

6. The Curious Case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko

Idealism and Populism in SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

Since its debut as a regional TV production in November 2015, the Ukrainian television series *Слуга народу* [Romanised Ukrainian: *Sluha Narodu*, English: *Servant of the People*] has become a notable, unusual, and in many ways tragic part of world history. Its star (and showrunner function), Volodymyr Zelensky, first rose to notable celebrity in the role of the series' 'president of the people' Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, who, in three seasons of various lengths and one feature film, shakes up the corrupt Ukrainian polity. SLUHA NARODU (SN) subsequently became the platform that arguably helped launch Zelensky on his path to the real-life Ukrainian presidency, an office he took in May 2019, much to the disdain of many of his critics who accused the entertainer of deliberately blending serial fiction and reality to serve his political ambitions.

As this chapter is being edited in the summer of 2022, the former "celebrity president"¹ has garnered global prominence and respect for his role in organizing Ukraine's defence against his country's invasion by Russia, which started on February 24th, 2022. With the war ongoing, its outcome uncertain, and history's verdict still out at the time of writing, this chapter will not examine Volodymyr Zelensky's role as a wartime leader but focus on the fictional series that helped constitute the foundation for all that was to follow.

The striking similarities between SN's idealised hero-president and the public persona, which the real-life Volodymyr Zelensky created during his election campaign, have often been pointed out. Given Zelensky's non-existent political record pre-presidency, many observers believe the comedian's fictional alter ego to have been instrumental in deciding the election in his favour, e.g., calling SN a "three-year political campaign".² Viktoriia Demydova states that on his way to the presidency, "Volodymyr Zelensky [...]"

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- 1 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 582.
 - 2 Stephanie Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's Servant of the People?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

seemed to perform a role of his hero from the TV series”.³ Moreover, Stephanie Petrella writes that SN’s “narrative – that of the people’s man, who disrupts Ukraine’s oligarchic rule by returning honesty to politics – comprised Volodymyr Zelensky’s campaign platform”.⁴ The curious case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko is, indeed, full of remarkable details. One example is Zelensky’s newly founded political party, which won a majority of parliamentary seats and 43% of the popular vote in the summer of 2019. It carries the name *Servant of the People* and is thus conspicuously eponymous with the fictional series. To avoid confusion between the homonymous TV series and political party, I will refer to the series by its Romanised Ukrainian title SLUHA NARODU and the political party by its English name (SoP).

Few contemporary series have arguably been as visibly dominated by the politicised *pragmatic* logic of its network as SN. This chapter will examine how the series presents politics, the ways in which its composition and leitmotifs might seem advantageous to a historical politician on his way to high elected office, and how its role in Zelensky’s political efforts has, in turn, shaped its narrative. It is crucial to note here that this chapter will not attempt to discern the ways and extent to which SN influenced the 2019 elections but, instead, examine how its *pragmatic* logic influenced the narrative.

Given the series’ unique context, this chapter will start by giving a historical overview of the many remarkable convergences between Zelensky’s road to the presidency and SN’s development as a cultural commodity and fictional narrative. This chapter will subsequently examine the series’ narrative configuration and its presentation of politics in a structural and formal analysis. It will become clear that SN uses a variety of established narrative conventions to present a utopian and idealised version of politics, following what Liesbet van Zoonen has called “the populist telling of the quest”.⁵ I will show that, in the construction of their narratives and characters, the series follows the “populist tradition” of building an opposition between supposed elites and ‘the people’.⁶ It is a motif that has been an established part of polit-fiction appearing in on-screen entertainment as early as the 1939 feature film “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (Frank Capra, USA).

It will become clear that SN, in dramatizing this *intradiegetic* populist logic, revolves around a central axis that divides its characters into morally upstanding *outsiders* and corrupt *insiders*. This binary juxtaposition corresponds to a normative division that divides the good from the bad, the competent from the incompetent, and the legitimate from the illegitimate.

I will show that, from this comparatively simple construction, the series’ protagonist, Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, emerges as a messiah-type saviour hero in the tradition of the American Monomyth (AM). It will become apparent that, despite its Ukrainian origin, SN follows this narrative archetype in almost every way, e.g., by portraying an individualistic outsider hero who saves a potential Eden which had previously been failed by

3 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 587.

4 Petrella, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine’s Servant of the People?”.

5 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

6 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 110f.

its institutions.⁷ I will demonstrate that, following the implicit impetus of the AM, the series ultimately rejects notions of pluralism and democratic representation in favour of a simplified vision of organic and immediate leadership despite paying lip service to progressive politics. However, this seeming paradox emerges not from ostensible anti-democratic tendencies within the series' historical network but from the narrative requirements of dramatizing utopian, idealistic politics itself.

Contextualising these findings with a comparative analysis of three other sample series – MADAM SECRETARY (USA, 2014–2019, MS), DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (USA, 2016–2019, DS US) and 60일, 지정생존자 [*Designated Survivor: 60 Days*] (Republic of Korea, 2019, DS 60), I will show that the populist construction of idealistic politics reappears – and functions – in a variety of cultural contexts. This chapter will demonstrate that, as a narrative trope, this construction emerges primarily from the *pragmatic* logics of linear circulation and political idealism rather than cultural or ideological convictions.

A subsequent analysis of SN's evolution throughout its three seasons – in the context of its emerging historical role as a tool in Zelenky's presidential campaign – will show that the series develops from a relatively conventional idealistic polit-comedy to an easily legible and highly biased commentary on the Ukrainian election of 2019. Therefore, if politics is the process of negotiating the distribution of power,⁸ then SN may arguably be considered the most *political* series in this study.

6.1 When History and Fiction Converge? A Timeline

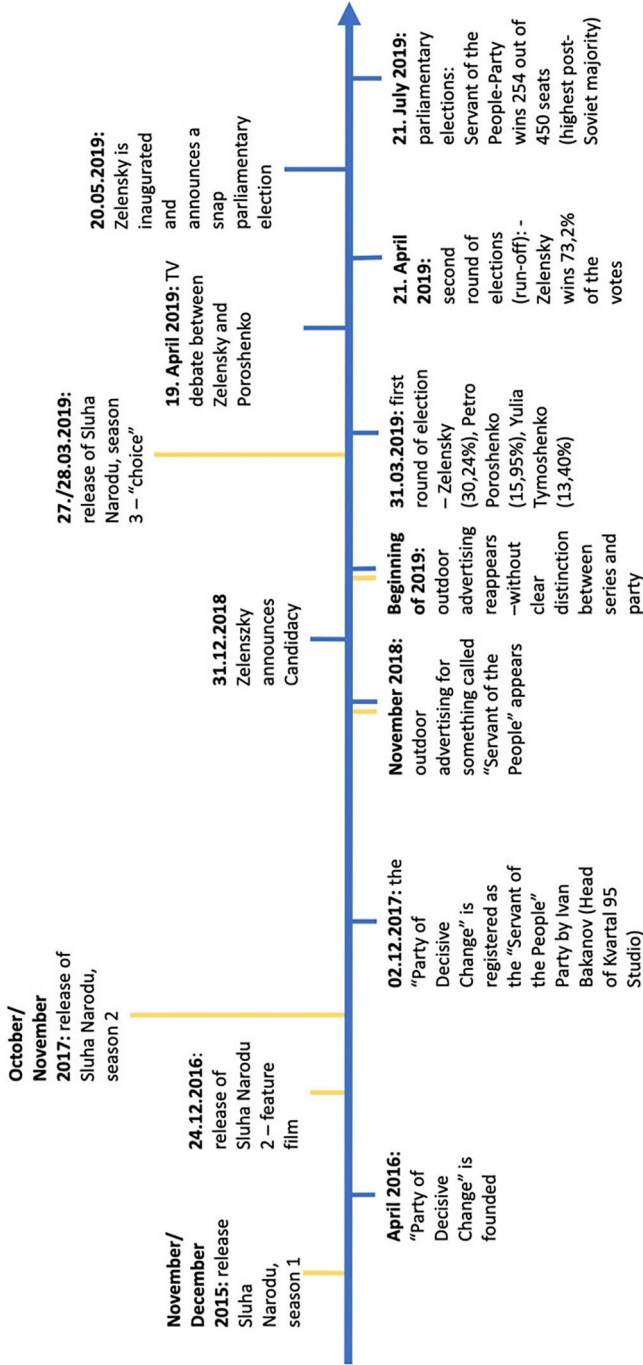
When and how the pragmatic logic of Volodymyr Zelensky's political ambitions started to influence SN and, in turn, whether and how the series became a discursive part of the Ukrainian presidential race is a contentious question. The circumstances of Zelenky's rise to power and the subsequent ascent of his SoP are certainly astonishing and merit a closer look. A short historical overview will show how much Zelenky's growing political ambitions influenced SN as an integral part of its pragmatic logic (for an illustrated timeline, see figure 32).

For this compilation, I rely on various scholarly discussions and media reports on both Zelensky's political campaign and the fictional series. It is important to note here that this compilation is intended merely as an overview and that this chapter does not aim to discern whether or not Zelensky broke the rules of political campaign ethics by instrumentalising his TV series nor to decide the extent of this instrumentalization, or ascertain the negative or positive effects such an amalgamation of fiction and reality might have had on Ukraine's political culture.

7 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

8 See Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.

Figure 32: Timeline: The convergence of SLUHA NARODU and key historical events



In November/December of 2015, SN's first season aired on the Ukrainian 1+1 network and subsequently rose to success among Ukrainian and Russian-speaking audiences. In December 2016, a full-length feature film called "Sluha Narodu 2" was released. It carried on the first season's plot and was followed by a second season in October/November 2017. This second season is remarkable for two reasons: (1) an unconventional use of serial and cinematic material and (2) the historical events following its release.

(1) Season 2 incorporates the plotline and sequences from the previously released feature film. The first seven episodes are a sequel to season 1 and a prequel to the film's plot. The narrated time of the following seven episodes is congruent with that of the feature film, and the episodes heavily feature material from the film and expand on its plot. The season's last ten episodes tell the story of what happens after the film's ending.

(2) Shortly after the release of season 2, the SoP party was reported as officially registered with Ukrainian authorities by Ivan Bakanov, long-term head of Kvartal 95 Studio [Студія Квартал-95], Volodymyr Zelenky's production company.⁹ The party evolved from renaming the already existing Party of Decisive Change [Партія рішучих змін], which had been founded in April 2016 by people seemingly unconnected to the Zelensky-camp. Following reports, the SoP initially occupied four rent-free square meters in the offices of a law firm associated with Zelenky's Kvartal 95-production company.¹⁰

It was initially claimed that its registration was little more than an unconventional copyright move intended to protect SN's brand from ill-use, with Zelensky stating in January 2018 that "so far", the SoP was "not a political project, but rather a legal nuance".¹¹

It would be speculation to try to discern whether, at this point, this claim was valid, whether there were further marketing ambitions or already formed political ambitions in play. However, by mid to late 2018, the picture becomes much clearer, with some observers placing the unofficial start of the presidential campaign here.¹² In November

9 Anastasia Daynod, "Political Party Servant of the People Appeared in Ukraine", *Ukrainian National News*, December 2, 2017, <https://www.unn.com.ua/ru/exclusive/1702069-v-ukrayini-zyavilasya-p-olitchna-partiya-sluga-narodu>; and "'Party of Decisive Change' changed its name to 'Servant of the People'", LB.ua, December 2, 2017, https://lb.ua/news/2017/12/02/383656_partiya_reshitelnih_peremen.html. Accessed through Google Translate.

10 Natalia Patrikeeva, "How 'Servant of the People' was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections", *Pyx ЧЕCHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020, https://www.chesno.org/pos/t/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATVij_e_DxNxLncj6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYwUuHFlvqQjeQGCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJJjBomBNvHlwoLvlCfzgiZhAP9jZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWho7NmEPIPVGrLCuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43lmYGFiQDaGOVA9QqqvVrVolT92D7ofkUIQL8hJTBxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQEJoX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voV05qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8Dx-27-ViDJ98Z4O8P8NtVvfAyJ4bQutQvYwEppDGHORCAx2locjCMY4_P8iJ3MrQ. Accessed through Google Translate.

11 Alexey Sysoev and Yulia Katsun, "Volodymyr Zelensky: If I go into politics, Kvartal 95 will joke even worse with me", *kp*, January 24, 2018, <https://kp.ua/culture/599107-vladymyr-zelenskyi-esly-poidu-v-polytyku-kvartal-budet-shutyt-nado-mnoi-esche-pokhleshe>. Accessed through Google Translate.

12 Johanna Rohozinska, Vitaly Shpak, "Ukraine's Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an 'Outsider' President", *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 36.

2018, large-scale outdoor billboards appeared advertising an undefined entity called *Servant of the people* in connection with the presidency.¹³ One example read, “The President is a Servant of the People: Soon”.

Whether this advertising referred to the TV series or the homonymous political party and its rumoured presidential candidate (who had, by then, still not declared his intentions) remained unclear.¹⁴ Other examples include the reported release of ambivalent video trailers that seemed to emphasise advertising political messaging. Zelensky, at the time, did nothing to clear up speculations over his political ambitions, stating ambiguously:

As for the ‘Servants of the People’ videos, they are the ‘Servants of the People’ videos. Could this be a form of election campaign? No one has ever done this before.¹⁵

Similarly, footage of Zelensky in his role as SN’s protagonist, Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko, appeared on his campaign website (see figure 33), and ambivalent advertising materials with the label “Servant of the people”, again, left deliberately unclear whether it advertised the TV series or the political party.¹⁶

On new year’s eve 2018, Zelensky finally announced his much-rumoured candidacy and the beginning of the “Ze!-campaign” on his ‘home’ channel 1+1,¹⁷ which had previously aired SN and many of Kvartal 95’s other productions.

13 Natalia Patrikeeva, “How ‘Servant of the People’ was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections”, *Pyx 4ECHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020, [https://www.chesno.org/post/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATVi\]e_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYWUuHFlvqQjeQGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJjBomBNvHlwoLvlCfzgiZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWwho7NmEPIVGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVA9QqqVrVolT92D7ofkUIQL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQE\]oX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-27-ViDJ\]98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAy\]4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMy4_P8iJ3MrQ](https://www.chesno.org/post/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATVi]e_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYWUuHFlvqQjeQGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJjBomBNvHlwoLvlCfzgiZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWwho7NmEPIVGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVA9QqqVrVolT92D7ofkUIQL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQE]oX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-27-ViDJ]98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAy]4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMy4_P8iJ3MrQ). Accessed through Google Translate.

14 Natalia Patrikeeva, “How ‘Servant of the People’ was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections”, *Pyx 4ECHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020. [https://www.chesno.org/post/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATVi\]e_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYWUuHFlvqQjeQGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJjBomBNvHlwoLvlCfzgiZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWwho7NmEPIVGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVA9QqqVrVolT92D7ofkUIQL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQE\]oX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-27-ViDJ\]98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAy\]4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMy4_P8iJ3MrQ](https://www.chesno.org/post/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATVi]e_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYWUuHFlvqQjeQGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJjBomBNvHlwoLvlCfzgiZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWwho7NmEPIVGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVA9QqqVrVolT92D7ofkUIQL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQE]oX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-27-ViDJ]98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAy]4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMy4_P8iJ3MrQ).

15 Roman Kravets, “The limit of a joke: how Zelensky is preparing for the elections”, *Ukrainian Pravda*, October 25, 2018. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/10/25/7196270/>. Accessed through Google Translate.

16 Roman Choncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <http://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.

17 Alla Marchenko, “The personal is political: Volodymyr Zelensky in the spotlight of the international mainstream media”, *Baltic Worlds* 13, 1–2 (October 2020): 102.

Figure 33: Photo from 'Sluha Narodu' on Zelensky's Campaign Website.



Передвиборча програма кандидата на пост Президента України Володимира Зеленського

© Volodymyr Zelensky

The Main Inscription says: “Manifesto of the candidate for the Ukrainian Presidency Volodymyr Zelensky”. In the upper left corner: “Ze! Team” (Google Translat). Found in Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. Credit: Volodymyr Zelensky.

The ensuing campaign was, as Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak claim, “largely devoid of any clear statements of ideology or significant policy proposals”¹⁸ and focused mainly on Zelensky’s personal appeal and image. Viktoriia Demydova has likewise described the SoP party as a “populist, pro-western party that has anti-corruption stance”,¹⁹ calling Zelensky’s election program “a utopian essay about the future of Ukraine”.²⁰ In his campaign, Zelensky followed, as Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield put it, a “centrist”, “catch-all” position “deemphasising ideological divisions”²¹ and focussing on the commonplace valence issue of “replacing the existing party system and political establishment”.²² Zelensky thus managed, as Rohozinska and Sphak note, to serve “as something of a black screen onto which voters could project their hopes or assumptions.”²³

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- 18 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 33.
 - 19 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 589. [sic!].
 - 20 Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine”, 588.
 - 21 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages: Explaining the Landslide Victory of the Servant of the People Party in the 2019 Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections”, *Party Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2022): 118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820965413>.
 - 22 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages”, 122.
 - 23 Rohozinska and Shpak: “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles”, 37.

During his campaign Zelensky, as Andika Hendra Mustaqim states, showed clear opposition to “mass media hegemony”²⁴ and, as Demydova observes, a shift to “the virtual sphere where young Ukrainians are particularly active”.²⁵ In the run-up to the election, Zelensky largely avoided public appearances and interviews, instead focussing on curated social media appearances, initially refusing to participate in a televised presidential debate.

At the beginning of 2019, ambivalent outdoor advertising reappeared, again without a clear distinction between the fictional series SN and the, by now, very much non-fictional SoP party and its candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky. This amalgamation of fiction and reality neither went unnoticed nor uncontested. According to Diana Duzyk, Zelensky moved in a grey area of Ukrainian electoral law.²⁶ The “Committee of Voters of Ukraine” went even further, claiming that SN’s third season, which aired on March 27th and 28th, 2019, a mere four/three days before the presidential election, had to be considered an election campaign and regulated as such.²⁷

On March 31st, 2019, the first round of the presidential election showed no clear winner, with Zelensky gaining 30,24%, incumbent Petro Poroshenko 15,95%, and former minister-president Yulia Tymoshenko 13,40% of the votes. On April 19th, a presidential TV debate between the run-off’s remaining candidates, Zelensky and Poroshenko, was held after all; Zelensky had previously issued the challenge on social media. The run-up to the debate quickly took an unconventional turn with Zelensky demanding, e.g., prior drug testing and that former contestant Yulia Tymoshenko host the duel.²⁸ The event itself followed suit in unconventionality, as Demydova describes:

During the debate, Volodymyr Zelensky knelt down in front of the Ukrainians in order to commemorate the victims of the war in Donbas while Poroshenko got down on one knee and turned his face to the Ukrainian flag. Candidates ended up singing Ukrainian national anthem [...].²⁹

On April 21st, the run-off election made Volodymyr Zelensky the presidential race’s clear winner, with 73,2% of the votes cast in his favour. During his inauguration on May 20th,

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- 24 Andika Hendra Mustaqim, “Politik Selebriti: Perlawanan Terhadap Sistem (Studi Kasus Gaya Komunikasi Politik Pada Kandidat Presiden Ukraina Volodymyr Zelensky)”, *Dakwah Risalah* 30, no.1 (June 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.24014/jdr.v30i1.7059>.
- 25 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 597.
- 26 Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <http://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.
- 27 The Committee of Voters of Ukraine, “KVU calls on V.Zelensky to pay for ‘Servant of the People 3’ from the election fund”, February 12, 2019, <http://www.cvu.org.ua/nodes/view/type:news/slug:kvu-zaklykaie-v-zelenskoho-oplatyty-sluhu-narodu-3-iz-vyborchoho-fondu>. Accessed through Google Translate.
- 28 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 39.
- 29 Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine”, 590. [sic!].

2019, he announced snap parliamentary elections and on July 21st, Zelensky's SoP won the highest post-soviet majority in Ukraine with 254 out of 450 seats.³⁰

According to Demydova, the 2019 election “brought a very different type of the political leader,” with Zelensky becoming a “celebrity president”.³¹ Natalia Petlyuchenko accordingly states that Zelensky's public image was decisive in securing the SoP's electoral victory claiming its transfer onto “all the representatives of the Servant of the People party resulting in them becoming a collective avatar of president Zelensky's individual charisma”.³²

Faced with this development, many observers asked the question, as Roman Goncharenko for DW put it,

Who did 30% of Ukrainians really vote for on March 31st: the political newcomer Volodymyr Zelensky – or Vasyl Holoborodko, the protagonist of the comedy series ‘Servant of the People’?³³

Was the 2019 presidential election really “*Servant of the People* come to life”, as Petrella notes?³⁴ One will invariably be hard-pressed to answer this question with precision. It is possible that, as some observers have claimed, “Voters are not voting for Zelensky, but actually for Holoborodko”.³⁵ Another observer just before the election stated that

judging by the rating of the series [...], the electorate does not distinguish between the serial Holoborodko and the real Zelensky. So already on Sunday, people will vote under the impression of the utopian product of the Kvartal 95 studio [SN].³⁶

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- 30 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages: Explaining the Landslide Victory of the Servant of the People Party in the 2019 Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections”, *Party Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2022): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820965413>.
- 31 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 582. [sic!].
- 32 Natalia Petlyuchenko, “Servant of the People as a Collective Avatar of Zelensky's Charisma: Phenomena of Ukraine's 2019 Electoral Discourse”, *NANO-2019: Limits of Nanoscience and Nanotechnologies* (September 2019): 47.
- 33 Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”. *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>. My translation: “Für wen haben 30 Prozent der Ukrainer in der ersten Runde der Präsidentschaftswahlen am 31. März denn nun wirklich gestimmt: für den politische Newcomer Wolodymyr Selenskyj oder für Wasyl Holobordoko, den Protagonisten der Comedy-Serie ‘Diener des Volkes’?”.
- 34 Stephanie Petrella, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's servant of the People?”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.
- 35 Maria Buchelnikova, “Voters are not Voting for Zelensky, but actually for Holoborodko”, *Media Detector*, February 2, 2019. <https://vybory.detector.media/2019/02/22/vybortsi-holosuyut-ne-za-zelenskoho-a-faktychno-za-holoborodka/>. Accessed through Google Translate.
- 36 Gala Sklyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluga-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>. Accessed through Google Translate.

Andrij Bytschenko doubts the singular role of SN, adding that Kvartal 95 had been an essential source for satirical, critical content in Ukraine and that “[t]here are synergy-effects between the series and other Kvartal 95 productions, that amplify each other”.³⁷

However, it is possible that Ukrainians mainly opted for neither Zelensky nor his on-screen persona and instead *against* the establishment personified by Yulia Tymoshenko and Petro Poroshenko.³⁸ Rohozinska and Shpak, e.g., claim that “Zelensky tapped into the deep public desire for new faces and disgust with political elites that had been the undercurrent of the 2013–14 EuroMaidan Revolution.”³⁹ Demydova likewise estimates that the reason for Zelensky’s election was, overall, a hope for change.⁴⁰ Ratnikov and Zemzyulina point out accordingly that the election of such populist celebrity “politicians as D. Trump and V. Zelensky” is possible “only in conditions of electoral fragmentation”.⁴¹ Considering the significant societal and political complexities that shape elections, one should thus not oversimplify matters by claiming an exclusive causal link between SN and V. Zelensky’s election victory.

Only one claim seems to be undoubtedly false: the much-repeated claim that SN somehow *predicted* the future of Ukraine.⁴² Instead of ‘predicting’, the series undoubtedly took an active part – however big or small – in *shaping* the country’s future.

6.2 Fictionalising Idealpolitik and the Narrative Logic of Populism

In constructing its plot, its protagonist, Vasyl Petrovich Holoborodko, and its vision of governance, SN operates with a simplified notion of idealistic politics [*Idealpolitik*]. Opposed to *realpolitik*, the term denotes a deontological concept of politics primarily determined by the normative principles behind political action instead of the moral evaluation of its outcome. Series that follow the trope of *idealpolitik*, as Andreas Dörner notes, “define a utopian space, which can function as the normative benchmark” for politics.⁴³

37 Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”. *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>. My translation: “Es gibt zwischen der Serie und anderen Produktionen von Quartal-95 Synergieeffekte, die sich gegenseitig verstärken”.

38 See Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”. *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.

39 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 33.

40 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmalar*: Journal of Black Sea Studies 17, no. 67 (2020): 581.

41 Max Ratnikov and Natalia Zemzyulina, “Comparative Analysis of the Political Motivation of the Partisans who Vote for D. Trump and V. Zelensky”, *The Journal of Society and Media* 4, no.2 (October 2020): 434, <https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v4n2>.

42 See Michael Garrood and Yuri Zoria, “What Zelensky’s prophetic ‘Servant of the People’ TV show suggest for his further steps”, *Euromaidan News*, August 7, 2019, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/08/07/what-zelenskyys-prophetic-servant-of-the-people-tv-show-suggests-for-his-further-steps/>.

43 Andreas Dörner, “Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 8. My translation: “Die Politserie definiert utopi-

Dramatizing this approach to politics, SN applies a well-established narrative convention, which van Zoonen has called “the populist telling of the quest”. In it, “the people are the source to which all actions of the hero can be traced”⁴⁴ and become “the dispatchers of the hero”.⁴⁵ To construct a protagonist as a saviour hero in line with utopian, idealistic logic, SN thus implicitly applies what Jan-Werner Müller calls the “internal logic of populism”.⁴⁶ Populism, for him, does not refer to a type of charismatic leadership but to a vision of politics and governance that assumes a direct, organic connection between the populist leader and a unified and incorruptible ‘people’, whose will the populist hero alone can discern and represent.⁴⁷

This simplified dichotomy is the structural principle according to which SN is organised. As Petrella states:

Servant of the People’s surreal humor derives from the clash between two exaggerated archetypes: Ukraine’s establishment politicians and Zelenky’s man-of-the-people, history teacher Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko.⁴⁸

The central juxtaposition of corrupt elites vs ‘the people’ has been an established trope in popular on-screen polit-fiction, at least since the feature film “Mr Smith Goes to Washington” (1939).⁴⁹

This pervasiveness is partly due to a distinct underlying dramatic logic. The ideal hero is most visible as the people’s envoy when put against the foil of antagonists who clearly are not. In narrative composition, the construction of a hero in line with the utopian claims of idealpolitik is, therefore, achieved by a clear division of protagonists and antagonists into a morally pure *outgroup*, whose members – and moral values – exist safely ‘outside’ the corrupt sphere of politics and the morally deprived *ingroup* of the political establishment.

While it is primarily motivated by dramatic logic, this narrative construction of idealpolitik thus almost inadvertently evokes a specifically populist conception of politics

schen Raum, der als normative Messlatte, als positives Gegenbild zur außermedialen politischen Realität fungieren kann”.

44 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

45 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen* 112. She notes this with reference to Vladimir Propp’s structuralist terminology of narrative.

46 Jan-Werner Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 191, <http://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>. My translation: “Der inneren Logik des Populismus”.

47 Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, 191.

48 Stephanie Petrella, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine’s servant of the People?”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

49 See Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 110f.

according to which a morally pure, homogenous people [...] faces an immoral, corrupt, and parasitic elite – while this elite is actually not even really part of the people.⁵⁰

However, this primarily compositional phenomenon can quickly appear as ideological as it results in “the decidedly moral claim” of the populist hero as the sole representative of ‘the people’ while “all other supposed representatives of the citizens are – in one way or another – illegitimate.”⁵¹ SN’s Holoborodko, in one of his many hyperbolic daydreams, accordingly envisions himself shooting the obstinate members of parliament,⁵² who, as political insiders, stand to obstruct the populist connection with ‘the people’.

6.2.1 The President of the People

SN goes to great lengths to present its protagonist as a principled ‘man (as well as servant) of the people’ who is in every way the juxtaposition of the established political *ingroup*. Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko is a decidedly simple history teacher who is popular with his students and content to live in a spacious, friendly, but not overly luxurious apartment with his parents and adult sister.

It should be noted that this *mentor trope*, which sees a political protagonist start from a teacher position, occurs in many populist renderings of idealpolitik. In “Mr. Smith goes to Washington”, the idealistic protagonist, Jefferson Smith, is the former head of the Boy Rangers. Other examples, which I will discuss later in this chapter, also apply this trope: MS, DS US, and DS 60 all feature protagonists who start as university professors. Mentor professions create relatability for audiences as they (1) command sufficient respect while (2) constituting a familiar reference for more or less everybody in the respective target audience.

Holobordoko’s ‘man of the people’-styled modesty is emphasised throughout the series. SN’s intro makes it clear from the start how charmingly clumsy and refreshingly down-to-earth Holoborodko is. It shows the president riding a bike through Kyiv on his way to work. He looks calm and content and waves almost embarrassedly to the people who notice him. A clothespin prevents his trousers from getting caught in the bike’s

50 Jan-Werner Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 187, <https://doi.org/10.3224/zpzh.v7i2.03>. My translation: “Populismus, so meine These, ist eine ganz bestimmte Politikvorstellung, laut derer einem moralisch reinen, homogenen Volk stets unmoralische, korrupte und parasitäre Eliten gegenüberstehen – wobei diese Art von Eliten eigentlich gar nicht wirklich zum Volk gehört”.

51 Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, 188. My translation: “Hinzukommen muss noch der dezidiert moralische Anspruch, dass einzig die Populisten das wahre Volk vertreten; alle anderen vermeintlichen Repräsentanten der Bürger seien auf die eine oder andere Art illegitim”.

52 *Sluha Narodu 2*, directed by Aleksey Kiryushchenko (2016, Kyiv, Ukraine: Kvartal 95 Studio), Netflix, [<https://doi.org/10.14881/9789839479883-009> <https://www.hiltra.com/de/igb> - Open Access - !\[\]\(0cf9b64a6f601b05cc4171cf6ecd63f2_img.jpg\)](https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597220?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978%7C1%2C%2C, 04.41”.</p>
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chain, which Holoborodko remembers to take off just in time before entering the presidential office. The president, likewise, pays off a mortgage for a microwave, and audiences learn from an introductory report given by an antagonist's investigator that "he is known for having staunch and strong moral qualities, a Nordic temperament and for being ironclad and brave",⁵³ is free of bad habits of any kind⁵⁴ and, as per his students, "simply a saint".⁵⁵ Holoborodko takes a taxi to his own inauguration⁵⁶ and prefers the bus instead of the presidential motorcade to get to work.⁵⁷ Furthermore, in season 1, he appears as a caring divorced father who touchingly prioritises playtime with his son, Dima, over all else, even his presidential duties.⁵⁸

Holoborodko is a politician sans désir and, as such, possesses no sense or desire for power, stating, "The people elected me to effectively manage the country and that's all".⁵⁹ He belongs to no political party, did not actively campaign for the presidential election, and his initial candidacy was paid for through a crowdfunding campaign organised by his pupils.⁶⁰ "The people" later fund Holoborodko for a second time when he runs for re-election by the end of season 2.⁶¹ SN's main antagonists, a sinister trio of faceless oligarchs, accordingly express their surprise that, although they have largely divided the political realm of Ukraine among themselves, nobody seems to 'own' Holoborodko.⁶²

As a man of the people, Holoborodko feels entirely uneasy in the formal and luxurious world of presidential splendour and, for example, does not know how to eat with formal cutlery.⁶³ He rejects the lavish presidential mansion offered to him by prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko, choosing instead to continue living with his family (the latter changes with a recalibration after season 1, which I will discuss later in this chapter). It is worth noting that the location featuring as the fictional presidential villa is the historical Mezhyhirya residence [Мезигір'я], previously inhabited by the discharged Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich before his fall and subsequent exile following the

53 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129, 10.49>.

54 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129, 11.58>.

55 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129, 11.41>.

56 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859, 21.58>.

57 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 4, "#1.4", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119387?trackId=200257858, 03.52>.

58 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859, 11.47>.

59 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 11, "#1.11", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119394?trackId=200257858, 13.16>.

60 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859, 36.39>.

61 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 18, "#2.18", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 7, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597219?trackId=200257859, 12.50>.

62 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859, 33.56>.

63 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859, 16.09>.

2014 Maidan Revolution [*Революція гідності*]. The lavishness of the historical residence caused significant international media attention following Yanukovych's fall. In 2015, with the release of SN's first season, it arguably constituted a strikingly current symbol of excessive government corruption that would have been easily legible for most Ukrainian and many international audiences. The fictional presidential villa accordingly contains several features that reference the historical Mezhyhirya residence's furnishings, such as gilded fixtures and an ostrich farm, as well as some even more excessive (and troubling) features like a remote to summon prostitutes⁶⁴ that are most likely fictional.

Following the populist trope, governance, in SN's world, occurs in a highly simplified version of political decision-making. It directly results from Holoborodko's alliance with 'the people' and the corresponding antagonism towards the political establishment. The president governs by simple proclamation without deliberation or adherence to 'obstructive' political, administrative, or democratic procedures. As the people's champion, Holoborodko does not possess or require a parliamentary majority or allegiance to a political party. Despite a lack of experience, he becomes a sweeping reformer, making profound decisions in the blink of an eye without knowing – or needing to know – how government functions in the first place; indeed, he is not even aware of the initial cabinet ministers' names.⁶⁵ In his 'common sense' reforms, Holoborodko, for example, cuts down administrative staff, dismisses "450.000 bureaucrats",⁶⁶ supports a reduction of parliament from 450 down to 70 seats,⁶⁷ and moves the government to a more modest location, giving the excess buildings "to the children"⁶⁸ (what precisely this means remains unclear).

It should be noted that, in historical liberal democracies, processes of representation are deemed necessary because, as Müller states: "A *priori* nobody can know the people's will; it is only ever *a posteriori* that we learn about (often relative) majorities".⁶⁹ Therefore, as I have discussed in this thesis' previous chapters, the co-creation of political imaginaries is essential for assembling the pluralistic variety of a society's disparate, individual views into functional (albeit fictional) representative entities. Political majorities and identificatory imaginaries, such as national mythologies, are, by their very nature, fictional creations often containing a great deal of compromise and volatility (chapters 4 and 5 discuss some fictional illustrations of this). As Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler note,

64 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859>, 18.03".

65 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, "#1.5", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 07.17".

66 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 15, "#2.15", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 2, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597216?trackId=200257859>, 20.33".

67 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 6, "#1.6", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119389?trackId=200257858>, 09.17".

68 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, "#1.5", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 18.28".

69 Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 197, <http://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>. My translation: "A *priori* kann niemand den Volkswillen kennen; wir erfahren immer erst *a posteriori* von (oft nur relativen) Merheiten".

A substantiated understanding of representation is thus informed by acts of conveyance that must be negotiated again and again. It dispenses with a formation of the represented that is welded together in the term 'people'.⁷⁰

In SN's diegesis, however, Holoborodko's populist "imperative mandate"⁷¹ is informed directly by the will of a diegetically *extant* unified people. The series thus denies the need for the co-creative fictions as a prerequisite to political representation and instead constructs Holoborodko as an idealised leader by suggesting the possibility of "a frictionless transfer"⁷² and "an identity between representatives and represented", which "deceives politics about its own aesthetic dimension".⁷³

6.2.2 Dramatizing the Clash of *Inside* and *Outside*

In SN, the conflictive meeting of the political, corrupt *inside* and the non-political, upstanding *outside* serves to facilitate engaging interactions that constitute the series' main plot (see figure 34). The two spheres and their interaction operate according to a set of basic *dramatic* rules, which reappears in all narratives that fictionalise a populist vision of idealpolitik.

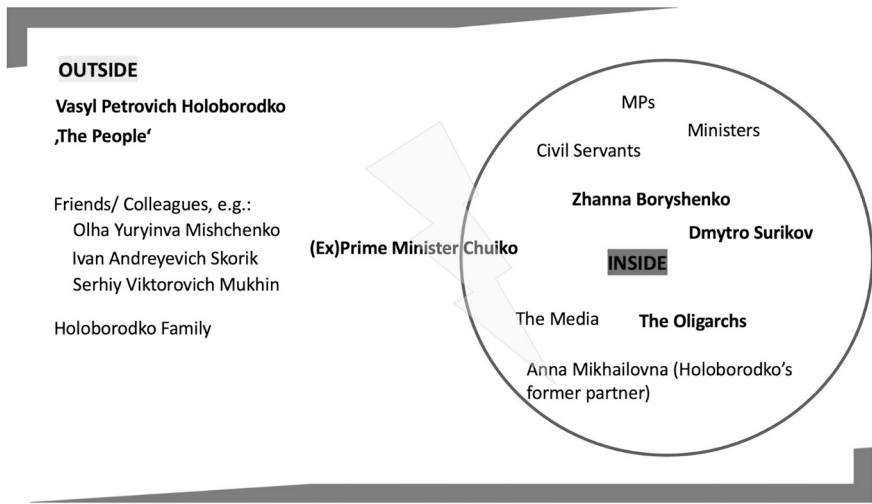
1. All games on the *inside* are agonal, uncooperative games, that is, competitive games in which no force of a higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. All games on the *outside* are cooperative games, that is, games in which a referee function of higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. In SN, this function often falls to protagonist Vasyl Petrovych Holobodorko. While the dominant tools on the *inside* are slyness, deception, and intrigue, the primary means of the *outside* are common sense, incorruptible morality, and the court of (unified) public opinion.

70 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 73. My translation: "Ein gehaltvolles Verständnis von Repräsentation speist sich demzufolge aus immer wieder neu auszuhandelnden Akten der Vermittlung und verzichtet auf eine im Begriff 'Volk' zusammengeschweißte Formation der Repräsentierten".

71 Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 188, <https://doi.org/10.3224/zp.th.v7i2.03>. My translation: "Diese Vorstellung eines imperativen Mandats".

72 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 63. my translation: "transferkostenfreie Vermittelbarkeit". They write this with regard to "Mr. Smith goes to Washington" but it generally applies to populist narratives.

73 Celikates and Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter", 72. My translation: "das die Möglichkeit einer Identität zwischen Repräsentanten und Repräsentierten suggeriert und die Politik damit über ihre eigene ästhetische Dimension täuscht".

Figure 34: Inside and outside players in *SLUHA NARODU*

2. Accordingly, players can only belong to one sphere and are fundamentally unable to grasp the other sphere's rules. Accordingly, too much *inside experience* is directly related to an incapability to understand and adhere to the *outside's* rules and thus connect to 'the people'. A player who understands the nature of the *outside games* must, likewise, remain ignorant about the nature of the political *inside games*. This entirely *dramatic* construction ensures that the moral depravity/ recitude of the respective player is clearly emphasised and that the games retain their simplified conflictive layout.
3. Consequently, characters are static and easily recognizable as insiders or outsiders. They start their journey with all their values in place and usually do not change their position on the *inside* or *outside* throughout the series. Indeed, as is the case with protagonist Holoborodko, most characters actively refuse to adapt even when faced with new circumstances ensuring the *dramatic* serial principle of repetition. Accordingly, SN's plot is almost entirely action-based, featuring external events as the element of serial innovation.
4. All interactions on the political *inside* and all games that transgress the boundaries between *inside* and *outside* take the shape of agonal *Zero-Sum* games in which one player's gain equals another player's loss. This increases the stakes for the players involved and, thus, the amplitude of the games, creating engaging narrative suspense. For audiences, it also assures a satisfying proportionality between the hero's victory and the villain's fall.
5. The rules of the *outside* trump the rules of the *inside*. This *dramatic* principle (i) ensures that all games in SN ultimately turn out cooperatively and thus follow the series' overall utopian vision of politics. It (ii) causes the curious *intradiegetic* phenomenon that, although they lack experience and resources, Holoborodko and his noble band of allies are continuously able to outwit their much more seasoned opponents. Holoborodko's friend, the idealistic foreign minister Serhiy Viktorovich Mukhin,

e.g., is an actor with little education, no diplomatic know-how, and no willingness to acquire either. Nevertheless, he remains a successful official and overall positive character due to his upstanding loyalty and integrity (*outside*).

6.2.3 Diminishing the Inside

Games that feature players from both the *inside* and the *outside* provide the central plot-driving dynamics in SN. The individual games usually start within the functional logic of the *inside* (agonal, uncooperative zero-sum structure) and subsequently progress towards that of the *outside* (cooperative structure). They often create comical tension by creating crossed transactions between the *inside* and *outside* players who engage in non-complementary Parent-Child transactions. Holoborodko, for example, starts his initial game with the *inside* from a Child-position in an often-patronising Parent-Child transactional configuration that evokes the initial stages of a CoA *Student-Mentor* game (see chapter 3): After being elected, the newly minted president is found by the sly prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko while reading a comic book on the toilet.⁷⁴ The following two and a half episodes feature a wide-eyed Vasyl Petrovych (Child) being shown around the presidential world by a patronising Parental PM.

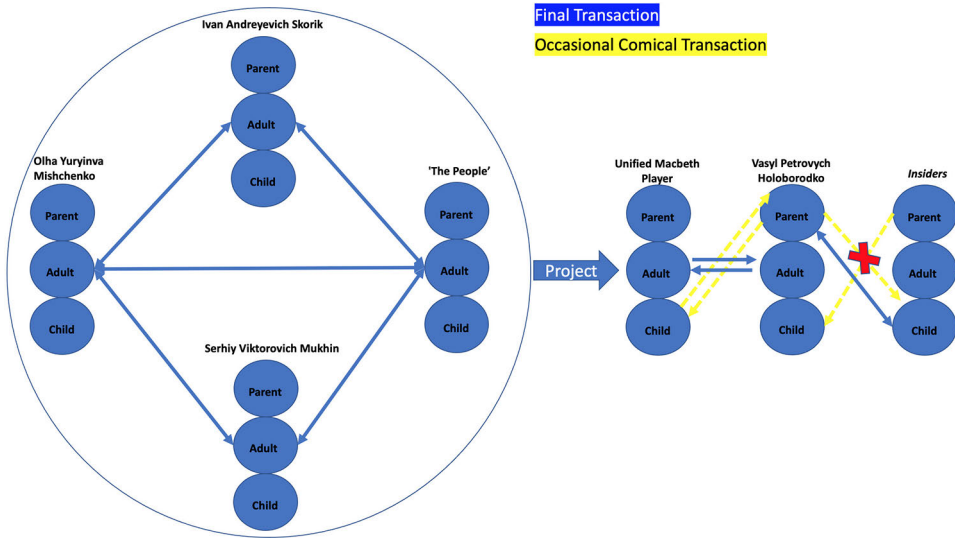
The series makes it unmistakably clear that Holoborodko knows absolutely nothing of the political *inside* and its rules. However, following the series' *dramatic* configuration, such knowledge subsequently turns out to be unnecessary, even harmful, as the rules of the *outside* trump those of the *inside*, with insight into one sphere precluding players from comprehending the other. It is a central feature of the static character Holoborodko that he does not follow the configuration of the CoA *Student-Mentor* game into political maturity by learning to apply the rules of the *inside* through consolidating the poetry of his ideals with the prose of political realities (as is required, e.g., in *THE CROWN*, see chapter 4).

Instead of adjusting his character in accordance with a CoA progression, the static player Holoborodko shifts the uncooperative game of politics to the cooperative logic of 'his' *outside* realm. Here, the poetry of the protagonist's ideals equals the prose of reality. As a now superior player, Holoborodko often engages his *inside* co-players – now reduced to a diminished Child-state as per the game's zero-sum *inside-outside* configuration – in superior Parent (him)-Child (co-player) transactions (see figure 35). He, for example, embarks on frequent lectures on morality and uses the means supplied by his superior position as 'the people's president' to diminish his opponents' standing, e.g., by firing most of the (insider) cabinet.⁷⁵ As the uncontested arbiter of the *outside* games' cooperative nature, Holoborodko is usually able to punish the bad and reward the good in line with the requirements of the games' demonstrative zero-sum structure.

74 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859_08.07.

75 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 6, "#1.6", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119389?trackId=200257859_12.54.

Figure 35: The outside Macbeth game and the inside-outside configuration



6.2.4 Playing on the *Outside*

In SN, all players who belong to the *outside* sphere automatically join Holoborodko's camp. The qualification for their various positions is usually a limited degree of demonstrable hands-on experience in their field, a healthy portion of common sense, and the fact that they are just as morally upstanding and untainted by political experience as Holoborodko himself.⁷⁶ Serhiy Viktorovich Mukhin, e.g., becomes foreign minister because he is, in Holoborodko's words, "handsome and easy to talk to" and possesses some English skills.⁷⁷ Following a similar logic, Holoborodko's ex-wife, the economist Olha Yuryinva Mishchenko, becomes the decidedly unpolitical director of the Ukrainian central bank. A teacher Holoborodko feared as a child (jokingly nicknamed "Beria" after the infamous Lavrentiy Beria, who ran the feared USSR-secret services until his execution in 1953) consequently becomes the chief of the secret service. Moreover, army officer Ivan Andreyevich Skorik qualifies for the job as defence minister after proving his *outside* credentials by getting into trouble selling jeep tires to pay for his men's boots.⁷⁸

SN narratively operationalizes the loyalty and morality of the *outside* sphere by showing its occupants engage in a cooperative multiplayer version of the *Macbeth* game (see figure 35). It consists of framing Adult-Adult transactions between a primary actant

76 The first assembly of the group takes place in *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859, 15.35>".

77 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859, 17.56>".

78 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859, 12.33>".

(*Holoborodko*) and several supportive actants (his allies and ‘the people’) who together form a unified front to participate in games with secondary *inside* players.

Several episodes of SN, e.g., derive their suspense from showing Holoborodko’s team finally giving in to bribery only to ultimately reveal the ‘corruption’ as part of a coordinated scheme to fight the broken system. Examples of this are episodes #1.9 and #1.10, where several members of Holoborodko’s *Macbeth* group seemingly accept bribes before it is revealed that they did so only to raise money for the empty state coffers.⁷⁹

To create comical internal dynamics among the *outside* players, the *Macbeth* game, at times, reverts to a low-intensity Parent (Holoborodko)-Child (allies) pattern in which Vasyl Petrovych reprimands his co-players for minor moral transgressions, after which the collective reverts back to the Adult-Adult *Macbeth* progression as soon as things get serious. The games involving Holoborodko’s family in season 1, e.g., usually serve the purpose of such comic relief.

The members of the Holoborodko family are well-meaning but ultimately less morally steadfast than their presidential son/brother and thus in need of Parental transactional supervision. Holoborodko’s parents, e.g., lavishly redecorate their apartment following their son’s inauguration.⁸⁰ His sister Svetlana secures a position as the deputy head of the tax revenue service by playing on her relation to the president (behind her brother’s back)⁸¹ and subsequently abuses her power, e.g., by taking bribes and having an ex-partner arrested.⁸² In each case, a set of complementary, conflict-free Parent-Child transactions mitigates the low-2nd-degree damage done by the family’s transgressions, thus quickly restoring the moral unity of the *Macbeth* collective.

However, other than in previous *Macbeth* games featured in this study, Holoborodko ultimately does not depend on his co-players to project his presidential persona. The populist intradiegetic congruence between Holoborodko’s bodies natural and politic and his superiority as the arbiter of the game’s cooperative rules of higher order ultimately renders such support obsolete. Therefore, the allies’ whimsical and good-natured interactions essentially serve the *dramatic* purpose of allowing Holoborodko’s qualities to play out in demonstrative dramatic action. However, his *outside* co-players rarely occupy a vital intradiegetic function. Diegetic reform is ultimately implemented by the saviour-president Holoborodko alone. Indeed, throughout the series later seasons, many *outside* characters disappear or appear in a highly reduced format – e.g., “Beria”, Holoborodko’s son, and the rest of his family – without leaving much of a gap in his intradiegetic political efforts.

79 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 9, “#1.9”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119392?trackId=255824129>, and *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 10, “#1.10”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119393?trackId=200257859>.

80 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, “#1.5”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 20.15”.

81 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, “#1.13”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119396?trackId=200257858>, 23.51”.

82 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, “#1.14”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119397?trackId=200257859>, 8.31 and 15.20”.

6.2.5 Playing with the *Inside*

Just as all characters on the *outside* are allied with Holoborodko and possess positive characteristics, all characters on the *inside* are automatically immoral and corrupt. An example of this is prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko, the series' central single antagonist and the main pawn in the sinister oligarchs' play to retain their stranglehold on Ukrainian politics. Chuiko is a political mastermind whose superior ability is second only to Vasyl Petrovich Holoborodko's all-conquering integrity.

Following the narrative's zero-sum structure, in which a hero's complete victory must equal a villain's total destruction, Chuiko ultimately suffers multiple defeats when Holoborodko reveals him to be the head of a vast conspiracy.⁸³ The series supplements Chuiko's material and political defeat (and arrest) with personal defamation. Diegetically, the public revelation that his codename "Milady" references the fact that Chuiko used to play women's roles in his college theatre group subjects the formerly powerful PM to widespread ridicule that contributes to his political fall. The series, thus, reveals its conservative take on binary gender roles and fragile masculinity by aligning villainy with effeminacy and defeat with emasculation.

A *soft recalibration* in season 2 somewhat reverses Chuiko's previous defeat. Following his expulsion from the political *inside* – at the oligarchs' behest, he receives a 20-year prison sentence (although he occupies a comically luxurious cell)⁸⁴ – Chuiko becomes Holoborodko's ally in the fight against the sinister trio. However, as a static character, his change of allegiance largely remains external. As Holoborodko's involuntary ally, the corrupt Chuiko, in season 2, thus serves as a comical foil for the President's equally static virtue.

6.2.6 The Issue of Corruption

The main narrative struggle in SN is the *outside* characters' fight against widespread corruption. At the series' outset, Vasyl Petrovych Holobordko encounters a vision of two ancient Greek philosophers who describe Ukraine as a paradise threatened by underhanded politicians, thus laying out the series' central theme and its protagonist's future mission.⁸⁵ While corruption is a common trope in much of polit-fiction, contemporary western series usually present it as a moral condition associated with the struggle for power while the issue of money remains a means to attaining that end.⁸⁶ For example,

83 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 23, "#1.23", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 9, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119706?trackId=200257858>, 11.54".

84 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 5, "#2.05", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired October 2, 2017 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80172540?trackId=200257859>, 00.30".

85 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 01.57".

86 Discussed with regard to HOUSE OF CARDS, e.g., in Chris Byron and Nathan Wood, "Money Gives Power... well a Run for its Money": Marx's Observation why Capital and not Frank Is Really in Charge of the White House", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 152–162; and Kody W. Cooper, "Praying to One's Self, for One's Self: Frank's Ethics and Politics of Autoreroticism", in *House of Cards and Philosophy*, 210.

HOUSE OF CARDS' antihero Frank Underwood states accordingly: "Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years. Power is the old stone building that stands for centuries."⁸⁷

In SN, on the other hand, money and its effect on politics are the omnipresent central issue. Ukraine is said to find itself in an "eternal engine of debt"⁸⁸ where even the national gold reserve has been swapped for gold-painted plaster.⁸⁹ This emphasis on financial corruption is personified in the first two seasons' main antagonists: the three sinister, initially faceless oligarchs. As a well-known trope personifying notions of the questionable connection between wealth and political power, the oligarchs serve as the series' main focal point for all that is rotten in the fictional state of Ukraine.

In a prologue to the first episode, the oligarchs reveal that they have divided the political realm and the country amongst themselves.⁹⁰ In season 1, they often appear to be engaging in hyperbolic activities that symbolise their status as the cynical puppet masters of a political Ukraine. For example, they discuss their disreputable business while having themselves painted as medieval kings⁹¹ or over a round of poker⁹² and play Ukraine-shaped games of "Risk"⁹³ and "Monopoly".⁹⁴ Thus the series presents tangible representations of the oligarch's cynical 'game' with Ukraine's politics and the playful, almost careless attitude with which they determine the country's fate. The oligarch's faces appear for the first time in the SN feature film (after the recalibrated trio underwent a re-cast). They thus move from omnipotent puppet masters to visible, tangible antagonists that can be fought and – as the film's conclusion shows – defeated.

Equally corrupt, Ukraine's fictional politicians hide extensive assets with family members⁹⁵ and renovate critical infrastructure purely to serve their own needs (e.g.,

87 *House of Cards*, season 1, episode 2, "Chapter 2", directed by David Fincher, written by Beau Willimon, aired February 1, 2013, https://www.netflix.com/watch/70248290?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265_titles%2F1%2F%2Fhouse%20of%20cards%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265_titles%2F1%2F%2Fhouse%20of%20cards%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C70178217, 04.46".

88 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 16, "#1.16", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119399?trackId=255824129,07.51>".

89 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 16, "#1.16", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119399?trackId=255824129, 15.46>".

90 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859, 01.25>".

91 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 17, "#1.17", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 20, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119700?trackId=200257859, 22.37>".

92 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 20, "#1.20", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 3, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119703?trackId=200257859, 08.24>".

93 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 9, "#1.09", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119392?trackId=200257859, 00.16>".

94 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 11, "#1.11", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119394?trackId=200257859, 22.41>".

95 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 12, "#1.12", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119395?trackId=200257859, 09.50>".

by building a new street to their family home).⁹⁶ Accordingly, when, during a highly competitive hiring process for government posts, Holoborodko spreads the bluff that he will introduce the death penalty for corrupt civil servants, only two applicants remain.⁹⁷

Given the comparatively high tangibility of corruption in historical Ukraine, it is understandable why the issue would be a dominant topic in SN. The ‘Corruption Perceptions Index’, published annually by the NGO Transparency International, aims to measure the respective level of perceived corruption in the public sector of currently 180 countries by analysing 13 different corruption surveys and assessments conducted by independent international institutions such as the World Bank.⁹⁸ In the ‘CPI’ of 2016, the year of release of SN’s feature film and second season, Ukraine ranked 131 out of 176 countries.⁹⁹ The Chinese production *IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE* (人民的名义, 2017) is another contemporary example of a polit-series that concerns itself with financial corruption (in this case, of regional government officials). Correspondingly, in 2017’s CPI, China occupied rank 77 out of 180¹⁰⁰, showing a notable awareness of corruption as a governance issue.

For comparison, Germany and the UK, at the start of *EICHWALD*, MdB in 2015, occupied a shared corruption perceptions index rank of 11/168.¹⁰¹ The US, at the start of *VEEP* in 2012, occupied rank 19/176.¹⁰² France, at the outset of *BARON NOIR* in 2016, was listed on rank 23/176¹⁰³, and South Korea, at the start of *DS 60*, in 2019, occupied rank 39/180¹⁰⁴, with the country continuing an upward trend that, as of 2021, has been ongoing.¹⁰⁵ In all of these series, corruption appears as a primarily moral rather than economic condition. These comparisons suggest a direct correlation between the historical level of perception of government corruption and the fictional emphasis on its moral vs its economic dimension in the polit-fiction of a given country.

96 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, “#1.14”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119397?trackId=200257858,10.04>.

97 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, “#1.07”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859,05.12>.

98 *Transparency International*, “The ABCs of the CPI: How the Corruption perception Index is Calculated”, December 20, 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/how-cpi-scores-are-calculated>.

99 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2016”, last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2016/index/ukr>.

100 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2017”, last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2017/index/chn>.

101 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2015”, last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015/index/deu> and <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015/index/gbr>.

102 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2012”, last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2012/index/usa>.

103 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2016”, last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2016/index/fra>.

104 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2019”, last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/index/kor>.

105 *Transparency International*, “CPI 2021”, last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/kor>.

6.2.7 The Issue of Europe

In SN, Holoborodko's political platform essentially appears as a collection of vague commonplace valence issues (e.g., the fight against corruption, the country's reform, and the removal of its elites). However, on several occasions, the series makes it a point to illustrate a Western rapprochement and an admission to the European Union as a utopian ideal. An accidental phone call by then-German chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, leads Holoborodko to falsely believe that Ukraine has been granted an EU membership, prompting the animated Kyiv fountains to spring up to the rhythm of the 'Ode to Joy' in one of Holoborodko's satirical visions.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the EU intercedes to review the conditions of Holoborodko's detention.¹⁰⁷

The series' presentation of the European Union is notable because it breaks with an established convention of polit-fiction according to which the EU either does not feature at all or, if it does appear, is presented as a more or less corrupt and inefficient technocratic dystopia.¹⁰⁸

SN's treatment of Europe illustrates just how crucial the historical political circumstances in Ukraine were for parts of the series' network. The issue of Ukraine orienting itself towards the West (the EU) or the East (Russia) has been at the core of much of the country's recent political struggles. The historical 2013/14 Euromaidan Protests and the subsequent Maidan revolution in 2014 resulted in the removal of then-President Viktor Yanukovich and erupted as a response to the pro-Russian leader's decision to turn down an association agreement with the EU. With its first release in 2015, SN, likewise, followed at the heels of the ensuing Crimean crisis, which saw, among other things, the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Zelensky's historical SoP party has accordingly taken a pro-western stance.¹⁰⁹ Volodymyr Zelensky – not least since the invasion of Ukraine through Russian forces in late February 2022 – frequently and strongly emphasised his country's wish to join the so-called Western community of values and, more concretely, the European Union. The series' expression of pro-European tendencies is, thus, unsurprising and most likely uncontroversial among much of its initial target audience functions.

6.2.8 SN as American *Monomyth* and the Populist Narrative Paradox

In its populist structural setup, SN largely follows the conventions of a narrative archetype, which Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence described as the American

106 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 18, "#1.18", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 1, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119701?trackId=200257859>, 07.22".

107 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, "#3.01", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 29.33".

108 Mentioned with regards to British polit-fiction in Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", LSE (blog), March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

109 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 589.

Monomyth (AM). It has significant consequences for the series' presentation of politics and political processes. Jewett and Lawrence define the AM as follows:

*A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity.*¹¹⁰

Of course, SN is by no means a US-American production and was arguably not intended for the US market. However, the series' adherence to the AM's narrative conventions is far from accidental. It began its life as a decidedly commercial – rather than political – entertainment commodity. The AM, on the other hand, is a well-tested narrative formula for constructing a sympathetic hero and simplifying – among other things – complex political structures and processes according to established conventions with proven suitability for mass consumption.

Following the AM, SN predominantly features static characters, and its action-centred plot is not “based on rites of initiation”¹¹¹ as is the case in classically monomythical, character-based coming-of-age stories like *THE CROWN* (chapter 4) or *THE POLITICIAN* (chapter 5). In fact, in SN, the uncompromising unchangeability of Holoborodko's character appears as one of his primary virtues. Following the AM's presentation of “tales of redemption”,¹¹² SN presents its protagonist as a messiah-like ‘super-saviour’¹¹³ who emerges to fend off a “threat against Eden's [Ukraine] calm” and to save “a chosen people [Ukrainians] under attack”.¹¹⁴ Two ancient philosophers who visit Holoborodko in a dream during the series' exposition, e.g., explicitly describe Ukraine as a potential paradise.¹¹⁵ Holoborodko likewise rises to appropriate, messianic grandiosity in season 3, where the framing story of a history class in the year 2049 makes it entirely clear just how singularly great his political struggle and ultimate redemptive impact has been (more on this later).¹¹⁶

In the narration of the fictional “super-presidency”¹¹⁷ within the dramatic conventions of the AM, there often arises, as Lawrence and Jewett note, a contradiction between the fictional trope of a singularly powerful (super)hero and the limited powers of a fictional president within a system of checks and balances.¹¹⁸ In the historical Ukrainian

110 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX. Original emphasis.

111 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

112 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

113 See Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

114 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 174.

115 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, “#1.2”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 01.57”.

116 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, “#3.03”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 56.00”.

117 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 128.

118 See Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 128f.

polity, the president is, e.g., considered “primarily responsible for foreign policy”.¹¹⁹ In SN, on the other hand, president Holoborodko shows the AM-(super)hero’s typical “pure motivations, a redemptive task [to free Ukraine from corruption], and extraordinary powers [both his personal virtue and his simplified presidential omnipotence]”¹²⁰ as he pushes through reform after reform with no knowledge of – or regard for – the political process (in the tradition of many US American on-screen presidents).

The AM’s projection of “all evil outward upon others”¹²¹ manifests in SN’s building of populist opposition between the protagonist and the “Intruding, Evil Other”¹²² of the corrupt political establishment (as discussed above), which directly opposes Ukraine’s potential Eden-like natural state.

One of the many binary juxtapositions in SN that closely follow the AM’s conventions is the series’ construction of an opposition between the negatively connotated intelligence of antagonist Chuiko and his accomplices (as slyness) and the positively connotated naivety and ignorance of Holoborodko and his team (as unspoiled honesty and common sense). As Jewett and Lawrence put it: “So hostile is monomythic material to individual intelligence that one of its most durable conventions is to use ‘brains’ as a distinguishing trait of evil persons”.¹²³

SN even features the AM’s signature “hostility towards human sexuality”.¹²⁴ Holoborodko himself is essentially sexually abstinent. He appears single and attractive, but not overtly sexual and thus, as a non-threatening hero and statesman. The characters of his ex-wife Olha and their little son serve to assure the audience of Holoborodko’s virility without him having to engage in any sexual or romantic activity. The series thus solves the ‘double bind’ of male sexuality in binary polit-narratives (both fictional and historical), according to which politicians “must present virile and potent figures, without being allowed to resort to their sexuality as proof of their virility”.¹²⁵

Indeed, the one time in which Holoborodko does give in to his libido, disaster quickly ensues. His courtship of the beautiful government employee Anna Mikhailovna, who ultimately becomes his short-term partner,¹²⁶ plays out as a satirical struggle to resist his urges/her charms. As the series progresses, Anna Mikhailovna turns out to be an accomplice of the antagonistic oligarchs.¹²⁷ She is ultimately exposed and removed from the

119 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 42.

120 Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 47.

121 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 176.

122 Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 26.

123 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 215.

124 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 219.

125 Wieland Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters: The Body Politic and Its Restrained Libido”, in *A Man’s World? Political Masculinities in Literature and Culture*, ed. Birgit Sauer and Kathleen Starck (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 143.

126 Starting in *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 19, “#1.19”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 2, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119702?trackId=200257859>, 19.53”.

127 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 20, “#1.20”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 3, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119703?trackId=200257859>, 09.00”.

narrative in the middle of season 2.¹²⁸ Both historical narrative tradition and the conventions of the AM suggest that “the tale of the politician who falls in love (or who tries to follow his libido) is one destined to end unhappily”.¹²⁹ By disposing of Anna and unceremoniously dropping her story arc mid-season, SN thus performs a soft recalibration correcting what must – in the AM’s dramatic logic – seem like an unfortunate compositional choice for the happy-ending-bound series. Accordingly, the reveal of Anna’s betrayal remains a relatively brief sidenote in season 2 that primarily serves to justify her disappearance and has little effect on the plot or the static character Vasyly Holoborodko.

6.2.8.1 The Implicit Anti-Democratic Impetus

As I have shown, SN blends idealism with populism to create an “escapist fantasy”¹³⁰ of politics. To Jewett and Lawrence, the AM’s similar mixture

encourages passivity on the part of the general public and unwise concentrations of power in ostensible redeemers. It betrays the ideals of democratic responsibility and denies the reliance on human intelligence that is basic to the democratic hope¹³¹

AMs such as SN thus implicitly create a vision of societal redemption through “anti-democratic means”.¹³² For Jewett and Lawrence, the AM

conveys a pessimism about democratic institutions and public responsibilities, a messianic expectation that society can be redeemed by a single stroke, and an impatience with constitutional processes.¹³³

Vasyly Holoborodko regularly uses his official and unofficial presidential powers to force MPs to vote according to his wishes.¹³⁴ He relishes in the ‘comical’ phantasy of shooting the entire uncooperative assembly with a machine gun¹³⁵ and openly threatens an

128 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 13, “#2.13”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 1, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597214?trackId=200257858,17.40>.

129 Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters”, 150.

130 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 210. They write this with regard to the AM in general.

131 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 210f.

132 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

133 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 215.

134 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, “#1.14”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 1, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597215?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593_title%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80119382.24.48.

135 *Sluha Narodu 2*, directed by Aleksey Kiryushchenko (2016, Kyiv, Ukraine: Kvartal 95 Studio), Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597220?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978%7C1%2C%2C,04.41.

uncooperative cabinet with another Maidan Revolution.¹³⁶ In his circumvention of procedure and the (broken) democratic institutions, Holoborodko thus becomes the AM's classic vigilante hero whose legitimacy derives not from procedure but the self-evident righteousness of his redemptive quest.

6.2.8.2 The Populist Narrative Paradox

Is it possible to infer from these narrative observations any concrete populist convictions of SN's historical network? The series' tangible yet implicit anti-democratic impetus is, above all, the result of dramatic logic. Diegetically, SN constantly evokes the ideals of liberalism, democracy, and justice commonly associated with idealpolitik. However, the dramatic construction of SN's narrative as a binary juxtaposition of *inside* and *outside* generates a normatively charged, simplified protagonist-antagonist structure that dismisses all actors of representative democracy and thus contradicts any intradiegetic avowals of democracy.

This populist paradox of intradiegetic progressive idealism and structural anti-democratic impetus results from the interplay of the nature of idealpolitik with the conflicting dramatic logic of serial fiction and the systemic logic of historical politics. As Niklas Luhmann points out, historically, it is an essential prerequisite for any (functional) democratic system that contestants concede their opponents' fundamental moral eligibility to compete.¹³⁷ Principles of morality (and the question of an opponent's moral fitness), thus, ideally, play no role in any democratic contest. On the other hand, a reduction of a contested political sphere full of highly abstract processes to seemingly tangible questions of morality usually serves to disqualify opponents from participating.¹³⁸

For the notion of idealpolitik to persist, however, this very reduction of politics to moral categories is essential. Idealpolitik, by its very nature, determines a participant's legitimacy through their adherence to a set of categorical moral imperatives and thus usually clashes with the refracted discursive realities of representative democracy. Translated into narrative composition, morality inadvertently becomes the single decisive factor for determining a character's position in the series' protagonist-antagonist structure. At least in mainstream narrative, the almost unavoidable result is the morally charged binary *inside-outside* structure described above.

The binary dramatic logic of the utopian "Opera of Power" inadvertently tends to evoke a populist vision of politics in line with the anti-democratic tendencies of the AM, even where this vision directly opposes intradiegetically voiced ideals or even the political intentions of the series' overall network. As the next section will show, the almost inevitably populist structural construction of fictional idealpolitik and its resulting anti-democratic impetus reoccur in various series that feature an idealistic saviour hero.

136 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859>, 14.58".

137 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 170.

138 Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, 171.

6.3 A Comparative Analysis of a Paradox Narrative Convention

Before attempting to assess the influence of politicized pragmatic logic within SN's network, it is crucial to note that the structural requirements of idealistic polit-fiction, which manifest in the narrative conventions of "the populist telling of the quest",¹³⁹ are by no means unique to series' arguably serving as tools in historical election campaigns such as SN. Instead of a particular cultural or political context, the paradoxical populist construction of fictional idealpolitik seems to occur primarily in accordance with the traditional storytelling conventions of linear television, e.g., perpetual seriality and the principle of the 'Least Objectionable Program' (LOP).¹⁴⁰ The latter aims to structure linear TV content according to what audiences might find the least offensive rather than most appealing, thus enticing them to stick with – rather than seek out – a program's flow. I will discuss this in more detail in the coming sections.

I want to illustrate this principle further by highlighting the main features of three of SN's contemporaries: The two US-series MS and SD and the Korean remake of DS US, DS 60. Like SN, all three series present a vision of idealpolitik that features the populist construction of an idealistic saviour hero and a dichotomy between moral *outgroup* and evil *ingroup* (of politics).

6.3.1 Madam Secretary

The CBS series MS tells the story of the idealistic college professor Elizabeth McCord (Téa Leoni), who – together with her trusted team – reforms US politics (and arguably the fictional world) first as the titular US secretary of state and later as president.

In keeping with the populist construction of idealistic polit-fiction, the series frames McCord as an outsider hero whose primary qualification for the job is her deontological moral rectitude – she leaves her career at the CIA for moral convictions – and the related fact that she does not belong to the political establishment. During McCord's appointment, the stereotypically sacrosanct President Dalton (himself a former CIA-man and political 'outsider' in the populist narrative tradition) accordingly emphasizes that:

You quit a profession you love for ethical reasons. That makes you the least political person I know. You don't just think outside the box. You don't even know there is a box.¹⁴¹

139 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

140 A term famously attributed to NBC executive Paul Klein. See Tom Shales, "NBCees Paul Klein to the Door", *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/03/06/nbcees-paul-klein-to-the-door/998c31db-7e66-4bco-bbd3-b309ofob97d1/?no-direct=on>; see Paul L. Klein, "Why you watch what you watch when you watch", *TV Guide*, July 24, 1971, 6–9.

141 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&stcx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b

Following the redemptive arc of the AM, Elizabeth McCord, like Vasyl Holoborodko, finds a spoiled potential Eden (the US) unable to fix itself without help from a morally stable/narratively static outsider hero (herself). Her static outsider status subsequently makes McCord the unquestioned champion of the unified 'people'. As such, she is approached by both the Republican and the Democratic parties as their respective presidential candidate.¹⁴² Of course, like all populist heroes, she promptly refuses them. When faced with an option to appease a hostile senator (and representative of the morally corrupt *inside*) through a convenient compromise, she states:

I am not willing to sell out my agenda to sit in the Oval and take orders from a partisan hack who puts his own self-interest before the national good. I'm going to continue serving the American people.¹⁴³

Other than her establishment counterparts, McCord, like Vasyl Holoborodko, possesses a direct link to 'the people', exemplified, e.g., by her instant personal connection to the fabled 'middle America' as personified by an ostentatiously average couple from Minnesota whom she meets during a press appearance.¹⁴⁴

The binary structural dichotomy of *inside* and *outside* appears as a double phenomenon here: (1) it structures the interaction of corrupt establishment and morally upstanding non-politicians following established tropes of delegitimizing the protagonist's political opponents along normative lines and thus granting McCord a claim to sole representation. In MS, to oppose McCord equals refusing the unified will of the people and the self-evident 'best' for the nation. Accordingly, McCord tells the power-hungry Senator Hanson: "You're obsessed with destroying me, and you're willing to take down the whole country to do it".¹⁴⁵

-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 07.00"

142 *Madam Secretary*, season 5, episode 19, "The great Experiment", directed by Eric Stoltz, written by Joy Gregory, aired April 14, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81135824?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70696136_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70696136_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 07.00"

143 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 7, "Accountability", directed by Darnell Martin, written by Leland Jay Anderson, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287032?trackId=255824129, 34.02>".

144 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 37.27"

145 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 8, "Ships and Countries", directed by Sam Hoffman, written by Joy Gregory https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287033?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 39.55".

(2) The *inside-outside* dichotomy appears in the series' construction of a good America vs a suspicious, potentially dangerous international realm. Foreign secretary Elizabeth McCord frequently voices her disregard for and suspicion of all places that are not the US, stating, for example, that "No one misses Syria if it completely self-destructs".¹⁴⁶ In another example, when a captured US spy faces rapid execution in Pakistan, McCord's associate disparagingly states: "That's fast even for that part of the world".¹⁴⁷

Though it is ostensibly about foreign policy, MS is fundamentally a US American story about US Americans and for US audiences. It follows a vision of US American superiority typical for native productions of the AM with its "traditional notion that America somehow has a responsibility to the rest of the world".¹⁴⁸ McCord, e.g., claims:

We're the country that sent men to the moon. We are the envy of our rivals, the hope of the oppressed, the sword and shield of free people everywhere. We, the people, it's up to us, all of us.¹⁴⁹

In the construction of its protagonist, MS frequently evokes the AM's signature messiah trope. For example, a priest and activist from the deprived fictional country of "West Africa" trying to enlist McCord's help to prevent an ongoing genocide, states: "The truth is that you have the power to answer the desperate prayers of thousands of my people",¹⁵⁰ thus taking the AM's pseudo-religious messiah motif to tangible extremes. Subsequently, McCord naturally obliges, stopping the genocide and informing the disreputable envoy of the regime responsible: "You tell your bosses back home that the United States is watching".¹⁵¹

The fictional US's superior moral, military, and economic force become the superpower of the monomythical saviour-hero Elizabeth McCord. In the anarchic, neo-realist international realm, it trumps all need for diplomatic compromise and procedure. When asked about potential inducements to persuade New Guinea to extradite a spy, McCord,

146 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&ctcx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 36.05

147 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 3, "The Operative", directed by Jeremy Webb, written by David Grae, aired October 5, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074130?trackId=255824129&ctcx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 28.33

148 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 225.

149 *Madam Secretary*, season 5, episode 20, "Better Angels", directed by John Murray, written by Matt Ward, aired April 21, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81135825?trackId=255824129, 41.25>

150 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Mark Piznarski, written by Matt Ward, aired October 26, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074133?trackId=200257859, 6.26>

151 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Mark Piznarski, written by Matt Ward, aired October 26, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074133?trackId=200257859, 10.02>

e.g. states, “The inducement is, I’m asking”.¹⁵² On another occasion, a reward for the opposing side’s cooperation is that “we won’t sanction them into the stone age”.¹⁵³ The President’s advisor summarizes this notion very clearly when he states, “We’re the United States; we practice whatever the hell we want.”¹⁵⁴

Politics, in MS, is an entirely individualized and personified affair. In a clear example of narrative executive bias, the international polity is generally reduced to one or two players that usually personify governmental authority. Few pluralistic bodies, binding treaties, or moral ambiguities influence McCord’s often-unilateral decisions. Instead, every political event within the plot is a matter of clearly discernible cause and effect resulting from the interactions of McCord and her foreign counterparts.

Like SN, and following the AM’s *dramatic* configuration of idealpolitik, MS portrays a typically populist anti-establishment (and anti-democratic) functional logic. McCord, having risen to the US Presidency, is saved from impeachment through a corrupt Congress by ‘the people’ who – in the shape of millions of protesters¹⁵⁵ chanting “she’s my president” – march on Washington demanding that she remain in office.

In the populist intradiegetic logic of MS, this act appears both plausible and justified: The unified ‘people’ turn out in force to protect their ally against an illegitimate political establishment. However, watching this scene in 2021/2022 after the historical storming of the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, gives one pause. In the historical event, several hundred supporters of the defeated incumbent Donald Trump claimed to defend ‘their’ president from what they perceived to be an abuse of power by an illegitimate legislature. The US Congress had, in reality, been in the process of verifying the largely uncontested election victory of Democrat Joe Biden.

This does not suggest any causal link between the series and historical events. “Carpe Diem”, the episode in question, aired in December 2019 and thus before the historical ‘storm on the Capitol’. Nonetheless, the circumstantial similarity of the fictional and historical scenes is a powerful illustration of the populist logic permeating MS. It is a striking example of the narrative populist paradox that combines liberal idealpolitik with the

152 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 3, “The Operative”, directed by Jeremy Webb, written by David Grae, aired October 5, 2014, [153 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot”, directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, \[154 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 21, “The Kill List”, directed by Ed Ornelas, written by David Grae, aired April 26, 2015, \\[155 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 9, “Carpe Diem”, directed by Felix Alcalá, written by David Grae, aired December 1, 2019, \\\[<https://doi.org/10.14881/9789389479883-000> <https://www.inlibra.com/de/igb> - Open Access - !\\\\[\\\\]\\\\(18e477ba969129e4de60347a65252bb4_img.jpg\\\\)\\\]\\\(https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287034?trackId=200257859, 40.43”.</p>
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AM's anti-democratic impetus to turn the fictional storming of a democratically elected (fictional) parliament into an act of morally justified defense of democracy itself.

6.3.2 Designated Survivor(s)

There are two Designated Survivors in polit-fiction: One goes by the name Tom Kirkman (Kiefer Sutherland) and features as the protagonist of the DS US. The other is called Park Mu-jin (played by 지진희, Romanised: Ji Jin-hee) and serves as the hero of DS US' South Korean adaption DS 60. Accordingly, while they differ in their individual composition, both series share their premise and much of their general outline. They follow a minor government official who becomes president after a devastating attack kills all higher-ranking members of the executive. Both DS US and DS 60 apply a common trope of polit-fiction where a relatively rare historical law or regulation features as the series' premise.¹⁵⁶ In DS US, Thomas Kirkman, the unassuming US secretary for housing and urban development, becomes president after surviving as the US government's 'Designated Survivor'. The term refers to a little-known historical practice that originated during the Cold War to ensure government continuity in case of a nuclear attack by keeping one government member in an undisclosed location during occasions that require the polity's united appearance.

DS 60 adjusts DS US' storyline to fit Korean circumstances, leaving its structural configuration largely intact. Here, it is the unassuming minister for the environment, Park Mu-Jin, who survives a devastating attack on the *Gukhoe* [국회], the Korean national assembly. Following the historical South Korean constitution, Park holds this office for 60 days, during which new elections must occur.¹⁵⁷

Like the other sample series in this chapter, the narrative structures of DS and DS 60 revolve around the dichotomy between illegitimate, corrupt *inside* and morally pure *outside*. Both Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin are classic outsider heroes with a direct connection to their respective unified 'people'. Like Holoborodko and McCord, they share the mentor trope's background as former college professors, one of architecture (Kirkman) and one of chemistry (Park). The series make it clear that, despite their ascension to the presidency, neither Kirkman nor Park ever becomes an *insider* 'politician'. In "#undecided", Kirkman, e.g., states, "I didn't get into politics to behave like a politician".¹⁵⁸ In another episode with the revealing title "#thesystemisbroken", he is introduced to a hostile anti-Washington protest with the words, "This isn't one of them. This is one of ours. A true independent. The President of the United States, Tom Kirkman".¹⁵⁹ Remarkably, in

156 See Niko Switek, "Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 26.

157 In accordance with articles 68 and 71 of the constitution of the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

158 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 9, "#Undecided", directed by Peter Leto, written by Dawn DeNoon, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015342?trackId=255824129>, 42.14".

159 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 1, "#TheSystemIsBroken", directed by Chris Grismer, written by Adam Stein, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015334?trackId=200257858>, 31.24".

DS US' paradox populist logic, Kirkman remains a systemic *outsider* – one of 'the people' rather than 'one of them' – even in his role as US President.

Park, too, is decidedly not a politician. As the title of DS 60's fifth episode reveals, he is "A Good Person",¹⁶⁰ and audiences learn that

President Park never even ran for class president when he was in school [...], although he was a model student. Do you know what that implies? He doesn't have any desire for power [...].¹⁶¹

Park himself later affirms his aversion to politics and power, stating,

Did you just say 'power'? That has nothing to do with me. I'm going to carry out my duty as a citizen of this country and return to my school after 60 days as planned.¹⁶²

His unassuming nature is emphasised, e.g., when he, as *acting* president, refuses to sit at his predecessor's desk or when starting his first speech with the entirely needless introduction, "My fellow Koreans, it's nice to meet you. I am the acting president, Park Mu-jin".¹⁶³

Both series express the integrity of their respective protagonist's moral convictions by presenting them as static characters in an equally static moral universe. Kirkman's vice president, e.g., states admiringly:

The Tom Kirkman who started this job 20 months ago, ambivalent, aspirational, honest to a fault, is the same Tom Kirkman that they saw today. You have not changed one bit, Sir.¹⁶⁴

160 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 5, "A Good Person", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 15, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101770?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109.

161 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 3, "Maintaining Status Quo", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 8, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101768?trackId=255824129, 02.42>".

162 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 3, "Maintaining Status Quo", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 8, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101768?trackId=255824129, 18.22>".

163 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 10, "Accomplice", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 30, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101775?trackId=200257859, 01.10.22>".

164 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 19, "Capacity", directed by David Warry-Smith, written by Keith Eisner, aired April 25, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199937?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647, 38.45".

Faithful to the paradoxical narrative construction of populist idealpolitik, both series frame the political *inside* as a seat of corruption and depravity. In DS 60, the powerful government secretary Han states about the Blue House [청와대], Romanised: *Cheongwadae*], the seat of the Korean presidency, “this place is hell, where nothing ends until everyone becomes a monster”.¹⁶⁵ In DS US, Kirkman jokes with his wife about a false promise, saying, “We’re in Washington. They’re the only promises we’re allowed to make”.¹⁶⁶ Referring to the US capital, Kirkman’s associate likewise states, “it was nice to hear some honesty in and about the swamp”,¹⁶⁷ thus referencing a widespread populist metaphor about cleaning up alleged moral deficits in the historical political establishment in Washington that has been popular from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump.¹⁶⁸

As idealist heroes following a populist narrative construction, Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin – like Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko, the modest servant of Ukraine, and Elizabeth McCord, the unassuming secretary of state – possess a direct link to the unified ‘people’ (indeed, Kirkman uses the term with almost comical frequency). Evoking this unity, a congresswoman trying to solicit Kirkman’s goodwill, for example, states: “Republican, democrat, independent, it doesn’t matter anymore. We’re all Americans today”.¹⁶⁹ Park Mu-jin, likewise, manages what only a fictional populist hero can do: he wins an election without disappointing anyone, quasi by acclamation. Accordingly, his assistant states: “Mr President won without making any enemies”.¹⁷⁰ Emphasising this universal appeal – a trope likewise recurring in MS – all political parties approach the former designated survivor Kirkman as their presidential candidate.¹⁷¹ Like in MS, both Kirkman and Park

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- 165 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 15, “The Trap”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 19, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101780?trackId=200257859,1.04.49>”.
- 166 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot”, directed by Paul McGuigan, written by David Guggenheim, aired September 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133832?trackId=255824129,02.16>”.
- 167 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 1, “#TheSystemsBroken”, directed by Chris grismer, written by Adam Stein, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015334?trackId=200257858,6.30>”.
- 168 Ted Widmer, “Draining the Swamp”, *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/draining-the-swamp>.
- 169 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, “The First Day”, directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, September 28, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=200257859,14.00>”.
- 170 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 7, “Governance”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 22, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101772?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknow%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109,1.09.35”.
- 171 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, “Target”, directed by Timothy Busfield, written by Bill Chais and Ashley Gable, aired may 16, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199939?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknow%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109,1.09.35”.

subsequently choose to run as independent candidates, as any true outsider hero and populist ‘man of the people’ would.

True to the populist construction of fictionalised idealpolitik, both series ultimately sustain the AM’s tangible anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus. The bond between Kirkman and ‘the people’ is presented as so direct and self-evident that even democratic elections must distort it. Die supposed political idealist Kirkman justifies his paradoxical opposition to elections by pointing out his successful advocacy on behalf of the unified people, stating:

The polls didn’t make any headway on clean energy or fill judicial vacancies. The only thing that really matters is the actual work that we get done here on behalf of the American people.¹⁷²

He frequently rejects all notions of compromise-based representative democracy, stating: “I’m not going to affiliate myself with any party just because I want to pass a bill”.¹⁷³ DS US’ populist intradiegetic logic even allows Kirkman to legitimately pressure an uncooperative legislature to approve his military spending bill by threatening direct intervention of ‘the people’. In a repetition of Holoborodko’s similar threat of another Maidan revolution, he states:

I will take whatever political capital I have left, and I will make my case to the people. I will tell them that I believe partisanship is ruining this country and that their representatives are more interested in keeping their power than serving the people and the soldiers that defend them.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, in DS 60, *insider* antagonists openly declare themselves sworn enemies of the Korean people. After having been revealed as the mastermind behind the Gukhoe-attack, the devious government official Han names disdain for the people as his primary motivation, stating:

This country isn’t worthy of a president like him [Park’s deceased predecessor]. Impatient, selfish, and greedy, the people of this nation don’t know how to be patient.

noun%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647.

172 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 1, “One Year In”, directed by Chris Gisner, written by Keith Eisner, aired September 27, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199919?trackId=14170286>, 4.06

173 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, “Target”, directed by Timothy Busfield, written by Bill Chais and Ashely Gable, aired may 16, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199939?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknoun%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647, 18.00”.

174 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, “Target”, 29.41”.

To those people, President Yang and his view of democracy were more than they deserved.¹⁷⁵

Accordingly, Han names “fear and terror” as the “most formidable type of power” and the “governing style which well suited this nation” that he so despises.¹⁷⁶

Both DS US and DS 60 show a notable inconsistency between intradiegetic logic and the demands of their respective dramatic composition. Initially, the series’ shared premise rests on the physical annihilation of the political *insider* elite. As Kirkman’s assistant states with reference to the destroyed Capitol, “My God, there’s no Hill anymore”.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, it is curious to see that DS US, and consequently DS 60, would continue to rely on the traditional *inside vs outside* dichotomy to construct their narrative. So crucial is the populist structural juxtaposition for creating an idealistic hero protagonist in polit-fiction that, in order maintain it, the series end up largely ignoring the momentous diegetic events that initially set off their respective plots. Particularly in DS US, the diegetic Capitol attack serves primarily as the justification for a whodunnit thriller B-plot, which centres on an FBI agent’s investigation of the events and plays a secondary role in the political A-plot as the series continues.

6.3.3 Linear Pragmatic Logic

The consistent reoccurrence of the *dramatic* populist composition of idealpolitik in polit-fiction seems to coincide with a series’ linear circulation background. Indeed, there seems to be a natural kinship between the demands of linear TV and the populist simplification of idealistic politics along the lines of the AM that transcends cultural and ideological contexts.

SN, e.g., appeared as part of the linear schedule of the Ukrainian TV channel 1+1 throughout most of its 51 episodes (barring the homonymous feature film and the series’ third season, which I will discuss shortly). As a production of the linear TV channel CBS, MS’ episodes were released as part of a weekly linear schedule with an eye on potential serial perpetuity (at its finale in December 2019, MS had aired a remarkable 120 episodes spanning six seasons). DS US aired first on the linear TV-channel ABC. After an initial cancellation, it was picked up for a third and final season by the on-demand portal Netflix, which was released in full in June 2019, and subsequently cancelled. DS

175 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, Season 1, episode 16, “The Last Choice”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 20, 2019, [176 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, Season 1, episode 16, “The Last Choice”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 20, 2019, \[177 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, “The First Day”, directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, September 28, 2016, \\[<https://doi.org/10.14881/9783838475883-009> <https://www.inlibra.com/de/igb> - Open Access - !\\\[\\\]\\\(0c61a7e79f24b6ebd52d3259a30778a7_img.jpg\\\)\\]\\(https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=200257859, 9.20”.</p>
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<div data-bbox=\\)\]\(https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101781?trackId=14170289&tctx=2%2C1%2Ca73ba9f3-19bd-4383-be07-2c1553df1e8e-44483310%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65-B9F225DDE3A711-B61FFBD686_p_1661499802684%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65_p_1661499802684%2C%2C%2C81072109, 39.36”.</p>
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60 is a production of the Korean pay TV channel tvN, which optioned and distributed the US original for the Korean market. The series' 16 episodes were produced for a subscribing audience and distributed as part of the channel's linear schedule over roughly two months, airing two episodes per week on tvN (in Korea) and Netflix (internationally) from June to August 2019. While its subscription-based background becomes visible in some of DS 60's alterations – e.g., a much more streamlined narrative, no intra-episode cliffhangers to accommodate commercials, and a more experimental editorial presence – the series' retains the overall structure of its linear US role model.

The narrative structure of the populist AM, with its provision of a simplified binary morality, static characters, and retention of a core character configuration, seems to chime with the storytelling requirements of linear TV. It creates highly recognizable and structurally repetitive plotlines that are easy to follow and allow audiences to remain oriented throughout temporally extensive release cycles. The well-established configuration of the AM furthermore adheres to the classic LOP principle of linear TV, which assumes that any discrete instalment of a linear TV schedule must fit the generalized appeal and televisual flow of a channel's overall programme, thus avoiding tailoring individual content to specific audience functions. With their construction of an easy-to-recognise yet largely undefined positive outgroup that allows widespread identification, an unambiguous moral spectrum, and their emphasis on commonplace valence issues, the populist construction of idealistic polit-series ultimately serves the LOP requirements to appeal to a large and indifferent – rather than selected and engaged – viewer base.

It is crucial to note the spread of the populist construction of idealpolitik within polit-series across cultural and historical contexts. Realising that SN follows the same dramatic logic as series from entirely different cultural backgrounds, which show no ties to concrete political interests, the claim of SN's unmitigated political purpose becomes somewhat doubtful. Nonetheless, a look at the series' evolution against its historical backdrop will reveal fascinating parallelisms between the fictional developments in SN and Volodymyr Zelensky's campaign.

6.4 Seasonal Changes and Historical Politics

Throughout its run, SN underwent several recalibrations that suggest its recalibration from entertainment commodity to political instrument. While SN's first season seems relatively unassuming, the series' purpose as a tool of political image-building becomes a tangible influence on its network's pragmatic logic in season 3.

6.4.1 Season 1

SN's first season shows a tendency towards comical hyperbole, often supported by tangible moments of *editorial presence* in the series' otherwise largely conventional formal continuity layout that supports the flow of the plot. For example, Holoborodko indulges in frequent daydreams in which he encounters prominent historical characters that provide topical guidance for the different challenges he faces. Throughout episode 1x11, au-

diences likewise hear the comically absurd thoughts of the series' characters. The series similarly shows moments of self-referentiality, providing occasional meta-jokes, for example, when President Holobodorko asks angrily, "Do I look like a comedian?" to which his counterpart replies, "Yes. That is, no".¹⁷⁸

SN's comparatively low initial production values suggest a local European production's relatively limited televisual budget. The historical costumes in Holoborodko's visions, e.g., are often noticeably low-grade. Similarly, Holoborodko moves parliament and the rest of the government to smaller, nondescript locations for the *intradiegetic* reason of cutting down on government spending. This has the effect of providing a diegetic explanation for the series' *pragmatic* decision to shoot in nondescript locations rather than having to rebuild costly sets that work as stand-ins for the Verkhovna Rada [Верховна Рада України], Ukraine's parliament] and other iconic buildings that would be well-known to Ukrainian (and, as of March 2022, many international) audiences.

Season 1 displays a notably incoherent narrative pacing typical of the early stages of an ongoing series still finding its bearing. For example, SN's expository arc takes up seven episodes, with the first three instalments leading up to Holoborodko's inauguration. Here, audiences follow the newly minted President as he is taken from his parents' bathroom to explore the lavish world of presidential life in an unnervingly detailed tour of the presidential palace. The following four episodes show Holoborodko as he gets to know the absurdly lavish government apparatus, various more or less overstuffed, inefficient departments, and the cabinet he fires and re-staffs with his allies.

The narrated time in these first seven episodes is inconsistent. The first three cover little more than one event (the visit to the presidential palace) that appears as one coherent scene, that is, a narrative unit defined by a unity of location, characters, and action. The subsequent four instalments span an unspecified period and revert to a more conventional formal style of narrating in a sequence of scenes. Initially, this temporal incongruence causes some disorientation in audiences, especially because the series simultaneously begins to introduce unrelated B-plots for comical relief (e.g., in the form of Holoborodko family shenanigans) while the exposition of the central plot is still ongoing.

There is little accessible historical context suggesting that SN's pragmatic logic already encompassed a clearly defined political purpose. While the series' season 1 establishes Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko as an idealistic hero in the populist logic of idealpolitik, this composition largely follows the established narrative conventions outlined above and thus a dramatic logic that is prevalent in productions from various cultural contexts.

178 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 15, "#1.15", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119398?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%2F0%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80119382, 02.47".

6.4.2 Season 2 and “Sluha Narodu 2”, The Movie

To remind the reader: the story of Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko initially continued with the feature film “Sluha Narodu 2” in December 2016. A year later, in the winter of 2017, the second season started in the diegetic temporal gap between season one and the film. Its first seven episodes cover this gap. The following seven episodes incorporate and expand the film’s plot utilising its material. The last ten episodes continue the plot after the film’s end.

In SN’s second season, notable mitigation of the first season’s formal and narrative inconsistencies occurs. Its narrative is more streamlined, and the increase in production values is clearly visible. The quality of lighting and costumes is notably elevated, and the season features a wider variety of locations. The series also somewhat reduces previous notions of a hyperbolic editorial presence. For example, Holoborodko’s ‘comical’ visions occupy a reduced role in his decision-making, thus giving the character and his actions a more focused and professional air.

These changes are arguably partly due to the fact that SN had, by this time, become a commercial success and that much of its material had been shot for cinematic release. The film “Sluha Narodu 2” is, in many ways, a conventional comedy in which Holoborodko and the ex-antagonist Chuiko embark on a literal quest (complete with leaving Kyiv and going on a road trip-type adventure) to tackle the sinister oligarchs in an often hyperbolic and tangibly physical sequence of events. However, both the film and season 2 notably emphasise Vasyl Petrovych’s ability as an effective administrator and fighter of corruption while reducing the focus on his personal circumstances. For example, his family’s role in producing comical B-plots is significantly diminished, with several characters vanishing from the ensemble.

While the historical part of SN’s network had made no publicly notable political moves before the season’s release (in October/November 2017), the SoP party was registered shortly afterwards (on December 2nd, 2017) by the head of Zelensky’s production company. The well-timed use of the series’ symbolic capital (e.g., through ambivalent advertisements) and the announcement of Zelensky’s candidacy followed roughly a year later.

6.4.3 Season 3: “Choice”

The dominant impact of Zelensky’s political ambitions in SN’s pragmatic logic becomes evident in its third season, conspicuously subtitled “Choice”. Its unusually timed release occurred only days (March 27th and 28th, 2019) before the first round of the presidential election on March 31st, 2019. Season 3 underwent significant recalibrations in terms of narrative composition and serial format. It consists of only three episodes (as opposed to 23 and 24 in the previous two seasons). With a running time between 42 minutes (episode 2) and one hour and five minutes (episode 1), they are significantly longer than most of the previous seasons’ classic 25-minute TV instalments. Scripted and produced as one coherent unit and released within only two days, the episodes show a higher narrative consistency than the previous seasons.

Figure 36: *The Independence Monument in Maidan Square covered in gold.*



Screenshot from *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, “#3.03”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859,55.56>. Credit: Kvartal 95

Season 3’s *pragmatic* purpose as a political tool also becomes evident in its narrative. The season highlights the presidential qualities of Holoborodko while simultaneously presenting the dangers of electing anybody else with explicit reference to the historical election and its contestants. As media commentators noted,

If we briefly retell the plot, then (warning – spoiler) in the first episode, we are told about what a bad president Poroshenko is, in the second – what a bad president Tymoshenko will become, and in the third Zelensky will save the world Ukraine.¹⁷⁹

In season 3, the intensity of the political game increases significantly. Holoborodko is imprisoned after losing the presidency due to electoral fraud, Ukraine’s democracy finds itself in an existential crisis, and the country falls apart in a succession of satirical horror

179 Gala Skylyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluga-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>. Accessed through Google Translate. Original emphasis.

scenarios, e.g., splitting up into 28 hyperbolically specified states,¹⁸⁰ a coup d'état¹⁸¹ and experiencing numerous successive but ultimately futile Maidan Revolutions.

Having emphasised Holoborodko's qualities as a statesman throughout its run, the series' finale emphatically frames his election as the resurgence of Ukraine's ultimate messiah hero. After having unified the nation, ended corruption, and alleviated the national debt, the re-elected President Holoboroko gives a rousing speech in front of his allies and what appears to be a cross-section of the Ukrainian people.¹⁸² While he speaks, grandiose, extradiegetic music sets in, and the camera focuses on the shining, hopeful faces of the diegetic audience listening to their leader. After a cut, a full shot shows the angelic figure atop the Independence Monument in Kyiv's Maidan Square. In a subsequent, evolving extreme long shot, the base of the monument's victory column becomes visible: it is covered in a literal mountain of gold (see figure 36). Another cut to the season's framing story in the year 2049 shows a group of students and their teacher who – having been served the promised golden future – discuss their country's successful history in a state of blissful elation supported by the ongoing grandiose extradiegetic music¹⁸³ before the credits begin to roll.

The series' politicized pragmatic logic is visible in the presentation of Holoborodko's antagonists, the presidential usurpers Zhanna Boryshenko and Dmytro Surikov, as well. Following populist logic, both are not only enemies of Holoborodko but 'the people'. They come to power through illegitimate means and bring Ukraine to the brink of destruction (causing hyperinflation, unrest, and the defection of renegade regional governments). It has furthermore been pointed out that the fictional characters Zhanna Boryshenko and Dmytro Surikov bear striking similarities to Volodymyr Zelensky's most prominent contenders for the historical Ukrainian presidency: former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the then-incumbent president Petro Poroshenko.¹⁸⁴

The signature blond hair (and its recognizable sideway parting), rimmed glasses and, at times, severe demeanour of the incompetent fictional Zhanna Boryshenko is a thinly veiled satire of former Ukrainian PM Yulia Tymoshenko. The fictional Dmytro Surikov

180 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 2, "#3.02", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596234?trackId=200257859>, 36.56"

181 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 2, "#3.02", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596234?trackId=200257859>, 26.10".

182 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, "#3.03", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 51.35".

183 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, "#3.03", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 56.32".

184 See Gala Sklyarevska, "Servant of the People 3': Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky", *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluha-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>; Elena Galajiy, "Servant of the People 3: Tymoshenko is surprised by cynicism, Poroshenko is offended, the National Friends are intrigued", *kp.ua*, March 28, 2019, <https://kp.ua/politics/634126-sluha-naroda-3-u-tymoshenko-udyvleny-tsnyzmu-u-poroshenko-obyzheny-nadruzhyny-zayntryhovany>. Accessed through Google Translate. And Michael Garrood and Yuri Zoria, "What Zelensky's prophetic 'Servant of the People' TV show suggest for his further steps", *Euromaidan News*, August 7, 2019, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2019/08/07/what-zelenskys-prophetic-servant-of-the-people-tv-show-suggests-for-his-further-steps/>.

is, among other similarities, said to be the owner of a prominent fictional dairy company with “fairy-tale shops [...] next to each metro station”¹⁸⁵ as well as the fictional “channel 3”¹⁸⁶ while the historical Petro Poroshenko owns (respectively, owned) the prominent chocolate manufacturer ‘Roshen Confectionery Corporation’ [Кондитерська корпорація Рошєн] and the TV station “Channel 5” [5 канал].

The series even references the well-known (and cruelly ironic) fact that Petro Poroshenko, the owner of a chocolate manufacturer, is a diabetic: The fictional Dmytro Surikov, who owns a dairy company, is lactose intolerant.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, Surikov’s character carries numerous allusions to some of the historical scandals and communicative missteps associated with Poroshenko (e.g., the fictional president going on a holiday to the Maldives¹⁸⁸ shortly after taking office).¹⁸⁹

Faced with the conspicuous release date, the season’s subtitle “Choice”, the presentation of two presidential usurpers who, to Ukrainian audiences, are easily recognisable satirical allusions to Zelensky’s presidential contenders, and the presentation of Vasyl Holoborodko as the unequivocal saviour hero who will lead his country into a – in all senses of the word – golden future, SN’s season 3 becomes clearly visible as a campaign tool.

6.5 How Fictional is the President Anyway?

By consciously blending the idealised appeal of SN’s protagonist and its simplified political vision with the historical presidential campaign, Zelensky and his team attempted and – by many accounts succeeded – to transfer the fictional political clout of Vasyl Holoborodko onto the political construction of the discursive function of President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Like all politicians, the historical President Zelensky is ultimately a product of the process of co-creatively unifying the *King’s two bodies* in an imaginary third body, which

185 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 21.08”.

186 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 21.34”.

187 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 31.24”. Noted also by Gala Sklyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-slug-a-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>.

188 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 49.15”.

189 Compiled, for example, by Gala Sklyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-slug-a-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/> and Elena Galajiy, “Servant of the People 3: Tymoshenko is surprised by cynicism, Poroshenko is offended, the National Friends are intrigued”, *kp.ua*, March 28, 2019, <https://kp.ua/politics/634126-sluha-naroda-3-u-tymoshenko-udyvleny-tsynyzmu-u-poroshenko-obyzheny-nadruzhyhny-zayntryhovany>.

occurs between any ruler and his*her audience/electorate.¹⁹⁰ As this study has previously discussed, with recourse to Ernst Kantorowicz and Louis Marin, this process fuses the body natural of Volodymyr Zelensky, the man, and the entirely conceptual body politic of the president in the imagination of his followers to form the imaginary (though not ‘unreal’) third body of President Volodymyr Zelensky. Ironically, President Zelensky is, thus, a product of the very process of co-creating political imaginaries, which SN – in its populist logic – denies.

Zelensky’s use of his fictional alter ego to endow his own mythical body with political clout that he himself did, in fact, not possess arguably made the initial imaginary of President Zelensky appear as a simulacrum. However, it should be noted that history seems to have revealed – at least for the moment – the perhaps unexpected reality of Zelensky’s projections, with him having shown a remarkable ability to unite Ukraine and much of the international community behind the cause of defending the country against the Russian invasion.

Neither the rise of celebrity politicians nor the amalgamation of fiction and reality are new occurrences in politics. Donald J. Trump’s ascension to the US presidency in 2016 is the most prominent recent example of the former. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his gubernatorial bid for California in 2003 are a well-known instance of the latter. In his campaign, Schwarzenegger routinely quoted lines from his movies, thus associating his political persona with notions of the powerful, invincible, and popular fictional movie characters he had impersonated as an actor, ultimately gaining him the nickname “the Governor” (as a reference to his most famous role, the ‘Terminator’).

Storytellers have likewise often seized the opportunity to profit from the attention and controversy surrounding historical political elections. In 1998, German artist Christoph Schlingensiefel founded the satirical party Chance 2000, which competed in the 1998 German parliamentary elections (to relatively small political success). In the run-up to the 2009 federal elections, German comedian Hape Kerkeling seized the political buzz to promote his election satire “Horst Schlämmer – Isch Kandidiere!” (Angelo Colagrossi: Germany). The film’s promotion tour was framed as a political campaign. However, neither Schwarzenegger nor Kerkeling went so far as to blur the lines between fiction and reality: the candidate Schwarzenegger was arguably always clearly distinguishable from the fictional character, the Terminator Kerkeling, on the other hand, while never openly acknowledging the fictional character of his endeavour, never actually attempted to run for office. In the instrumentalization of their fictional entertainment arsenal, it is safe to say that few have gone as far (and succeeded as widely) as Volodymyr Zelensky.

6.6 Conclusion: Politics, Populism, and Paradoxes

The curious convergence of a relatively conventional polit-comedy with unique historical circumstances has turned SN into an unlikely part of world history. Starting as an unassuming polit-comedy, the series arguably contributed to the election of its star, Volodymyr Zelensky, as Ukrainian president, a role in which he was since forced to

190 As discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

emerge as the defender of his country following its condemnable invasion by the Russian Federation in late February 2022.

Summarising the key historical parallelisms between the series and the 2019 presidential election, this chapter showed how and why SN has been credited with and criticised for merging fiction and reality to endow an inexperienced celebrity comedian with the political clout of an idealised fictional president.

In a structural narrative analysis, I demonstrated that SN follows a populist logic in dramatizing idealistic politics by juxtaposing a morally flawless outsider-hero (and direct envoy of a unified 'people') and a corrupt and illegitimate political elite. In SN, politics appeared as a binary sphere in which the political *inside* operates according to the ruthless laws of an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game. At the same time, the *outside* plays a largely cooperative game (ensured by the protagonist's superiority and compositional intervention). Political games between the two spheres take on a cooperative character in which the superiority of the protagonists reigns supreme. They retain their agonal zero-sum structure to ensure narrative suspense and emphasise the protagonist's ultimate victory through his antagonists' proportionate defeat.

It became clear that this construction follows well-established narrative conventions of polit-fiction that largely adhere to the narrative archetype of the AM. With its messiah-like saviour hero, its endorsement of individualism over institutions and procedures, and its distrust of personal intelligence and human sexuality, SN displays the anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus typical for the AM.

While SN shows none of the defeatist tendencies of this study's previous samples (see chapters 4 and 5), it is remarkable that even in the series' utopian construction of politics, change is possible only outside the established avenues of the political system. Positive reform in polit-fiction, or so it would seem, is only an option in highly simplified versions of politics where representation is a frictionless translation of people's will by an unassuming saviour.

However, this compositional base structure emerges not primarily as a consequence of specific cultural or ideological tendencies within SN's historical network but instead results from transferring the normative logic of idealpolitik onto the dramatic logic of conventional fictional storytelling. In what I called the populist narrative paradox, it became clear that morality, as an exclusive benchmark of political legitimacy, almost inadvertently leads to delegitimizing political opponents and, thus, to a populist negation of pluralistic principles.

A comparative analysis of other series of the 2010s – MS, DS US, and its South Korean remake, DS 60 – showed a repetition of the paradox narrative formula underlying SN. I pointed out that this formula – and its ideological consequences for the portrayal of polit-fiction – in many ways adhered to the requirements of linear serial TV and its governing LOP principle by providing understandable and uncontroversial content with an easy-to-follow protagonist-antagonist structure and a correspondingly unambiguous moral universe.

Comparing SN's narrative development to the historical evolution of Volodymyr Zelensky's campaign, I discussed how the series evolved from a relatively conventional and seemingly unassuming polit-comedy (in season 1) to a visibly biased commentary on the

2019 Ukrainian presidential race (in season 3), airing only days before the election itself and containing easily recognizable satirical renderings of the historical candidates.

It is not for this study to discern the extent or legitimacy of Zelensky's campaign activities. However, given the series' simplified moral structure and anti-democratic impetus (among other things), it is no wonder that many commentators have taken issue with its instrumentalization as a potential tool in the president's political campaign. In doing so, the series' production entities ran the risk of – and arguably attempted to – transferring SN's simplified populist subtones to real-life Ukrainian politics.

Simplifications and fictionalisations are legitimate and, indeed, essential processes for political communication. However, they are a dangerous instrument that must be wielded with some caution. In SN's diegesis, the simplified, binary assumptions guided by categorical morality – that, in the real world, would rightly be considered populist – are valid. In the series' diegesis, there *is* a unified people. Likewise, there *are* only allies and enemies, and the fictional Ukrainian polity *is* divided along a binary moral spectrum. Instead of calling the fictional character Holoborodko a populist – he does, after all, adhere to the functional logic of his world – it is much safer to consider SN a populist narrative. Historical Ukraine – like all historical societies – however, is structured much less stringently. A confusion of the simplified narrative lines of popular (and populist) polit-fiction with real-life politics, thus, remains a risky undertaking.

History has forced Volodymyr Zelensky into a tragic encore of his role as 'the people's president'. At the time of writing this chapter, his bravery and skill in leading the defence of Ukraine against the Russian invasion remain uncontested. In a highly mediated war, this defence includes a skilled reframing of many of the simplified binary tropes of 'us vs them' and masterful use of old and new media that harken back to Zelensky's campaign practices. The media appearances of the president and his allies have undoubtedly contributed much to uniting the Ukrainian population and a substantial part of the international community behind the cause of the country's defence.

Historically, populist narratives arguably fare well in times of war with their lamentable but perhaps unavoidable tendency towards binary simplification. One would, given the circumstances, commit an injustice if one were to blame Zelensky for using what means he has at his disposal to ensure his country's safety. However, while his current efforts are doubtlessly admirable, it remains for history to decide – and future studies to discern – how to draw the balance of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency.

