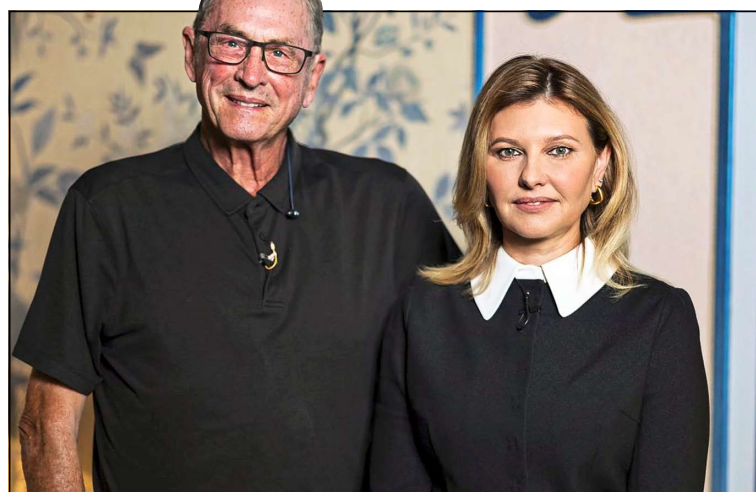


**In a world exclusive interview conducted at the Office of the President in Kyiv, Volodymyr Zelensky's wife Olena tells LORD ASHCROFT...**

# Living in a country at war is a constant psychological burden – but my husband and I are emotionally closer than ever before



**T**HE tragic events of the past two-and-a-half years would have tested any marriage: an unprecedented war, a potentially life-or-death decision on whether to flee the fighting and a close-knit family forced to live apart.

Add to that the huge responsibilities that go with being the President and First Lady of Ukraine after their country was invaded by a neighbouring power, and the marriage of Volodymyr and Olena Zelensky could easily have crumbled under the pressure.

However, the First Lady made it clear to me that this is a long way from the reality. Speaking in an exclusive interview at the office of the President in central Kyiv, Olena Zelenska (in Ukrainian, the married name often takes on a feminine ending) reveals that war has made the couple's 20-year-marriage stronger than ever.

'I think we are closer and more tied because we have supported each other the way in which we hoped. I think I didn't let him down, and he never lets me down,' she said.

'We don't see each other as often as we would like, so every meeting is a joy. We're never tired of each other, we never bore each other. And it makes the family stronger, too.'

For the duration of the conflict, the First Lady and their two children, daughter Oleksandra, 20, and son Kyrylo, 11, have had to live apart from the President. They are able to see each other more now than at the start of the war, but family life still has its challenges, as it does for all those living in the war-torn country.

Ms Zelenska told me: 'It's not a normal life for any person to live in a country at war. It's a constant psychological burden and pressure. I hope when this pressure is relieved, with our victory, we will be able to stay sane and we'll be fine. However, now I think that we are as close as ever emotionally.'

'And we understand each other very well. In fact, it is very important that you can respect your nearest and dearest. I am sure love is not enough. And I am happy that I can respect my husband because it would have been very hard to stay with him, even given huge love, if I hadn't believed in his honesty.'

As Russian special forces troops swarmed all over the capital hours after the all-out invasion in February 2022, the U.S. gave the President an option to leave Ukraine. He is famously said to have replied: 'The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.'

The softly spoken First Lady, wearing a stylish black-belted trouser suit, told me: 'I have to be frank, yes, I am proud of him. But it was not a surprise for me. It was just another proof that I chose the right person.'

In the terrifying days, weeks and months at the start of the war, I didn't doubt for a second the way he'd behave. But I am even more proud of his resilience. This is a long-lasting marathon.'

**S**HE added: 'Displaying your courage once is possible – sometimes it may be an accident. But when you constantly put all of your effort and power into achieving the common goal, it demands something extra. He's managing, and I pray that he does not lose his power and strength, because we need him as he is, strong and stubborn.'

Her pride in her husband goes hand in hand with her concerns for his safety and the wider family. President Zelensky has been the target of several reported assassination attempts.

'I hope everything that could be done for his safety has been done, and the same for my family, too... I don't want to think about bad stuff. I'm afraid to think about it,' said the First Lady who, despite her good English, preferred to answer my questions in Ukrainian.

Just as Ms Zelenska could not

disguise her admiration for her husband, she cannot hide her hatred for Vladimir Putin for causing widespread death, destruction and chaos in her country, the second largest in Europe. Ukraine does not publish casualty figures but tens of thousands of its service personnel and civilians have been killed during the war.

The First Lady said of Putin: 'Many people, for a long time, have not considered him to be a person. It is some sort of a monster that rules the country.'

The atrocities inflicted on Ukraine's people seem endless:

last month, a Russian missile hit a children's hospital on the outskirts of Kyiv, killing two people and injuring 300 more, mostly children. At least 46 people – including 33 in Kyiv – were killed across Ukraine in a wave of missile and drone strikes on the same day.

'Who is this person, this officer of the Russian army, who pushed the button, knowing he was launching a rocket to a children's hospital? And it is 100 per cent that they knew. It is proven,' said the First Lady, still deeply moved.

Like her husband and Ukraine's military, she is dismissive of a

peace deal that would cede Russia the nearly 20 per cent of land it has seized from Ukraine, saying it would mean the struggle of the last two-and-a-half years had been in vain. She fears such a pause would give Russia the chance to regroup and attack again at some point, adding: 'In many fairy tales of many nations, there is a dragon who, every year is given a girl so that the monster won't burn down the city. But for how long can we keep feeding the dragon? Somebody has to stop it.'

Does she contemplate the consequences of a Russian victory? Say-

ing she tries not to think about such a scenario, she added: 'I have a strong hope that won't happen. I cannot confidently say that it wouldn't happen, but it would be a loss, not just of Ukraine, but also the entire democratic world.'

If peace and victory come to Ukraine, the First Lady insists that her country and the international community must prosecute Russia and its servicemen for war crimes, including those who committed rape and also crimes against the elderly and children. 'The victims need this justice,' she said firmly.

Ms Zelenska said various phases

## WORLD EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW by Lord Ashcroft

IN KYIV



of the war had presented different challenges: 'Everyone gets tired, everyone wants to preserve hope inside – and it takes effort.'

I learned that, like me as the author of seven books on bravery, the First Lady had a huge admiration for the courage of her nation's service personnel and civilians. She thanked me for telling the stories of Ukrainian bravery in newspaper articles, adding: 'It hurts a lot when I see the stories of our warriors, especially those who died at the very start.'

'It is painful because those were the bravest, those who joined the army in the first days of the war. Those were the people who felt this call, this sincere urge to defend their country. Unfortunately, many of them are not with us any more. And in this war, we lose those most valuable ones.'

I told the First Lady that, over

the past two years, I have interviewed many Ukrainian women – from a female sniper to a front-line aid worker – to champion their bravery. She replied: 'Military service for Ukrainian women is not mandatory, and all the women who took weapons into their hands,

**‘We need my husband as he is, strong and stubborn’**

including sniper rifles, are women who made the choice for themselves. It is incredibly courageous and inspiring.'

She added that when she is at her

most weary, her work inspires her to carry on. 'Of course, everyone has moments of exhaustion, when it is hard to start every morning all over again. And in this moment I can keep moving when I know there are things I haven't done yet. 'There are different kinds of people. Some give birth to an idea, those who develop processes and plan, and others who implement. I think I represent the first group – I am full of ideas.'

Ms Zelenska has been touched by the way the UK has rallied behind Ukraine. 'When I visit Great Britain, I feel how strong the support of the British people is on every level – from the Royal Family to ordinary citizens who I meet every time I go back.'

As for the suggestion that Donald Trump would, if he is re-elected U.S. President, cut the huge levels of aid for Ukraine, the First Lady



**CLOSE BOND:** Volodymyr Zelensky with his wife Olena, left, and visiting the front line last month. Inset left: Olena with Lord Ashcroft

said: 'I hope it is mere speculation. The U.S. election is something that a lot depends on for many countries, especially for those who, like us, hope for their support.'

I was touched when she greeted me as a 'big friend of Ukraine'. I have visited the country eight times since the start of this war, including many trips to the front line. My numerous newspaper articles supporting Ukraine resulted in me being one of a number of individuals to be sanctioned by Russia earlier this year.

Like all first ladies, or first gentlemen, Ms Zelenska had the chance to opt for a private life out of the spotlight or to have a public role of her own. She chose the latter. That role, of course, expanded hugely after the war.

Within months of the outbreak, she founded the Olena Zelenska Foundation, a charity that has raised millions of pounds for humanitarian aid, education and health care. Many of these projects support children by building bomb shelters in schools and places where children can learn outside of schools, as well as rebuilding destroyed homes, hospitals and the like.

She told me: 'When the war commenced, I realised that, through my contacts, my trips abroad, the fact I can talk to a great number of people outside of our country, I could channel all that to help Ukrainians inside the country.'

That so much of the foundation's work is with children is no coincidence. 'I think any conscious adult understands that, first of all, children are the most vulnerable category of people who suffer from war. They are the least protected. And when you see them suffer, it tears your heart,' she said.

'We owe them because we didn't manage to preserve the peace in their country. As adults, we owe them because they don't have the starting opportunities their peers have abroad. They don't have a normal childhood. So to do something for their childhood, to become at least better, is a normal desire of every adult. And the fact that I'm a mother, I think, only amplifies all that.'

Next month, Ms Zelenska will host the fourth 'Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen' in Kyiv, focussing on the safety and security of children.

Commended for her charitable and other work, she was named among Time magazine's 100 most influential people of 2023, in which

she was described as 'a warrior for the people of Ukraine'.

She modestly played down suggestions she is a role model but added: 'I hope greatly that my activities, my behaviour, inspire somebody, give somebody hope.'

Despite the strains of war, she retains a sense of humour. I told her that her husband, when once asked by a journalist what he most looked forward to doing after a peace agreement, replied: 'To catch a carp in the Dnipro [river].'

So I wondered if she has a similar interest she wants to rekindle? 'It is a very interesting thing about the carp. Let me put it this way. I hate cleaning fish. In my family it was a tradition that the one who fishes is the one who cleans and fries the fish. But when Volodymyr catches a carp, I promise to clean and cook that fish, because that would mean victory is here. And in the meantime, I will think about some carp recipes!'

Finally, I asked Ms Zelenska if she sometimes feels her life is sur-

**‘When you see children suffer it tears your heart’**

real. Only a handful of years ago, her husband was an actor and she was a screenwriter. Now she is the First Lady of a country fighting for its survival.

'Well, nobody ever planned that, that my husband and I would find ourselves in a situation like this, especially that there would be a war. I never thought I would be a wife of a president. But to be honest, when we were young, I didn't expect him to become a TV star and then a movie actor, either.'

She said that her husband has involved her at every step of the way. 'Each turn in our journey made me stronger and demanded development from me. And I thank him for that.'

● *Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft.*

● *To donate to the Olena Zelenska Foundation, visit: [zelenskafoundation.org](http://zelenskafoundation.org)*