

Attempting to set the record straight. How should the family name of Ukraine's President be spelled?

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Abstract

Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, became a globally recognized persona since 2019, even more so now as a result of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. Despite that fame and recognition, it is not uncommon to observe some variations in the spelling of the President's family name, Zelenskyy, either as Zelenskyi, Zelenskiy, Zelensky, or Zelenski, even in mainstream English media and/or English academic literature. The apparent reason for this variation is the lack of Latinization of the name from the Ukrainian form and/or the recognition of the double-consonant "yy" in English. As equally as the public expects unbiased and balanced news – an unlikely phenomenon during a war – so too should news outlets pay attention to small, but important details, such as the accurate spelling of publicly highly visible personalities, such as President Zelenskyy. This paper serves to provide a culturally accurate version of the representation of the family name of the current President of Ukraine, with the hope that it may be used in a more standardized manner in news and in academic literature.

Key words: accuracy; credibility; cultural differences; manipulation; media; misleading information; transliteration

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy: The correct spelling

According to Wikipedia, the correct English spelling of the President of Ukraine is Volodymyr Zelenskyy (in Ukrainian: Володимир Зеленський)¹. Despite this, it is not uncommon to observe some variations in the family name, as Zelenskyi, Zelenskiy, Zelensky or Zelenski. The Wikipedia page also provides a reason for the existence of this variation, stating that: “Zelenskyy's name lacks an established Latin-alphabet spelling, and it has been romanized in various ways: for example *Volodymyr Zelensky* or *Zelenskyi* from Ukrainian, or *Vladimir Zelenskiy* from Russian.” That explanation, based on the imperfect Romanization of the family name, was originally provided by Dickinson (2019), who noted that, in the initial period following his inauguration as President in 2019, that there was a “range of different spellings used in various government communiques and official social media accounts”. Another reason for the apparent incorrect Romanization of the Ukrainian form of the President’s family name may be due to a Russian influence, namely the Russian transliteration as Zelenskiy, similar to the influence of the choice of Kiev (Russian transliteration) versus the correct Ukrainian form, Kyiv. Google translate from Ukrainian to English represents the family name as Zelenskyi, but if one were to select Russian instead of Ukrainian, the translation results in Zelensky. While Google Translate has been shown to be accurate for some languages like Spanish, this was not so for other languages like Farsi or Armenian (Taira et al., 2021). Others have claimed inaccuracies pertaining to Russian (Samokhin & Dzhidzhavadze, 2020).

More formally, regarding the rules of transliteration, in 2010, a Resolution No. 55 "On arranging the transliteration of the Ukrainian alphabet in Latin" was published by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine², where the expected rule was explained, the example being Zghurskyi (from Згурський), thus resulting in Zelenskyi (from Зеленський). Until 2010, since there was no system-wide established rule, with different public agencies followed their own systems, so anybody could write the spelling as they wished to interpret it. This transliteration rule can also be conformed on the website of the State Migration Service of Ukraine, which offers an official service "Checking the spelling of the last name and first name in Latin letters"³,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volodymyr_Zelenskyy

² <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/55-2010-%D0%BF#Text>

³ <https://dmsu.gov.ua/services/transliteration.html>

where entry of Володимир Зеленський will result in Volodymyr Zelenskyi. The Instagram account of the President (i.e., zelenskiy_official) assumes this “official” spelling⁴. However, on the official website of the President of Ukraine, the surname is transliterated as Zelenskyy⁵. CNN’s Chris Cillizza assessed the reason as follows: “Zelensky himself has it spelled “Zelenskyy” on his passport”⁶, essentially bringing no clarity as to why the transliteration of the President's name in his passport does not meet the established standards. On a historical note, prior to the 2019 Presidential elections, President Zelenskyy did not speak Ukrainian and actively used Russian forms⁷. President Zelenskyy himself spoke against the Soviet transliteration of Ukrainian cities⁸. To complicate matters, in Ukraine, spelling is often a “political” issue, reflecting historical ties and tendencies, although some academics in that article argued that spelling is irrelevant because for linguists, the phonetics remains the same⁹. The latter claim is supported by the fact that the last letter of President Zelenskyy’s family name, i.e., the letter й, is a short or non-syllabic “i” (i.e., yot) in Cyrillic, so it is not pronounced, or it is barely audible. That would also explain the various spelling forms.

Despite these variations, according to Dickinson (2019), the Ukrainian Presidential administration in 2019 formally adopted Zelenskyy as the official spelling. Consequently, one would expect international government representatives and media organizations to have adopted this standardized form. A 2019 Tweet by the former spokesperson of the President, Iuliia Mendel, who herself indicated multiple transliteration forms of her own name, confirmed the official spelling of the President’s family name as Zelenskyy¹⁰.

Variations in President Zelenskyy’s name in the media

As select examples of geographically diverse high-profile or established media organizations that in 2022 adopted the correct spelling of the Ukrainian President’s family name, as Zelenskyy, one may find the Associated Press¹¹, The New York Times¹², Al Jazeera¹³, or ABC News¹⁴.

⁴ https://www.instagram.com/zelenskiy_official/

⁵ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en>

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/17/politics/how-to-spell-volodymyr-zelenskyy/index.html>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volodymyr_Zelenskyy

⁸ <https://twitter.com/zelenskyyua/status/1509544344327528453>

⁹ <https://forward.com/culture/483578/kyiv-kiev-zelensky-zelenskyy-politics-spelling-ukraine/>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/IuliiaMendel/status/1138086685181456385>

¹¹ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-kyiv-poland-europe-c270027c825e009ed66988bb98a3476e>

If that is the case, why then do some media outlets continue to insist on spelling the family name of President Zelenskyy as Zelenskyi, Zelenskiy, Zelensky or Zelenski? For example, the BBC utilizes Zelensky¹⁵, with a 2019 Twitter clue¹⁶ suggesting that the existence of a double “yy” might confuse English-speaking readers, most likely because no words in the English language carry a double y, i.e., “yy”. Similarly, The Economist also adopts Zelensky¹⁷. Despite this linguistic oddity, the English version of the Japan Times opted for Zelenskyy¹⁸ whereas the English version of Chinese Global Times opted for Zelensky¹⁹. Understandably, Russian-based media might adopt the Russian-mediated transliteration of the name, as Zelenskiy²⁰. Non-English news sites such as El Pais would use Zelenski to represent the Spanish version²¹.

There may even be inconsistencies in spelling within a single media organization, depending on the reporter or journalist, such as Zelenskyy²² and Zelensky²³ at Forbes, suggesting individual choice rather than an organization-imposed mandate. In contrast, other news organizations seem to be trying to standardize the use of one form, such as the Independent²⁴, although exceptions may be found²⁵. Inconsistent standards in reporting, including within the same news organization, reflect poorly on its quality control or may reflect political or other bias (Egelhofer et al., 2021). It is also unclear why media-compiled biographies of President Zelenskyy would actually insist on the “Zelensky” spelling²⁶, because in doing so, they would potentially bias, skew, or otherwise incorrectly influence the trajectory of history, and how it is portrayed. Curiously, in the latter case at The Guardian, Zelensky was used in the title, whereas Zelenskiy was used

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/19/opinion/why-we-admire-zelensky.html>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/prove-you-are-with-us-ukraine-president-urges-eu>

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-31/volodymyr-zelenskyy-australian-parliament-address/100956534>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59667938>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/JonahFisherBBC/status/1138085269482156033>

¹⁷ <https://www.economist.com/culture/2022/07/07/the-many-lives-of-volodymyr-zelensky>

¹⁸ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/03/23/national/politics-diplomacy/volodymyr-zelenskyy-japan-speech-parliament/>

¹⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1259472.shtml>

²⁰ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/08/ukraines-zelenskiy-says-open-to-compromise-with-russia-on-crimea-separatist-territories-a76821>

²¹ <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-06-17/bruselas-acepta-la-candidatura-de-ucrania-a-la-ue-pero-exige-grandes-reformas-a-zelenski.html>

²²

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2022/03/16/there-are-now-hundreds-of-volodymyr-zelenskyy-impersonators-on-social-media/?sh=7423f9f94a6e>

²³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattdurot/2022/04/20/president-zelensky-is-not-a-billionaire-so-how-much-is-he-worth/?sh=19e724895bb0>

²⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/volodymyr-zelensky>

²⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ukraine-ap-russia-antony-blinken-mariupol-b2079316.html>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/26/zelensky-a-biography-by-serhii-rudenko-review-from-voice-of-paddington-to-global-giant>

consistently in the main body of text.

Variations in President Zelenskyy's name in academic texts

For academics, especially those who may insist on greater accuracy and standardization, the difference in spelling matters. This may have particular relevance in scholarly texts related to history. In order to gain some appreciation into the variation in spelling observed in academic literature, a search for “Volodymyr Zelensk*” on Google Scholar was performed on July 10, 2022. The search was limited to English articles, papers that only carried a DOI (digital object identifier), publication in 2022 (to give it a Russo-Ukrainian war context), and spelling anywhere in the text. The search was limited to English since different languages would also have their own spelling, such as in Spanish, Volodomir Zelenski (Urbán Crespo and Camargo Fernández, 2022), or Volodimir Zelenski in Romanian (Botnari, 2022).

An initial search (any language, all years) revealed 468 results, and when limited to 2022, 73 results. Manual screening of the 73 results, including the removal of false positives, revealed a total of 15 English articles that fulfilled the indicated selection parameters noted above.

The most frequent forms of spelling of Ukraine's President's family name were: seven papers for Zelensky, six for Zelenskyy, and two papers using Zelenski (Table 1). Surprisingly, none of the papers examined used the formally required spelling as established by Ukrainian Government authorities related to transliteration rules, i.e., Zelenskyi.

Closing arguments

How does one interpret this range of spellings, despite an officially declared stance that is already three years old? Does the insistence of the use of Zelenskyi, Zelenskiy, Zelensky or Zelenski reflect cultural insensitivity, or in the case of media organizations, the lax attention to detail? This article does not purport to know the answer to these questions, nor can it claim that any of the non-standard versions are factual errors, but suggests that media organizations standardize the use of the current officially recognized version of the President of Ukraine's name, Zelenskyy, as suggested by the President himself, or as Zelenskyi, as suggested

by the Ukrainian Government, as was detailed earlier on in the paper.

Unprecedented history is currently being written, and it can be argued that it has been in a process of being molded ever since President Zelenskyy was elected to this position in 2019. Many might argue that it is not the accuracy of the President's name that will be remembered in history, but the actions he has taken and the directions he has led Ukraine towards since 2019, and now, in particular, since February 24, 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, leading to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

As for academics, as evidenced by the small data set in Table 1, the accurate representation of Ukraine's President's family name as Zelenskyy, or as Zelenskyi, sends a message to peer reviewers and editors, who would do well to pay closer attention to this detail, especially in texts related to history, so that facts, and by association names, are accurately portrayed and represented over time in the academic literature. One possible explanation for the use of Zelenskyy by US authors, or by US publishers, may be related to the transliteration rules in place for the Romanization of Cyrillic/Ukrainian, as established by the US Library of Congress²⁷, although a future study could examine the instructions for authors across journals in the humanities, or for different publishers, or interview authors, to establish clearer reasons for uses, or to identify any patterns.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest of relevance to this topic.

Author contributions

The author contributed fully to the intellectual discussion underlying this paper, literature exploration, writing, reviews and editing, and accepts responsibility for the content, analyses and interpretation herein.

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²⁷ <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/roman.html>; <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/ukrainia.pdf>

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Table 1 Spelling of the family name of the current President of Ukraine in select academic literature*

| Reference | Spelling | # Mentions |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Allin, 2022 | Zelensky | 1 |
| Åslund, 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Benzel, 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Devi, 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Gosling et al., 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Gould-Davies, 2022 | Zelensky | 5 |
| Kaminskij, 2022 | Zelensky | 52 |
| Kang, 2022 | Zelensky | 1 |
| Marandici, 2022 | Zelensky | 2 |
| McKee et al., 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Michelsen & Reshetnikov, 2022 | Zelenski | 1 |
| Ryabinska, 2022 | Zelensky | 12 |
| Southall et al., 2022 | Zelenskyy | 1 |
| Szeptycki, 2022 | Zelenski | 1 |
| Umland, 2022 | Zelensky | 1 |

* Search parameters on Google Scholar (July 10, 2022): 2022; English papers; only journals (any category of manuscript) with a DOI; any part of the paper (title, abstract, main body of text, excluding references and websites)