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“RUSSIAN WARSHIP, GO F*CK YOURSELF”

Circulating social media discourses
in the Russia–Ukraine War

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This year can be called a year of losses for Ukraine, for the whole of Europe, and the whole world. But it’s wrong. We shouldn’t say that ... We haven’t lost anything. It was taken from us. Ukraine did not lose its sons and daughters—they were taken away by murderers. Ukrainians did not lose their homes—they were destroyed by terrorists. We did not lose our lands—they were occupied by invaders. The world did not lose peace—Russia destroyed it.

—*New Year greetings of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 31 December 2022*

The title and transcript of this speech were posted on the official website of the President of Ukraine in English, presumably translated from Ukrainian; I found the speech in this form on Twitter because it was shared by “Cap’n” (@Janet04745625) on 1 January 2023. The speech continues with a detailed portrayal of the forms and causes of dispossession in Ukraine that have occurred over the 311 days of the war in 2022 and outlines the strength of the Ukrainian response and the global outpouring of support.

Unfortunately, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is not unprecedented, but there is a sense of unprecedented awareness and support—emotionally and financially—for Ukraine in this phase of the war. This awareness and support are reflected in the volume of posts about the war from various perspectives on social media platforms. This chapter presents a sample of posts and reactions on social media to the events of the 2022 phase of the Ukraine–Russia war to shed light on the extent to which Ukrainians and the Ukrainian diaspora, rather than resigning themselves to being a part of Russia as the Russian government expected, have become ever more assertive in claiming a sense of being

Ukrainian. In this new era, being “Ukrainian” is symbolized by both Ukrainians and world observers as being heroic, brave, and resistant to the terrorist state of Russia and its President, Vladimir Putin. I will show through the presentation of these artifacts that, from national leaders and soldiers to individuals at home and abroad, the positive images of Ukraine and the Ukrainian government are persistent despite the ample evidence of loss, destruction, and dispossession this war has generated.

Methodology and positionality

Digital artifacts were collected from three social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram.¹ As a middle-aged Generation X American, I became an active member of Facebook in 2007 and joined Twitter in 2011. As a former English teacher in Kharkiv and Khmel’nyts’kyi (2001–2003) and an anthropology of language and education researcher in the city now known as Dnipro (2010–2011), I have friended multiple people on Facebook and followed accounts on Twitter related to Ukrainians in Ukraine, the Ukrainian diaspora in North America, and researchers and educators who have previously lived in Ukraine. These friends and accounts frequently share posts from Ukrainian social groups and news outlets. Telegram is a site I am less active on, but one that I have learned from my students in Kazakhstan is frequently used in Eurasian countries.

My analysis focuses on these platforms because they, plus Facebook Messenger, have been an especially important link connecting me to friends who remain in Ukraine, and, in one case, they helped me facilitate the departure and arrival of one acquaintance from Ukraine to Canada. In the early days of the war, I recall checking the Facebook Messenger status of a former student still in Kharkiv. If it showed she was active with a green light or that she had accessed the app in the past 12 hours, I could be sure she was still alive. She relocated with her family to L’viv in March 2022. Each time a bomb goes off in Dnipro or Khmel’nyts’kyi or L’viv, I write to friends in those cities on Messenger to make sure they and their loved ones are still okay.

Data were collected from individual and group posts that appear in English, Russian, Ukrainian, or a combination of these. Individual posters include current president Volodymyr Zelenskyy,² former President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko, newspapers *Ukrainska Pravda* and *The New Voice of Ukraine*, Kyiv *Independent* newspaper reporter Illia Ponomarenko, influencer Xena (@xenasolo, 36,000 followers), American journalist Terrell Jermaine Starr (@terrelljstarr), American celebrities such as Bette Midler and Steven King, and personal Ukrainian contacts. Group posters include In Ukraine, Ukrainian Memes Forces, and regional organizations, such as the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. Telegram data were collected from two news sites, UkraineNow and Ukraine24, with a focus on visuals.

Data were archived by saving screenshots or links between 1 March 2022 and 7 December 2022, with an emphasis on key strategic points in time or places in the war: (1) the defense of Snake Island; (2) the discovery of the massacre at Bucha; (3) the liberation of Kherson; and (4) the blackouts and limited gas supplies affecting heat in November 2022. In addition, secondary searches were conducted for additional materials on key words in posts and in comments on some original posts to enhance interpretation.

Artifacts could be textual only (i.e., tweets or Facebook posts), visuals (i.e., photos, illustrations, selfies, or memes with or without language), or moving visuals (gifs or videos) (Hand 2016). I broke down visuals into (1) still or moving visuals and (2) hybrids, which are visuals that may be still or moving and presented with commentary contextualizing the shared image. Following Altheide and Schneider (2013), I conducted analyses of both “manifest” and “latent” content, that is, the surface-level meaning and the apparent meaning in a particular time–space context (Banks 2018, 14). To check my interpretation of images, I relied on comments on the original posts in the original media, and consultations with other scholars in Ukraine and beyond, including a workshop with several scholars in this volume.

Discourses

I present four discursive themes on the Russia–Ukraine war found on social media in 2022. The first two themes focus on heroism at national and individual levels. The third theme considers regional and individual dispossession, while the fourth theme considers the hope of repossessing people and places.

Hero versus villain

Posts in the early days of the war focused on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as embodying grit and heroism. One image of Zelenskyy portrays him as a superhero, “Captain Ukraine,” by depicting Captain America’s body with Zelenskyy’s head on it (Selada de Fruta 2022).³ The Captain Ukraine image was reposted on Facebook, along with the phrase “The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride,” by two of my Facebook friends who are originally from Ukraine and Georgia but were working in a university in Hong Kong when the war began. This phrase is attributed to Zelenskyy and represents his refusal to flee the country in favor of staying and fighting Russia with international support. Although Zelenskyy’s office has never confirmed he made this statement (Kessler 2022), it has been reported in the Associated Press, the *Times of Israel*, *CNN*, *The Daily Beast*, and multiple other US news sources. It became one of the top quotes of 2022. This flippant use of humor to respond to the US President’s offer to evacuate him to safety during a dire wartime crisis contributed from the beginning to

Things on Earth you can see from space:



The Great Pyramids of Giza



The Amazon River



The Grand Canyon



The balls of Volodymyr Zelensky

FIGURE 8.1 Meme: “Things You Can See from Space.” Screenshot by the author of Twitter feed.

the perception of Zelenskyy as a strong, fearless leader. Multiple memes and Twitter texts refer to Zelenskyy’s balls to illustrate his fortitude, with the assertion that his balls can now be seen from outer space. Figure 8.1 shows an example of this meme posted on Twitter by Bette Midler, an American entertainer whose career and fame span over 50 years and whose tweets over the years have shown her to be a staunch anti-Trump liberal Democrat.

This portrayal of Zelenskyy contrasts sharply with how Putin’s leadership style is presented on social media. Visual side-by-side comparisons make the choice of resistance to Russian aggression that much easier for all to make, as seen in a split-screen image of the two leaders with the headline “Ukrainian vs. Russian leadership” (Rudkevich 2022). On the left, Zelenskyy sits in fatigues flanked by soldiers on both sides as they drink from plastic cups at a table laid with sausage, apples, and cookies—an everyday Ukrainian meal rather than a presidential banquet. On the right, Putin sits at the head of a long table in a suit with three advisors sitting far more than the COVID-precautionary six feet away at the other end. The post was retweeted 33,000 times and liked 209,700 times. An additional 2,241 people quote tweeted (retweeted with commentary). Some quote tweets merely say, “the picture says it all,” implying that it goes without

saying that the Ukrainian leadership is the winning side. Zycr9 (2022) was one of the few posters to comment on the comparison, explaining the importance of trading suits for fatigues: “President Zelensky is working ‘with’ soldiers for the country & obviously they share a great rapport. So much they will literally put their lives at risk.”

Regarding the image of Putin, other commenters asked, jokingly, why Putin has such a long table—is he trying to avoid COVID? Is he paranoid about getting stabbed by one of his advisors? Polterghast (2022) wrote, in his quote tweet, “that table is so comedically oversized is he trying to look like a cartoon villain bro,” followed by a tears emoji implying that the author is laughing so hard they are crying at the contrast between the villain Putin and the hero Zelenskyy. In a less “comical” view, the *Kyiv Post* (2022) shared an editorial cartoon that rendered the image of Putin at the table as a drawing, but with the table in the shape of a coffin with a cross on it—images that can be interpreted to signify Putin as a murderer and head of a terrorist state (Digital Nomad 2022) or as presiding over his own funeral (Kozłowski 2022).

Other posts position both Russian leadership and its followers on the losing side of the war. A repeated trope was modifying images of road and street signs to indicate that Russian soldiers were on the path to death. On Facebook, for example, Maryna Melnyk for *Ukrains'ki Posiden'ky!* (Ukrainian Gatherings!) wrote in Ukrainian that there were “new road signs in Ukraine!” The post includes a photo that shows blue and white signs offering directions to *HROBY* (coffins), *KREMATORII* (crematoriums), and *MISHKY* (body bags) (see Figure 8.2).

A similar road sign appears in a “revised” form of the famous painting *Kateryna*. The maiden is holding up her middle fingers while the bomb-sniffing dog Patron looks on. The road sign offers three directions: *NA KHUI* (GO F*CK YOURSELF), *ZNOV NA KHUI* (AGAIN GO F*CK YOURSELF), or *DO ROSII NA KHUI* (GO TO RUSSIA AND F*CK YOURSELF).

The theme of Russian soldiers on a path to death continued nine months later when Russia mobilized additional troops. Ukrainian Memes Forces (2022b) posted on Facebook a meme of a dog with the Russian flag on its head being told on its 18th birthday in English, “You’ve been drafted and are going to Donbas. You are lucky to die for Putin’s legacy!” In March, Vera Partem, a Ukrainian-American friend on Facebook, reposted from Ukrainian blogger Sergey Naumovich a billboard from Odesa that says in Ukrainian, “Hot tour: see Ukraine and die! Cocktails included.” While it looks like something that could have been improvised, this billboard is one of hundreds of anti-war posters placed on highways in the Odesa region, according to the Official Site of the City of Odesa (2022). The sign is a trope of a travel ad for a vacation package that, in this case, includes Molotov cocktails (homemade bombs), which have been renamed in Ukraine “Bandera smoothies.”

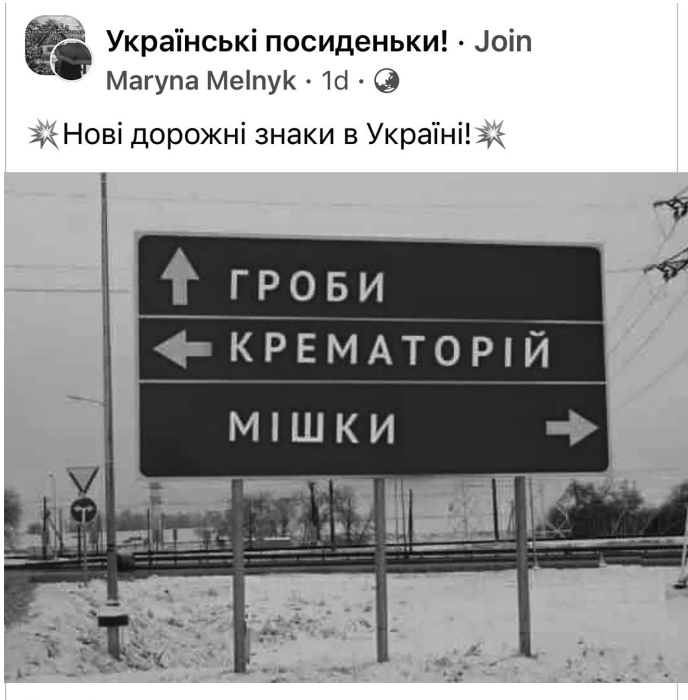


FIGURE 8.2 “New Road Signs in Ukraine!” Screenshot by the author of Facebook news feed.

Military and civilian heroism in Ukraine

I want to say to all of you: Ukrainians, you are incredible! See what we have done and what we are doing! How our soldiers have been smashing this “second army of the world” since the first days. How our people stopped their equipment and infantry columns. How an old man used his hands to stop a tank. How a woman knocked down a drone with a jar of tomatoes.

—*New Year greetings of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, 31 December 2022*

On the first day of the war, a Russian naval ship approached Ukraine’s Snake Island, 30 miles off the southern coast of Ukraine, and ordered the soldiers on the island to surrender. In the transcript of the conversation that was later released to the public, the response from a Ukrainian soldier was *Russkii voennyi korabl’, idi nakhui* (“Russian Warship, Go Fuck Yourself”). Since all contact was lost after that message, it was initially reported in multiple local and international news outlets that all 13 soldiers on the island had been killed and that Zelensky would

name them as Heroes of Ukraine posthumously (e.g., Radio Free Europe 2022). Later it became clear they had been captured by the Russian ship and were eventually released in a prisoner exchange (Verkhovna Rada 2022). The phrase and the moment became a widespread symbol of the bravery of the Ukrainian military in standing up to Russia from the first attack. The moment circulated far beyond Ukraine, but only within Ukraine was it depicted on a Ukrainian stamp with a soldier holding up a middle finger to recall the phrase (see Figure 8.3).

As of January 2023, the official version on the Ukrainian Post website goes one step further, showing the same soldier holding the middle finger up but with alternating images of a warship in some stamps and an empty seascape in others.⁴ The byline is *Russkii voennyi korabl' ... Vs'o* (“Russian Warship ... Done!”). While the first three Russian words echo those of the Ukrainian soldier who addressed the Russian warship in Russian, the final word “Done!” alludes to the Ukrainian Army’s sinking of the Russian warship (Harding 2022). However, the word *vs'o* is neither Russian nor Ukrainian. It is a mixed sociolect of Russian and Ukrainian. Given this is an official government document, the mixed word choice is purposeful and definitely sarcastic.



👍❤️👤 238

2 Comments

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

FIGURE 8.3 Ukrainian Soldier and Russian Warship Stamp Image. Screenshot by the author of Facebook news feed.

Another Ukrainian military action against Russia celebrated on Facebook was the rapid liberation of multiple towns and villages and the destruction of two key logistical and symbolic bridges between Ukraine and Russia. The liberation was marked by one academic on Facebook as “the greatest counteroffensive since WWII” (Sheremeta 2022). A more humorous representation, shared on Facebook by a former student of mine from Kharkiv and now living in Canada, portrayed in Ukrainian a “Daily Military Schedule” signed by President Zelenskyy and Ukrainian Minister of Defense Reznikov with timelines for liberating multiple cities in between meals and celebratory concerts (see Figure 8.4).

As important as the literal and figurative representations on social media of the strength of the Ukrainian military are for maintaining Ukrainians’ morale, there are similar discourses and portrayals of civilians showing bravery in their response to the war. As Zelenskyy told his people in Ukrainian, “each of us is a warrior” (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022a). Around this same time, reports appear of civilians performing military actions including removing mines (The New Voice of Ukraine 2022), throwing a jar of tomatoes to bring down a Russian drone, and stealing a Russian tank with a tractor.⁵ This last feat is also now on Ukrainian stamps⁶ (see Bilaniuk in this volume).



FIGURE 8.4 “Daily Military Schedule.” Screenshot by the author of Facebook news feed.

Other forms of civilian bravery shared on social media are expressions of patriotism and continuing everyday activities that are presented as evidence of a strong Ukrainian spirit. Journalist Kristina Berdinskykh (2022) posted a photo and caption of someone with a trumpet playing the “Ukrainian national anthem in the metro station (bomb shelter)”; this post was retweeted one day later by journalist Olga Tokariuk (2022) with the headline, “these people are invincible” followed by emojis of the Ukrainian flag and a heart afire. In December, a Ukrainian friend in Canada reposted on Facebook a TikTok video by rehabdp (2022), which showed young girls doing ballet exercises during an air raid alert. The captions in Ukrainian read “Unbreakable. Explosions in Dnipro, Exercises in the bomb shelter,” as the Cranberries’ song “Zombie” plays over.

In fact, the terms *neperemozhni* (“invincible”) and *nezlamni* (“invincible” or “unbreakable,” depending on the translation into English on social media) appear in multiple posts across multiple social media platforms to refer to the status and actions of Ukrainians. In hybrid form, the Khmel’nyts’kyi Palace of Creative Arts of Children and Youth (2022) in Ukraine posted an image of the Ukrainian trident written in footprints in the snow with the headline in Ukrainian: “*My—natsiia! I my—NEPEREMOZHNI!*” (“We are the nation! And we are



FIGURE 8.5 Russia as a Nutcracker, Ukraine as an Unbroken Nut. Screenshot by the author of Facebook news feed.

INVINCIBLE!”). Visually, the Facebook user In Ukraine represented the concept of being unbreakable with a photo of a nutcracker (potentially a symbol of Russia, but a modern metal version rather than a wooden soldier) and a walnut labeled “Ukraine” in English. The nutcracker is shown broken while the nut remains intact (see Figure 8.5).

Dispossession

Hostomel. Bucha. Irpin. Borodianka. Kharkiv.

Mriya.

Kramatorsk Station. Toy.

Chernihiv.

Mariupol. Drama Theater. The word “Children” written.

Olenivka.

Odesa. Multi-story building. Girl. Three months old.

Vilniansk. Maternity hospital. Baby. Two days old.

Azovstal.

It’s impossible to forget. And it’s impossible to forgive. But it’s possible to win.

—*New Year greetings of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 31 December 2022*

While the artifacts from the previous two sections illustrate the national and individual sense of Ukrainian heroism, other posts acknowledge the victims of this war and the ways in which Ukraine is broken, albeit not defeated. Some of them refer to soldiers who have died in battle and their funeral arrangements (e.g., Crimean Banderian 2022), including artists and athletes who died as volunteer soldiers or civilians (e.g., Kyiv Post 2022, September 13). Many of these posts include hashtags or headlines with the individual mourning expression *vichna pam’iat’* (“eternal memory”) and/or patriotic mentions of “heroes.” The Ukrainian spirit during wartime is simultaneously celebrated in these posts in at least two ways. One is to celebrate Ukraine with two phrases that date back to World War II: *Slava Ukraïni* (“Glory to Ukraine”), to which the reply is *Heroiam Slava* (“Glory to the heroes!”). Other posters decry and disparage Russia as the cause of these deaths, as Matviichuk (2022, 14 September) did in mourning soldiers lost as the result of “Russian occupiers.”

One pair of civilian images that has circulated repeatedly on Ukrainian Twitter and in Western media (e.g., John et al. 2022; Tahir 2022) is of one victim, Iryna Filkina, from the town of Bucha in the Kyiv region, where over 400 civilians were killed by Russian troops in March 2022. Their corpses were discovered in April 2022 (Pelley 2022). One photo shows her smiling in profile with her manicured and polished fingers resting on her chin, while the other photo

is of the same manicured hand lying lifeless in the street, covered in dirt and asphalt. When these images are shown side by side (Tahir 2022; Zabrisky 2022), they underscore the dispossession of life Ukrainians have suffered at the hands of Russian forces and demonstrate how social media can “prime us to react with outrage” (Goodman 2020, para. 4).

This “before and after” approach to understanding the destructiveness of the Russian military action (see Pavlenko, this volume) has also been applied in social media to cities and soldiers. Videos of cities, such as Mariupol, show what life and infrastructure were like before February 2022, compared with what has been and is being destroyed (e.g., In Ukraine 2022a). The approach has also been used when reporting about prisoners of war who have been freed, as evidence that Ukrainian soldiers have been “beaten, starved, and tortured in all ways imaginable” in Russia (Xena 2022). The hashtags in the main posts or responses suggest these posts are pleas for help to #StopRussia from further destroying Ukraine. They also constitute a mounting body of evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Paradoxically, the dispossession of infrastructure has inspired further Ukrainian resistance. Russia has attacked energy bases, leading the government to impose rolling blackouts on much of the country. President Zelenskyy responded to this threat by saying, “without gas or without you? Without you. Without light or without you? Without you” (Gerashchenko 2022). In other words, as Zelenskyy elaborated in Ukrainian, “Cold, starvation, darkness, and thirst are not as frightening and as deadly to us as your ‘friendship and fraternity’” (Zelenskiy/Official 2022). This discourse was repeated by numerous government officials. The British ambassador to Kyiv posted “without you” in Ukrainian with a photo of a flower and a flashlight (Dame Melinda Simmons 2022). A former member of the Ukrainian Parliament (Sotnyk 2022) and the head of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine (Matviichuk 2022, 26 November) both shared an embellished satellite image of Ukraine in full darkness with a red border line between it and Russia and the words “without you!” in English in red. This image was captioned with similar, but not identical, texts explaining that true light in Ukraine is not about electricity but about caring for one another. After Ukraine regained control of Kherson from Russia, a resident, Andrii, was recorded by a reporter for Agence France-Presse in English with the following comment:

I am extremely happy that we are finally liberated, that we are finally free, because now we have no electricity in the city, no water, no central supply heating, no mobile connection, no Internet connection, but we have NO RUSSIANS. And I am extremely happy of that. We can survive anything. But we are free.

(Soldin 2022)

In this statement, the paradox becomes clear—although Ukrainians momentarily possess even fewer material resources than before the war or as part of an occupied Russian nation, they are happier. These are marked shifts from pre-war attitudes of cynicism toward political leaders and high aspirations to have infrastructure that matched international standards (Goodman 2013).

This shift in thinking within Ukraine became policy, action, and discourse when President Zelenskyy linked the Ukrainian state response to the “terrorist attack on our energy system” to Ukrainian invincibility. In November 2022, Zelenskyy said in a speech posted on Facebook in Ukrainian, “*iakshcho zнову vidbudut’sia masovani rosiis’ki udary*” (“if there will be massive Russian strikes again”) the country will open *Punkty Nazlamnosti* (“Centers of Invincibility”) across the country where citizens can find heat, electricity, internet, mobile phone charging stations, water, and a pharmacy—all free and open 24 hours (Office of the President of Ukraine 2022b). Zelenskyy referred in this message to the website nezlamnist.gov.ua, which uses that same Ukrainian word for “invincible”; as of April 2023, the centers identified on the website blanket the map of the country, except for the occupied territories (Luhansk, Donetsk, Crimea) and parts of southern and eastern Ukraine (e.g., Kherson, Mariupol).⁷ These points of invincibility were expanded further by Kazakhs in Ukraine who have built “Yurts of Invincibility” (traditional Kazakh nomadic tents) to show their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people (5 Kanal 2023). Discursively, one Facebook poster illustrated her “‘point’ of invincibility in the soul” (“*Punkty*” *nazlamnosti v dushi*) with a drawing of a power strip with three devices connected: (1) *Nadiia na maibutne* (“Hope in the future”); (2) *Liubov do Ukraïny* (“Love of Ukraine”); and (3) *vira v ZSU* (“faith in the Ukrainian Armed Forces”) (Avtorhova 2022).

Repossession

The face of Kherson is cut by fragments of shells, but the main thing is that we welcome the New Year free and together under blue and yellow flags. And therefore, we will restore everything, rebuild everything. Just like Chernihiv and Zaporizhzhia, and Kramatorsk, and Bakhmut.

—*New Year greetings of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 31 December 2022*

It is difficult to end the analysis on a sad note, given the joyous displays on social media of *repossession*—Ukrainian individuals and military units taking back spaces that were previously occupied by Russian soldiers. In the case of the city of Kherson, one common trope was the use of the word “home”—for example, “welcome home” (U.S.—Ukraine Foundation 2022) or *Kherson vdoma* (“Kherson is home”) (Telegraf UA 2022)—with the understanding that Kherson had returned to Ukraine, its rightful “home.” Ukrainian-American Vera Partem’s

Facebook post on this theme consists of a picture of a soldier surrounded by a crowd of civilian men, women, and children. Over the photo is written in Ukrainian, “today every Ukrainian cries from happiness. Kherson is home.” Similar live videos and still shots of a soldier surrounded by civilian crowds and flags, with tears of joy, have been posted on multiple news and media outlets, such as the Ukraine NOW Telegram channel (Ukraine NOW 2022).

In the photo posted by Vera are three other symbols of Kherson’s liberation by the Ukrainian army. Two Ukrainian flags are seen, and one man holds a cardboard sign that reads in Ukrainian, “Kherson was waiting for the Armed Forces of Ukraine.” The message in the sign is punctuated by the image of a watermelon, as Kherson is “Ukraine’s ‘watermelon capital’” (Euromaidan Press 2022).

Another symbol of repossession is the Ukrainian flag and its colors. Two posts from September 2022 show individuals replacing the colors of the Russian flag (white, blue, and red) with the colors of the Ukrainian flag (blue and yellow). The Facebook user In Ukraine (2022b) described the activity of three men and two young girls in the photo as “giving a bus stop its true colors back.” UATV English (2022) showed a photo of a woman at the bottom of a ladder holding her thumb up. The poster identifies the woman as an “activist repainting the street sign into the colors of Ukrainian flag.”

Ukrainians are not only repossessing land, but they are also imagining a repossessed future. This is best reflected in the phrase that has widely circulated on all three platforms in English and Ukrainian, “Everything will be Ukraine” (*Vse bude Ukraïna*). The phrase is even the name of a Facebook page created in March 2022 (everythingwillbeukraine.org). This page and website are more than meme generators; they offer video testimonials of people in and from Ukraine about their reactions to the war. They also offer links to organizations where one can donate funds to support various needs of the war.

A more violent notion of an imagined future that is Ukrainian, not Russian, was captured by Ukrainian Memes Forces (2022a), which posted on Twitter another split hybrid image. The top image is of a wheat field and sky and the phrase in English “Ukraine before the war.” Underneath this is an image of a field of sunflowers and a sky with the phrase “Ukraine after the war.” The wheatfield and sky are known as the image of Ukraine on which the yellow and blue Ukrainian flag is based; sunflowers are also a symbol of Ukraine. However, the visual and text responses to the post indicate the interpretation goes back to the view of who will win the war (Ukraine) and who will lose. One response to Ukraine Memes Forces was to post an image of a Ukrainian woman pointing at a Russian soldier with the caption “Put the sunflower seeds in your pocket please” (Jones 2022). This is an allusion to a Ukrainian woman who told a Russian soldier to put sunflower seeds in his pockets so at least sunflowers will grow when he dies (*The Guardian* 2022). Another response to the post (Wilmoth 2022) made the connection between the woman in the video and the meme verbally, by replying, “Well fertilized fields.”

Conclusion: social media as a space for performing Ukrainianness

This is the year when Ukraine changed the world. And the world discovered Ukraine. We were told to surrender. We chose a counterattack! We were told to make concessions and compromises. We are joining the European Union and NATO.

The world heard Ukraine. European Parliament, Bundestag, the UK Parliament, Knesset, the US Congress.

The world felt Ukraine. Ukraine in the media. In the hearts of people. At the top of Google search.

The world saw Ukraine. On the main squares in Toronto, New York, London, Warsaw, Florence, Sydney, and other cities.

Ukrainians surprise. Ukrainians are applauded. Ukrainians inspire.

Is there anything that can scare us? No. Is there anyone who can stop us? No.

Because we are all together.

It is what we are fighting for. One for each other.

—*New Year greetings of President of Ukraine
Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 31 December 2022*

Researchers in the first phase of the war (2014–2021) found that posters on social media performed their understanding of Ukraine in multiple ways, including by declaring a threatened city or region “is Ukraine” (Boichak and Jackson 2020), by commemorating and mourning heroes who have died fighting for Ukraine (Kozachenko 2021), and by making “indirect” references to the Russian–Ukraine conflict (Kisliuk 2021). Social media has been used by citizens within Ukraine and beyond to promote both online and offline forms of engagement and activism (Boichak and Kumar 2021; Kozachenko 2021).

The data in this chapter demonstrate that many of these patterns continue in social media in the 2022 phase of the war. Individual posts asserting that “Kherson is Ukraine,” mourning military and civilian loss of life or celebrating strength, and using images of fields as allusions to the war are all examples of trends previously identified (Boichak and Jackson 2020; Kisliuk 2021; Kozachenko 2021). In 2022, as the war intensified and the need to stand against Russia intensified, social media went further by portraying ordinary citizens of Ukraine as heroes and Ukraine’s leaders as superheroes.

Digital artifacts illustrate the array of symbols that can be weaponized to convey a sense of patriotism and social solidarity in a time of war—not only a flag or an anthem but also the colors of the flag, the trident, a stamp, a flower, or a watermelon. In social media, in particular, it is not only the symbols themselves but also the positioning of these symbols and the metacommentary that imbues them with meaning as visceral symbols of national strength that are capable of

generating certain forms of behavior because they echo individual experiences, attitudes, and acts. In other words, it is not the anthem alone that is meaningful, but the sight and sound of the anthem being played in spaces challenged by the war (i.e., a metro station-turned bomb shelter and a darkened capital city square) along with a comment that understands these images as evidence of Ukraine’s invincibility. Similarly, the Ukrainian and Russian flags, when layered on other known images in popular culture, convey the relative positions of the two countries in the conflict, with Ukraine invariably portrayed in the winner’s position.

Social media and the relationships between the state and the people

Previous research has shown social media has been used by Ukrainian government entities to engage with the public and maintain political power, while simultaneously having that power shifted to other social media users who promote their own understandings of political situations, historical narratives, and identities (Lychkovska-Nebot 2018; Sadof 2017; Zakirov and Zakirova 2020). The alignment between President Zelenskyy’s daily and yearly speeches on multiple platforms and the discourses they inspire on social media raises the question of whether Zelenskyy is highly strategic and therefore highly successful in using social media to communicate his messages, or whether his communication is shaped by images on social media, or a cyclical combination. In his speeches and multiple seasons of the show *Servant of the People*, in which he portrayed a history teacher-turned President of Ukraine—a role that inspired people to vote him into office, Zelenskyy demonstrates that he is a gifted communicator in multiple languages and a student of history who draws on examples of past heroes to frame his oration and inspire a nation and the world to support him. Unlike radio speeches or scripts, the power and potential danger of social media is that it allows for quick and widespread second or thirdhand information, such as presidential quotes and reports of soldiers’ deaths, that may not be true. Unlike newspapers, there is no official correction posted. Discourses continue to circulate and impact viewers regardless of how true they are.

The posts on social media reflect dimensions of the relationship between individuals and the Ukrainian state, and among individuals. Social media affords people a chance to reconstruct their relationship with the Ukrainian state according to the challenges faced. At the same time, posts showing how people support each other, for example, by creating private “centers of invincibility” and non-profit fundraising, suggest ongoing self-organization (see Channell-Justice, this volume). Posters can position themselves as heroes of Ukraine by sharing images of soldiers standing up to Russia or by identifying as state “forces” that use private images (memes), rather than guns, to fight this war and support each other in metaphorical and literal dark times through humor.

Analyzing identity through the lens of social media lends some credence to the view espoused by some anthropologists that a nation-state is an ideological construct, an imaginary sense of community. Posters can connect and even develop attachments to the Ukrainian nation-state even if they are not living in the Ukrainian territory, or have no Ukrainian heritage. These posts allow viewers to identify politically and show solidarity with the people of Ukraine. While the creators and circulators of discourses in social media, including those who might identify as transnational migrants, are adamant about the need to maintain physical boundaries between Ukraine and Russia, they use social media and the internet, two forces that transcend all boundaries, to do so. Most importantly, the memes and artifacts analyzed here, many of which are now known to the world over through postings and repostings, testify to the commitment of Ukrainian citizens to their own state's sovereignty and their willingness to sacrifice and band together as a society to ensure its invincibility.

Notes

- 1 Had I included Tiktok (Kisliuk 2021) or Instagram (Sadof 2017) directly for analysis, it would have yielded greater representation of youth voices and perspectives. In addition, my social media network is specific to me and may not reflect even other people of the same ethnic and educational background.
- 2 In this chapter, I use the English transliteration provided by the official website of the President of Ukraine (<https://www.president.gov.ua/en>), except when the source of a social media post uses an alternate spelling.
- 3 Following citation style guidelines, posts with original and citable links are given preference; posts that could not be traced are shared in the findings as mobile or desktop screenshots.
- 4 These stamps can be viewed on the website of the Ukrainian Postal Service: https://postmark.ukrposhta.ua/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=275 (accessed 22 June 2023).
- 5 Facebook reports from Ukraine suggest that this tank was stolen by Roma (*tsyhani*), and therefore it is not Ukrainian heroism but stereotypical ethnic behavior.
- 6 This stamp can be viewed on the website of the Ukrainian Postal Service: https://postmark.ukrposhta.ua/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=527 (accessed 22 June 2023).
- 7 A friend in Ukraine reports that these centers are in “standby mode,” as winter is over.

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