

From a Pilfered Nail to a Stolen Tank

The Role of a Media Event in the Consolidation of the Ukrainian Political Nation

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A Ukrainian of Azerbaijani origin was awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine,¹ Pope Francis accused Buryats and Chechens of cruelty,² Tajiks mobilised to the Russian Army shot their commander,³ Turkey evacuated Ukrainian Ahiska Turks⁴: from the first days of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, national (ethnic) minorities began to regularly appear in both Russian and Ukrainian news. During the war so far, actors across information spaces and those making propaganda and counter-propaganda have been actively exploiting discourses about ethnic minorities. This can influence the assessment of current events as well as both the self-perception of these ethnic groups and how they are perceived externally, forming new stereotypes, new memories, and new senses of belonging.

One of the most remarkable stories from the first days of the war was the news that some Romani people from the village of Liubymivka stole a Russian tank. On the evening of 26 February 2022, Aliona Ostistova shared an emotional post on Facebook with a link to a screenshot from a private conversation. The next day, a news report by the TV channel 1+1 made this information public. The report also clarified that the

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- 1 Baku Press Klub, "Ukrainets azerbaydzhanskogo proiskhozhdeniya poluchil zvaniye geroya strany" ("A Ukrainian of Azerbaijani Descent Has Been Honoured as a Hero of the Country"), 17 May 2022, https://pressklub.az/news_ru/world_ru/ukrainecz-azerbajdzhanskogo-proishozhdeniya-poluchil-zvanie-geroya-strany/?lang=ru [accessed: 15.04.2023].
 - 2 TASS Russian News Agency, "Russian ambassador protests Pope Francis' allegation", 29 November 2022, <https://tass.com/society/1543159> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
 - 3 Timur Mura, "Rasstrel na poligone v Solote – k chemu privela nasilstvennaya mobilizatsiya tadjykov" ("Shooting at the Soloti Shooting Range – What the Forced Mobilisation of Tajiks Has Led to"), *Viral News*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.caviral.com/rasstrel-na-poligone-v-soloti-k-chemu-privela-nasilnaya-mobilizatsiya-tadjykov/> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
 - 4 Daily Sabah, "Türkiye evacuates 88 more Ahiska Turks from Ukraine's Kherson", 20 November 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-evacuates-88-more-ahiska-turks-from-ukraines-kherson> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

incident took place in Liubymivka, a village in the Kakhovka district of the Kherson Oblast, which is indeed home to a large community of Krymskja (Crimean) Roma, one of the sub-ethnic groups of Romani people who are distinguished by their traditional way of life.⁵ On the same day, the popular Telegram channel “Huyovyi Kherson”⁶ published the following message:

The information about the tank that the Tsygane [see footnote for translation]⁷ supposedly hijacked in Liubymivka turned out not to be entirely true. [They] didn't hijack the tank but dismantled it to the point of inoperability. And not just the Tsygane, but also their coalition with the locals. Nearby was also a military truck, and they definitely hijacked that⁸.

On 27 February, the Facebook page of the journalist Serhiy Tsyhipa also posted a text about and video of a Ukrainian farmer stealing a Russian BMP (an infantry fighting vehicle).⁹ The two stories blended into one. The same day, information about the tank's theft was published on the news aggregator Meta, was shared by the TV channel 24 and other news sources, and circulated on social media around the world. The

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- 5 Janush Panchenko, *Osnovnyye statisticheskiye pokazateli tsygan Khersonskoy oblasti 2016–2017 gg. (opyt etnosotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya)* (*Basic Statistical Indicators of Kherson Oblast Citizens in 2016–2017 (Experience of Ethnosociological Research)*), Dnepr: Serednyak, 2017; Janush Panchenko and Mykola Homanyuk, “Servur'a and Krym'a (Crimean Roma) as Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine”, *Etnografija Polska (Polish Ethnography)* 67/1–2, 2023, 155–173; and Vadim Toropov, *Crimean Roma: Language and Folklore*, Ivanovo: Unona Publishing House, 2009.
 - 6 This translates to “Fucking Kherson”.
 - 7 A note on translating the terminology: although the Ukrainian terms ‘Tsyhani’/‘Tsyhany’ (Циган/Цигани) or the Russian ‘Tsygan’/‘Tsygane’ (Цыган/Цыгане) can be translated as ‘Gypsy’/‘Gypsies’ when the words come up in interviews or media sources, we decided to transliterate the words to avoid the connotations that the English terms may carry. The majority of the Roma in Eastern and Southern Ukraine do not consider the ethnonym ‘Tsyhany’ incorrect or offensive, and often use it as an endoethnonym along with the self-designation ‘Roma’. For more, see: Natalia Zinevych, “Etnonimy romy, tsyhany v suchasnomu ukraïnskomy naukovomu dyskursi” (“Roma and Tsygan Ethnonyms in Contemporary Ukrainian Scientific Discourse”), in: K. Kozhanov, M. Oslon, and D. W. Halwachs (eds.), *Romani historija, chib taj kultura*, Graz: GLM, 2017, 484–500.
 - 8 Telegram channel “Huyovyi Kherson”, 27 February 2022, <https://t.me/hueviykherson/8532> [accessed: 29.07.2024]
 - 9 Sergiy Tsyhipa (Facebook profile), “putinski Z-yolopy na Khersonshchyni...” (“Putin's Z-morons in the Kherson Oblast...”), Facebook video, 0:07, 27 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/tsyhipa/posts/pfbidoQyuzuPyveNZ2LPonPGZYxShnhCdpNjSjr66AcBo3mYtzjdDDxfvHpPv9mXjKpSrl> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

news went viral and even appeared on the X (formerly Twitter) page of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda.¹⁰

Later, news pieces appeared that continued this story: Romani people stole another Russian tank, seized a missile, and took an antiaircraft gun, among other things.¹¹ Statements also appeared that on online commercial platforms, such as OLX or eBay for instance,¹² one could find ads for military equipment and spare parts for sale. The stolen tank became the subject of patriotic songs,¹³ original graphics,¹⁴ animations,¹⁵ merchandise,¹⁶ humorous programmes, and plenty of jokes on social media – it even appeared on the Facebook page of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.¹⁷ “Tsyhany stole a tank” became an internet meme.

As a result, an image of a tractor with wheels from the Roma flag towing a tank also became the background image on the landing page of the main Romani in-

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- 10 Andrzej Duda (@AndrzejDuda), “W <http://24tv.ua> podają...” (“In <http://24tv.ua> was written...”) X post, 27 February 2022, <https://twitter.com/andrzejduda/status/1497899381697257475> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 11 Khabibullin 13 Khabybullyn (Facebook page), “Tsyhany stole a missile from the Russians...”), Facebook video, 0:12, 01 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=281925007383089> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 12 Bartosz Witoszka, “Ukraińcy sprzedają przejęte rosyjskie czołgi na eBay? Wyjaśniamy” (“Are Ukrainians Selling Seized Russian Tanks on eBay? We Explain”), *Komputer Świat* (*Computer World*), 03 March 2022, <https://www.komputerswiat.pl/aktualnosci/bezpieczenstwo/ukraincy-sprzedaja-przejete-rosyjskie-czolgi-na-ebay-wyjasniamy/exrwzfh> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 13 Oleksandr Ponomariov, “UKRAÏNA PEREMOZHE’ – O. Ponomariov, M. Khoma, T. Topolya, E. Koshovyi, Yu. Tkach, P. Chornyi, YouTube video, 19 April 2022, 3:34, screenshot from 01:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRuiEv3JRDQ> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 14 Kar, “ROMA+tank.ru=UKRAINE”, 04 March 2023, http://soc.ks.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PostCard_Print.pdf [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 15 Tanya Kartashova, “Yak tsyhany tank kraly’: chomu humor pid chas viyiny dopomahae pidtrymuvaty ZSU” (“How Tsyhany Stole a Tank’: Why Humour in Times of War Helps Support the Armed Forces”), *mind*, 23 March 2022, <https://mind.ua/openmind/20247288-yak-cigani-tank-krali-chomu-gumor-pid-chas-vijni-dopomagae-pidtrimuvati-zsu> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 16 ProstoMaiki (JustShirts), “Katalog tovariv” (“Catalogue of Goods”), 05 March 2023, <http://prostomayki.com.ua/ua/tunika-s-ukrainskoy-simvolikoy/311626-tunika-tsyhane-ukrali-tank.html> [accessed: 29.07.2024].
- 17 Artem Bohomaz, “ZSU pokazaly novyi reyting nayisylnishykh armiyi svitu pislya rosiyskoho vtornnennya: ‘Mozhut staty reshymy, yaksho vkradut Putina’” (“The Ukrainian Armed Forces Revealed a New Ranking of the World’s Strongest Armies after the Russian Invasion: ‘They Can Be First if They Steal Putin’”), *Znanyi.UA* (*Know.UA*), 08 March 2022, <https://war.znayu.ua/420822-zsu-pokazali-noviy-reyting-naysilnishih-armiyi-svitu-pislya-rosiyskogo-vtorgnennya-mozhut-stati-pershimi-yakshcho-vkradut-putina> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

formation and analytical agency, RomaUA (Figure 24). The graphic combines the Ukrainian flag with the Roma flag.¹⁸

Figure 24: Image from RomaUA, main page



RomaUA, official website landing page, <https://romaua.org.ua/> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

It is almost impossible to verify this event now. To do so, we would need to conduct an investigation, follow the traces, and look for witnesses, which, first, is impossible under the conditions of the temporary occupation of the site of the incident and, second, may endanger any people who may have been involved in some way. In addition, to us, it is not important whether the theft occurred or not, but rather the media (or communication) event around it, by which we mean an event in the information space.

Naturally, Romani people around the world actively discussed the tank theft. We conducted a series of in-depth interviews to find out the influence of this media event on the Roma in Ukraine and in other post-Soviet countries. So far, 17 Romani participants have taken part in our study. They belong to the Servurja, Vluxurja, Krymskja (Crimean) Roma, Kishinivare Roma, and Ruska Roma sub-ethnic Roma groups. Most of the respondents are citizens of Ukraine, two are from Kazakhstan, and one is from the Russian Federation. We conducted the first part of the study from May to September 2022 with the support of the Documenting Ukraine programme initiated by the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

Undoubtedly, the tank theft was the most notable event of Russia's war in Ukraine, in which the Roma were involved. The event elicited a strong emotional reaction not only among the Roma of Ukraine but also among those abroad:

18 See the landing page of: RomaUA, official website, <https://romaua.org.ua/> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Yes, of course, at once I felt admiration (F, 55, Ukraine).

Yes. I wish they had stolen Putin, really. I'm proud of it (F, 24, Ukraine).

It was very exciting when I heard about it. I said: it's impossible! How can you steal a tank? Especially from under the noses of Russian soldiers. It should be impossible. But see, they managed. Those people are wonderful (M, 62, Ukraine).

You know, I wanted this, and always thought: "If only our Tsygane would take some technical equipment from the Russian military". And exactly this happened. I just got so excited for our [people] (M, 33, Kazakhstan).

They are just so great; I was just so happy to hear this. I really respect them for this, after all, very brave act (M, 34, Kazakhstan).

Most respondents believe in the reality of this incident. The event, which at the beginning was completely 'bare', became 'overgrown' with details, even in the dialogues with our participants:

They hijacked this tank... and dragged it to the scrap yard. They wanted to hand it over. And the boys there were like, "guys are you crazy!?" (M, 38, Ukraine).

They say it's all real. All of it's real. They approached these soldiers kind of slyly, proposed to drink with them, got them drunk, and they fell asleep once drunk, and they stole the tank from them (M, 62, Ukraine).

This happened precisely in Lyubymovka. The Lyubymovka Tsygane are there. I also heard that this happened to the Lyubymovka Tsygane (M, 62, Ukraine).

I saw facts; a video on Instagram, where the Tsygane had a tank. I think it was in a yard or somewhere behind the yard. I think they pulled it home with a tractor; that's how I remember it (M, 33, Kazakhstan).

The First Western TV channel even recorded an interview with Borys Oglou, a Crimean Romani, who testified that his relatives from the Kherson Oblast were involved in the theft of the tank: "One of the Roma, an older man, he knew how to

refill it, how to start it... they refilled it, drove it home, and over the next two days took it apart for scrap metal. There were about 45 tons".¹⁹

According to the participants, the plausibility of this story is related to both the self-stereotypes and cultural characteristics of the Roma (according to scholarly sources, these are a tendency to adventure and risk, a sense of humour, links to a nomadic way of life, the anonymity of the protagonists, and a lower ethical threshold as compared to non-Romani people) as well as the specific economic activities of some of the Roma (e.g., collecting scrap metal is a popular way of earning money)²⁰:

At the time, I believed it 100%. It's just like that, like I saw it myself. I didn't think that it was all a lie. Knowing our people, why not believe it? And I mean the words "knowing our people" not in a bad but a good way (M, 22, Ukraine).

I heard that they apparently took the tank apart and stole the APC [armoured personnel carrier]. It's kind of seen humorously. It's funny, really funny. But really, what was it? It's not like they stole from Tsyhany, they stole from the gadjo [non-Romani people], from the Russians. On the one hand, they could have really fucked us up with those tanks (M, 31, Ukraine).

[Interviewer:] Did you hear that in Liubymivka Tsyhany stole a tank from the Russians?

I heard it. Right away. Just as they took it, they said it.

Well, what do you think? Is it true or not?

Roma, God, they can do anything (F, 75, Ukraine).

It's not courage, probably; it's more like dumbness, stupidity. To climb into that tank, who only knows who's sitting there, they could go ahead and shoot you (M, 31, Ukraine).

I'm just saying, right away, it was all just really, really a lot. But later, that's what our guy said, this, what's his name... who broadcasts every evening? [Refers to Head of the Mykolaiv Oblast Administration and blogger Vitaliy Kim]. He said, "Don't steal anything anymore, don't thief, don't throw it in

19 PERSHYI ZAKHIDNYI (FIRST WESTERN), "Realna istoriya: yak romy vkraly tank" ("True story: How Roma stole a tank"), YouTube video, 25 May 2022, 3:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwzMy7XwO8E> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

20 Marianna Smirnova-Seslavinskaya and Georgiy Tsvetkov, *Antropologiya sotsiokulturnogo razvitiya tsyganskogo naseleniya Rossii (Anthropological and Cultural Development of the Tsygan Population of Russia)*, Moscow: Federalnyy institut razvitiya obrazovaniya, 2011; and Oleksandr Voitenko and Mykhailo Tyahlyi, *Romy: mify i fakty. Navchalno-metodichnyi posibnyk dlya vchytelya z protydiv romofobii (Roma: Myths and Facts, Teachers' Guide to Combating Roma-Phobia)*, Kyiv: Ukrainskyi tsentr vyvchennia istorii Holokostu, 2018.

the cellar, because it will even be punishable". Because it could blow up, something else could happen to it. And no one will accept it as [scrap] metal (F, 24, Ukraine).

These assessments of the event can be used to determine the self-stereotypes, cultural characteristics, and values of the Roma participants. That is, they show how they see themselves through the prism of the tank theft.

They also explained the theft through the fact that the Russian military was notorious for its negligence and ineptitude, especially at the beginning of the war, which itself brought this theft on them. This explanation fits perfectly with the general tone of the news coverage of the war in the first weeks of its course:

When you heard about the tank theft, what general emotions did it evoke in you?

Well, that the Russians are clowns. You can even steal a tank from them. That there isn't any professionalism. Even their army is weak. That from them [the tank] was snatched away like candy from a baby. And it's, somehow, like very patriotic. In a Tsygan way (M, 33, Kazakhstan).

Do you think it's a true story, that this tank was stolen?

There's a proverb: "If an axe lies under a bench, why not use it?" (M, 62, Ukraine).

Meanwhile, Russian media accused Ukrainians of fabricating the stolen tank story. They even claimed that the Russian Roma were involved in spreading this fake. But even this did not shake confidence in the reality of the famous abduction:

Do you know why? On the one hand, there are pluses. [The Russians] can justify themselves this way. Well, let's say they are sure that they will gain everything from this. And, kind of, so that there will be no accusations against Tsyhany, they want to exonerate the Tsyhany; they will tell this to the Tsyhany later (M, 31, Ukraine).

In terms of the information, well, some shared it like humour, some shared it and called it a fake, and after all, people are scared; people don't want that the Tsygane somehow get involved in all this (M, 34, Kazakhstan).

A Russian-language website also attempted to promote the news that a similar event occurred in Romania, where Romanian Roma stole an American tank during

NATO exercises.²¹ Nonetheless, this information did not generate any organic interest from audiences.

There were, however, also alternative interpretations or doubts about the objectivity of the tank theft story:

On the contrary, let both Ukrainians and Russians know that the Tsygan [man] doesn't want any harm, but he makes clear that we are against war, that we are capable... If you take [our] people into consideration, that means you understand that we Tsygane are also, as it were... that we have our own Tsygan weapons (M, 60, Ukraine).

Well, it's hard to talk about objectivity. I saw a video where that guy recorded himself once again and said, "Here, I did this", and behind him, there's a tank. I forget how he said it. So, many said to him that "You weren't there, that you didn't do anything, didn't steal anything", and he decided to show that here, definitely, here am I, and here's the tank (M, 34, Kazakhstan).

Assessing the aftermath of the event, respondents noted both positive and negative moments. Among the positives is the fact that, because of the spread of information about this theft, there have been changes in the images of the Roma, and that this is a small but sincere contribution of the Ukrainian Roma to the defence of Ukraine:

I don't know to which extent this is true, to which not, but some people with whom I communicate tell me, "This is all bullshit; this is just Tsygane promoting themselves", and something else like this. "Yeah, no. They're like that. The kind of people who could do anything". They stole it, turned it in as scrap metal and there you go; they got rich. Some out there say that, yeah, "Well they stole and turned it in as scrap metal and split the money, and that's all". And I think, "God, this is so nice". Sure, Tsygane aren't fighting, yes, but at least they did something, entered history, yes. This has entered history; that the Tsygane stole a tank (F, 24, Ukraine).

This is a very positive moment here. How can you steal an entire tank from under the nose of an enemy – an enemy. Not everyone can manage this. This is very positive, very. They basically deprived the combatants of the Russian Federation of one combat unit. They deprived them of one combat unit (M, 62, Ukraine).

21 Vitaliy Mann, "Na ucheniyakh NATO v Rumynii tsygane ugnali tank i sdali ego v metal-lolom" ("At a NATO Exercise in Romania, Roma Stole a Tank and Scrapped It"), *Panorama: satiricheskoe izdanie (Panorama: A Satirical Publication)*, 24 June 2022, <https://panorama.pu.b/news/na-uceniah-nato-v-rumynii> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

The stolen tank became a Romani news story that went far beyond the borders of Ukraine. The news especially gained popularity in Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova. Such coverage gave the impression that this was a global news story:

The whole world already knows about it” (M, 31, Ukraine).

In Kakhovka, everyone was buzzing about it. Everyone. Even the President of France once mentioned it in some interview (F, 28, Ukraine).

Well, you saw how it spread everywhere and on television [...]. Even the president of Poland, Andrzej Duda, made a post on his page about the Roma (M, 37, Ukraine).

This story was discussed in different countries, and many posts related to it appeared on social media. For example, there was a popular altered image about the ‘reconstruction’ of a monument dedicated to the Second World War in Estonia, which was called in the comments “the monument to the Tsyhany Tractor Division”²² (Figure 25).

The internet meme “Tsyhany stole a tank” also brought attention to the history of the Roma. For example, some Roma discovered the legendary story (likely a work of fiction) of the scout ‘Yashka the Tsyhan’, who single-handedly captured a German tank during World War II.²³

22 Arkady Babchenko (@StarshinaZapasa), “Govoryat, proklyatyte estobanderovtsy v Narve...” (“They say that the damned Esto-Banderites in Narva...”), X post, 07 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/StarshinaZapasa/status/1512098167529091074/photo/1> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

23 Chtoby pomnili (So they remember), “Kak tsygan nemetskiyi tank ugnal, kak 3 tanka KV-1 razbili nemetskuyu tankovuyu rotu” (“How a gypsy stole a German tank, how 3 Kv-1 tanks defeated a German tank company”), YouTube video, 15 February 2019, 10:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iselUBiHSn8> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Figure 25: Image from Arkadyi Babchenko, “Govoryat, proklyatyte estobanderovtsy v Narve...” (“They say that the damned Esto-Banderites in Narva...”)



Arkadyi Babchenko (@StarshinaZapasa), “Govoryat, proklyatyte estobanderovtsy v Narve...” (“They say that the damned Esto-Banderites in Narva...”), X post, 07 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/StarshinaZapasa/status/1512098167529091074/photo/1> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Parallels with the Second World War also arose during the interviews. Here is a fragment of an interview that speaks to this as well as to the idea that the Russian Army could be perceived as the army of Nazi Germany:

Have you heard that when the war first started, they said that the Roma stole a Russian tank?
I heard that the Roma stole a German tank – well done, well done.

Not German, but Russian.
Ah, Russian! I’m telling you, all kinds of things are mixing in my head (F, 63, Ukraine).

Thus, the tank became the point, perhaps at first accidentally and later deliberately, from which a new external and internal Roma discourse began to form, in which the Roma were integrated into the Ukrainian political nation, and the Ukrainian people themselves were consolidated on a civic rather than ethnic level:

Tsyhany are the kind of people who live on their own. Well, that’s the biggest thing; that it’s funny in this regard, with nationality [or ethnic origin]. They [Ukrainians] even write, “Even the Tsyhany are fucking with you [Russians]”. Tsyhany, they’re always somewhere on the sidelines, and then they emerged and started stealing tanks (M, 31, Ukraine).

There is a kind of pride there, like with the gadjo there: “Oh, there, our people snatched a tank”. “Oh, well done” – gadjo are like that, basically. There is a kind of pride here, to be honest. So basically, well, the Tsyhany, it’s good, on the contrary, I think, so others won’t say, “Oh, the Tsyhany were sitting around; they didn’t do anything”. Oh no, fuck, the Tsyhany snatched a fucking tank (M, 31, Ukraine).

And what’s interesting, this is probably the first time in my life that I’ve seen the whole nation [of Ukraine] admire the Tsygane like this. To have them say that our Tsygane are simply stunning. Just stunning. “We’re very proud of them, and we’re all unified now. We’re all united. We’re all one nation”. I’m surprised. I’m just generally surprised by this kind of unity and this kind of attitude towards Tsygane as a whole (M, 34, Kazakhstan).

The integration of the Roma into the Ukrainian political nation, even at the level of the media, seemed like a fantasy before the war. The Roma were one of the ethnic groups against which the highest level of xenophobia has long been recorded in Ukraine. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, shortly before the war (November 2021), Ukrainian attitudes towards the Roma scored 5.34 points on the Emory Bogardus social distance scale.²⁴ In September 2022, this figure decreased to 5.08 (-0.25) and the Roma moved up two places in the Bogardus scale, overtaking Russians living in Russia (6.39) and Belarusians living in Belarus (5.34) (as opposed to Russians or Belarusians living in Ukraine or holding Ukrainian citizenship, or Ukrainians of Russian or Belarusian origin), who previously were among those closest to Ukrainian groups.²⁵ This means that although a broad majority of Ukrainian citizens continue to maintain a significant sociocultural distance towards the Roma (they do not want to see them as colleagues, neighbours, or close friends or relatives), the vast majority of Ukrainians have already overcome the political barrier between them. That is, they do not see cohabitating in the same country as the Roma as an issue, despite them previously being one of the main groups for this problem.

The theft of the tank by the Roma is an important event that gave momentum to a more positive perception of Roma. And this was immediately felt in the Romani community:

24 The Bogardus scale is a 7-point scale measuring social distance. On it, 1 equates to accepting one as a member of one’s family and 7 to not allowing members of this group inside one’s country. Accordingly, the higher the mean value, the stronger the social distance.

25 Volodymyr Paniotto, *Mizhetnichni uperedzhennya v Ukraini (Interethnic Prejudice in Ukraine)*, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, report, September 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1150&page=1> [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Have you heard of any situations where the Roma were discriminated against during the war?

During the war? I don't hear it right now. The fact that the Roma stole a tank had a great influence on this. This gave some idea to all the non-Roma, to other people; that the Roma also do these kinds of things, and after that all the non-Roma instead said, "well done to Tsygane, you're also on our side" – and so, it had a great impact towards us, in a positive way (M, 37, Ukraine).

The media event of the tank theft has become a notable phenomenon, both in the lives of the Roma community in Ukraine and for the entire Ukrainian population. Stories about the participation of representatives of different ethnic groups in the war are not uncommon in the information space of Ukraine. For example, attention is drawn to the Korean origin of Vitaliy Kim, and pieces are published about servicemembers representing national minorities in the Armed Forces – including those of Azerbaijani, Crimean Tatar, and Ahiska Turk origin – who have been participating in the Russo–Ukrainian War since 2014. Other ethnic groups, such as Georgians, Belarusians, and Chechens, among others, are also present in the information space. Yet, they appear more often as volunteers in the Ukrainian Army, who are thus fighting not only for Ukraine but also for the futures of their own countries. However, the Roma have become the ethnic group that has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate the consolidation of the Ukrainian political nation after the full-scale Russian invasion on a broad media level. The tank theft was the starting point. Subsequently, the Roma have been appearing in the information space of Ukraine as defenders of the country – as military and police officers with specific names and concrete accomplishments. The stolen tank is a kind of modern retelling of the popular legend about the nail stolen by a Tsyhan man from the Roman legionnaires, which they were going to use to nail the head of Christ²⁶:

Tsygane and stealing was always... it was always news. If they said "Armenians stole", or someone else stole, this wouldn't be interesting. But "Tsygane stole"... You know, it's like the silver nail that [the Tsygane] stole from Jesus Christ. Here you have Tsygane and stealing – that's all. This was always interesting for people. If they said that some other nationality stole something, this news would survive for two or three days. But if the Tsygane stole, this will be... well, even the war will end, but they'll speak about this (M, 34, Ukraine).

It is difficult to disagree that this story will live on for a long time. It is worth adding that we are aware that the way to overcome negative stereotypes cannot be easy and fast, especially if they are so deeply rooted as with the Roma. And one media event

26 Nadezhda Demeter, Nikolay Bessonov, and Valdemar Kutenkov, *Istoria tsygan: Novyi vzgliad (The History of Tsygani: A New View)*, Voronezh: IPF Voronezh, 2000.

will not remove all stereotypes and discriminatory practices towards the Roma; it may even strengthen them in some ways. But we hope that this vivid case will contribute to the creation of a new basis for rethinking the sense of belonging of the Ukrainian Roma to Ukrainian society and the Ukrainian nation, and vice versa, because Ukrainians of different ethnic origins will consider the Roma as an integral part of a multiethnic Ukraine.

War and displacement created a new dynamic in Ukrainian society and intensified its citizens' reflections on their attitudes towards minority groups living on its territory. Some of these groups have become more visible. They are positioned and recognised as those who belong to the Ukrainian political nation.

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