

Servant of the People: Comedy or Conspiracy?

The Russian Area of the Modern Languages and Linguistics and Intercultural Communication Department invite all UMBC students and faculty to a discussion of the role of mass media in presidential politics.

Ukraine will elect its next president on April 21st. Incumbent Petro Poroshenko faces the very real possibility of being defeated by comedian and television actor, Volodymyr Zelensky. In America, *The Apprentice* gave Donald Trump the opportunity to showcase his leadership style to a broad audience, prior to his run for President.

In what some believe has been an orchestrated plan, *Servant of the People* opened its initial season in 2016 with the endearing history teacher, Vasyl Holoborodko, becoming president, almost by accident. Then, episode by episode, the nearly 13-million person viewing audience has watched President Holoborodko confront graft and corruption within the political establishment, thus becoming a folk hero to many Ukrainians. Astonishingly, at the height of the shows popularity, on New Year's Eve in 2018, Zelensky announced he was running for real-life president of Ukraine. Either by chance or by design, he has taken many of his TV fans—or more properly, the fans of TV character, President Holoborodko, with him to a potential victory.

Following a brief presentation by Russian Lecturer, Vira Zhdanovych, participants will view the official trailer, opening scenes and recent season-highlights of Zelensky's phenomenally popular Ukrainian comedy series, *Servant of the People*.

Participants will discuss whether this transition from TV president to real-life candidate has been spontaneous, or as some suspect, a pre-planned conspiracy. If this series and run for president were pre-orchestrated—by whom? Why does the series avoid discussion of Putin or Russia in its story-line? Has this approach undermined the democratic process that Ukrainians are fighting hard to achieve? In general, is the use of mass media by candidates helpful or harmful with respect to political elections?

Finally, has *Servant of the People* been merely an entertaining three seasons of a hit comedy-series, or a three-season infomercial in preparation for the real life candidacy of Volodymyr Zelensky?

Joining us after the 20 minute video introduction to the series, will be Dr. Olha Martynyuk, Senior Lecturer of History at the National Technical University of Ukraine. We also welcome back to UMBC, MLLI graduate and Fulbright Scholar, Aaron Kennet, who has spent time in both Russia and the Ukraine.