of freedom is to seek independence and access. With corrupt systems and officials of embezzlement, people failed to regain their freedom as the private sectors as civil society to earn their economic freedom. In terms of equality, as poor people in this drama, their definition of equality turn to be sharing the international relief funding and therefore may waste the opportunities of development infra-structure for future. Corruption system goes much deeper into the people's desire of grasping any penny they can for any condition as they lose their dignity in terms of ethics.

As poor people consider even illegal or non-ethical money can bring them economic dignity; however, from perspective of ethics, individuals achieve the human dignity from self-legislation and self-accountability. Without them, people will live under lies, accept unethical behaviors, and not be able to make narratives when they cannot be themselves and fail to win trust from others. In the personal realm of the private section (Table 1), people turn greedy when family and friends are eager to discuss how to steal national resources. The nature of human turn corrupts and failed to reflect the spirits of humanism.

In the section of order (Figure 2), it covers two sets of ideas: control vs. solidarity; authenticity and hierarchy. Due to corrupt systems, the government has been failing control for law and order in terms of economy as the government failed to pay financial expenditure on time and failed to take responsibility to offer basic infra-structure for daily life routine.

From social and political perspective, the way to save the nation in this drama is to resort for people's solidarity as cohesion to reform in public sector both for public sphere and the government (Table 1).

In this drama, creating an environment where individuals can pursue economic success through personal freedom is more important than solely demanding equality for social welfare or the redistribution of national resources. The dilemma between democracy and the truth is how to balance between freedom and equality (Rumelia, 2009). The protagonist choosing from ethical perspective by practice the ideas that individuals can achieve the dignity of autonomy (self-legislation) and self-accountability. The president uses his power as the leader to give up the easier money from the E.U. and seek for responsibilities and sacrifices from Ukraine's people to build up their dreams for developing hi-tech industries rather than turning Ukraine into Nuclear Waste Storage Site for the E.U. He also refused to accept the belittled fate arrangement offered by the E.U. Narrative identity encompasses identification and belonging, presenting the self through subjective storytelling; the process involves continuous fluid construction and mediation (2008, Hu). After the leadership from historical perspectives, the national narratives as symbolic culture about Ukrainians are changing, people finally are very much confident about their life and are very satisfied with government performance in the drama.

In this TV series, failed systems were characterized by oligarchs as manipulating emotions, hiring people for staged protests, bribing people with policy favors, fabricating public opinion through false events, and nurturing political leaders who only showed loyalty to the oligarchs. The play ironically depicts the impossibility of social mobility when corrupt officials and their families and relatives inheriting government positions which leads to the impossibility of equality, freedom, and private assets due to there is no way to gain economic success. Therefore, in the sector of "order," the leader explained to the public by changing their values into symbolic culture change to show the values of real Ukrainian people.

The analysis of this study focuses on breaking through the corruption structure: demonstrating how private individuals divided and merged into citizens, with what strategies upright new leaders ignited citizens to support reforms and collided with oligarchs and confront political puppets through conspiracy struggles, how geopolitical showdowns can bring back Ukraine esteem, why citizens finally took due action to save their nation, and how the Ukrainian collective identification helped each other through the national crisis transformation. After the struggle of Ukrainian people and leaders expanded the journey of cultural transformation in the public sphere and Ukraine in the drama finally became a successful country and complete mission impossible.

Table 1. Two views of the public/private divide and what goes wrong in Ukraine in this TV series

Public	Private
<p>The state: apparatus of government</p> <p><i>In a failed state: The concept of public sphere failed to eliminate corrupt authoritative representatives. Corruption, political cronyism, clientelism, rent-seeking, and bribes were daily routines.</i></p>	<p>Civil society: autonomous bodies- businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on</p> <p><i>In a failed state: civil society lost its freedom to search for economic goals for failed policies.</i></p>
Public	Private
<p>Public realm: Politics, commerce, work, art, culture, and so on.</p> <p><i>In a failed state: Media failed to oversee the government. Public opinion and election results could change bad policies.</i></p>	<p>Personal realm: family and domestic life</p> <p><i>In a failed state: individuals tried to grape any opportunities to steal money or get benefits from the government and resist to pay taxes and fail to become respectable persons.</i></p>

Italics are added by the author. Part of the table is from Heywood, A. (2019). Politics (5th ed.). p.7. Red Globe Press.

Table 1 shows the division of the public and the private. Heywood (2019) explained that back to Aristotle, politics has been seen as a noble and enlightened activity precisely because of its public' character; in addition, scholar Hannah Arendt argued in *The Human Condition* (1958) that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens.

Heywood cited Jean-lacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill to explain from this perspective, it thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual through political participation and personal, moral and intellectual development of individuals. Here is the base of the confidence for universal suffrage and in fact it is who are the nationals and with what nature of nationals could save a failed republic from corrupt systems. How the public changes are discussed as the follow.

The Table 2 below outlines six processes and explains the comparison between a failed state, a normal state and a reverse state (reversion from a failed state). People need to transcend political systems and demand an improved public system that serves the common good. However, this requires paying the price of reform. In the TV series, Ukrainian people engage in discussions about reversing their country's state and pursuing the common good. They pay the price of reform and succeed under the protagonist leadership.

When people's values change, political and economic changes occur, and cultural codes also undergo changes. The Ukrainian people transitioned from a corrupt nation to a leading nation in terms of economic and technological development in the drama. In practice democracy in reality, this transformation is a precious outcome of the reversal of people's values and their resonance by following the leaders' struggles and determination (See Table 2).

Table 2. People's responses among three types of nations: normal democratic nation, failed nation, and reforming nation

	Normal democratic states	Failed states	Reversing states
Forum	Political party elites and media oversight	Elite corruption and media controlled by conglomerates	Major oversight from online social platforms and interpersonal networks when media fail to oversee
Private Individuals	Self-reliance, independent judgment, good markets to develop economical chances for personal properties	People with low income. Local markets full of disqualified and failed companies or corrupt public services	Citizens are willing to bear the pains of reform such as donations, inflation, high taxes, reduced welfare.
Convergence	Discussions through various channels and space	Network convergence failed to stop thieves stealing from the nation, political posturing	Media professionals are willing to risk of being dismissed to send the truth and join reformation.
Public opinion	Satisfied public	The public is only concerned about welfare and benefits but not interested in paying taxes	Demanding for better government performance after citizens' sacrifice of paying higher taxes and benefitting fewer welfare in a short term
Authoritative responses	Responsible politics	Vote-buying policies, emotional instigation	The public has the dream of changing their nation into a strong country to get rid of corruption and oligarchs.
Legitimation of government performance	Good policy results from governmental rationality Failing to meet the expectation of the public, leaders will face replacements in next elections.	The public only cares about benefits from the government Political party rotations or changes of political leaders bring the same corruption results.	Leaders make good use of geopolitical strategies without compromising to hurt their own mother nation.

		Corrupt elites are willing to cooperate with international geopolitics for elites' own benefits.	
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Table 2 is made by the author to demonstrate how people need to change for democratic reversion when compared to people from failed or normal nation.

The Beauty and Sorrow of Geopolitics for Ukraine's Miracle Autonomy: The EU and IMF as Significant Others

Stopping corruption makes miracles happen—national autonomy becomes possible. True freedom and objective opportunities emerge. Social and cultural orders materialize to improve political and economic conditions.

Using geopolitics wisely, the protagonist engages in both conflict and cooperation with the EU. Despite being criticized by the entire nation, the protagonist loses the opportunity for an EU loan then but strives for the new reforms that could come with it. This drives the country towards new development opportunities for the practice of the laws.

During the protagonist's imprisonment for lying about the death of the Prime Minister in the drama, the protagonist leverage human rights as prison welfare, utilizing the European Union again to show his public talents. Predictably, the proxy politicians become incompetent, causing inflation and eventually leading to a coup and a nation division later. Concerned about the worsening situation in Ukraine and the potential refugee crisis, the European Union rescues the protagonist and arranges for his return as president, proving that he won the election.

The four stages of Ukraine facing in this TV series is listed as the follow A, B, C, and D in Figure 3. For Stage A, Ukraine as a very weak state which is known by its corruption. For the transition from A to B, the nation almost failed its fiscal planning and was in a hurry to make loans from the IMF. Later a failed leader in the drama caused inflation by printing its bills unlimitedly to cover her political promise. When the nation was in deep mess, an armed coup broke out. The nation turned to be run by a dictator as Stage B. Later Ukraine divided into several states and was about to collapse into anarchy as Stage C. After witnessing Ukraine possibly will turn into anarchy, EU is afraid to accept immense refugees from Ukraine, they brought out the protagonist from prison, corrected the presidential result, and made the protagonist as the president of Ukraine. Finally, Ukraine turned into the D stage as an economically strong nation.

Figure 3. Four distinct forms of Ukraine in the TV series presented in this study

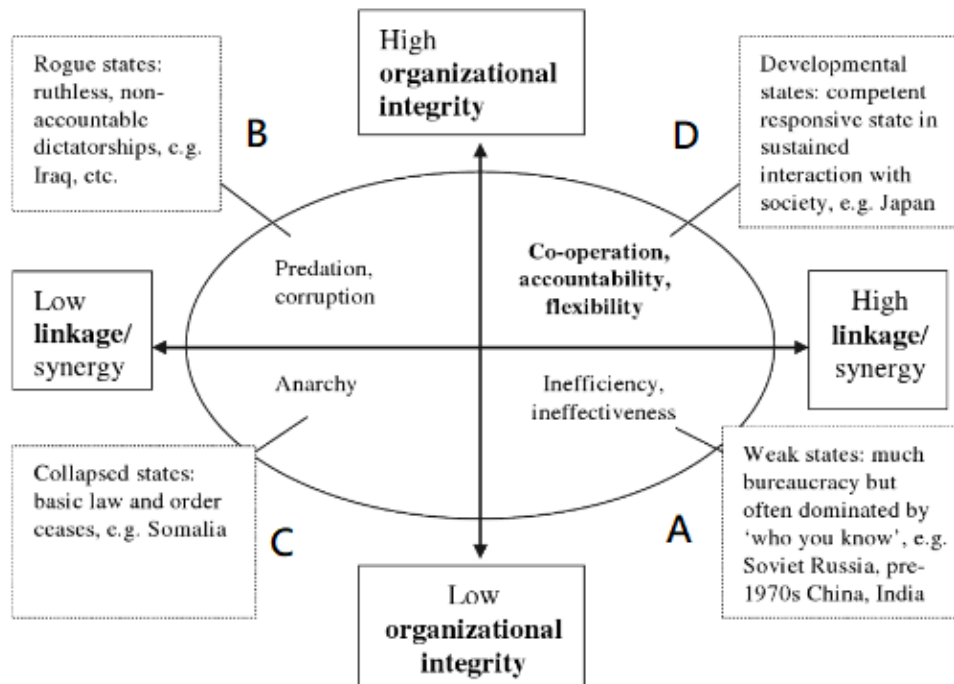


Figure 3 is redesigned and added by the author. Original Table is from Halper, D. (2005). p.24. Social Capita. Cambridge. Polity Press.

During the campaign period, the third season of the series serves as Zelenskyy's campaign promotion, portraying the Ukrainian people's contributions to repay the IMF and establish the country's true position for independent development. Subsequently, Ukraine achieves the status of a developed country and becomes an economic powerhouse. In this television series, a successful portrayal of a democratic nation overturning a corrupt government. Setting a model for the public to practice Ukrainian dreams; no only then, may be possibly to defeat Russia's invasion in the future. *Servant of the People* may turn the drama that saves Ukraine.

Conclusions

This paper found that it is the people, who build the base of democracy from humanistic perspectives to overturn this corrupt system in the drama. High school students put their history teacher's critique and ways to change the nation on social platform and won people's support. The leader, the funding, the forum are both from people rather than elite class. The leader united people and converge them as a force to search for truth, human dignity and integrity with firm belief in autonomy through virtues, morality and ethics, to overturn nightmares from poverty and corrupt to happiness and prosperity. Narratives connected Ukrainians and they may again to imagine their nation as a pride nation. Leaders are no longer controlled by oligarchs or geo-political power in the drama. The saviors of Ukraine come from "we the people" rather than elites, experts or foreign powers. No more yokels is the important change of a symbolic order. Ukrainians are finally defined as they wish.

For further studies, conducting in-depth interviews with fans could help explore their real challenge for democratic practice and sacrifices.

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