

The Power of Maps and Geographic Imagery in Digital Communication

Narrating Russia's War in Ukraine

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Since 24 February 2022, internet users have been bombarded daily by thousands of war-related images, videos, and news coming from Ukraine via different digital media that are not only displaying all the complexity of the war's developments on the battlefield, but also narrating the wartime reality of many Ukrainians. For more than eight months (at the time of writing this text), we have seen the borders of Ukraine violated. Every day, the frontline shifts with the heavy marks of Russian aggression. Explosions mapped on the Ukrainian geo-body spill out into thousands of stories of heroism, resistance, displacement, and violence. Each of these stories has echoes in the world's hybrid media space, touching people far beyond Ukraine and making them 'live' the war through the screens of their devices. The current Russo-Ukrainian War can be undoubtedly called the most documented war in history because of the "digital tsunami of media content" that is generated on a daily basis.¹ This war is also extremely visual; it is experienced and perceived through the prism of the multiplicity of visual data posted and recirculated online. What, then, is the role of visuals in Russia's current invasion of Ukraine? What information and messages do they convey? In this essay, I focus on maps and their multiple interpretations in digital media. I aim at unpacking the main functions of these visuals. To do so, I created a dataset of more than 300 maps and iconographic images collected from international, Ukrainian, and Russian digital media (e.g., official media, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and VKontakte).

Contemporary technologies determine not only how wars are conducted but also how they are communicated. Russia's war in Ukraine is also an information war, which goes beyond the battlefield and individual experiences and is broadcasted through old and new media and processed (live) by millions. The war has become

1 Andrew Hoskins and Pavel Shchelin, "The War Feed: Digital War in Plain Sight", *American Behavioral Scientist* 67/3, 2023, 449–463, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221144848>, here 452.

content that flows across every platform simultaneously.² Using this opportunity to speak to the world and to be heard, Ukrainians document the invasion in detail, share their war experiences, write war diaries, and show the destruction caused by Russian aggression. They broadcast their fights from the frontlines and express their grief. In this shared space of war documentation, the brutal reality unfolds with multiple personal interpretations of wartime experiences. Indeed, this “first TikTok war”³ or “first social media war”⁴ has many innovative means of informing and narrating the experiences that reshape the understanding of who Ukrainians are, what they fight for, and what Ukraine is.

At the same time, social media platforms amplify mis- and disinformation about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, propagating alternative narratives and fake news.⁵ The flows of disinformation and anti-Ukrainian propaganda circulate Russia’s vision of the geopolitical future of Ukraine, denying its agency and right to independence. Masking its true motives under the slogans of ‘liberation’ and ‘denazification’, Russia aims to resurrect the former borders of the USSR, spread its aggressive imperialism beyond its own borders, and erase Ukraine from the world map. These massive disinformation campaigns make the crucial challenges of the digital media landscape visible, exposing what Johannes Buchheim and Gilade Abirihe call “a growing epistemic divide running through liberal democracies: a situation in which substantial portions of the population believe in alternative realities on a broad range of factual issues”.⁶ Exploiting the existing tensions in different regions of the world, these alternative realities and fake news create divisions and draw new mental borders in the attempt to weaken the collective response of Ukraine’s allies.

The above-mentioned complexity of the unfolding war narratives in contemporary digital spaces explains the urgent need to study the mechanisms of communicating and propagating the discourses of war through visual means. It is worth

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- 2 Kyle Chayka, “Watching the World’s ‘First TikTok War’”, *The New Yorker*, 03 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
 - 3 Thomas L. Friedman, “We Have Never Been Here Before”, *The New York Times*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
 - 4 Dan Ciuriak, “Social Media Warfare Is Being Invented in Ukraine”, *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, 15 June 2022, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/social-media-warfare-is-being-invented-in-ukraine/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
 - 5 Paul Kari and agencies, “Russian disinformation surged on social media after invasion of Ukraine, Meta reports”, *The Guardian*, 07 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/07/propaganda-social-media-surge-invasion-ukraine-meta-reports> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
 - 6 Johannes Buchheim and Abirihe Gilad, “War in Ukraine, Fake News, and the Digital Epistemic Divide”, *Verfassungsblog (Constitution Blog)*, 12 May 2022, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-war-in-ukraine-fake-news-and-the-digital-epistemic-divide/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

noting that the visual discourse of the Russo–Ukrainian War has not yet been considered in detail, although there exists some research on the use of cartoons, memes, and other types of visuals in the period between 2014 and 2022.⁷ The developments of visual participatory culture during Russia’s current full-scale invasion and the role of this culture as a means of resistance and resilience garnered significant media attention,⁸ but the role of maps and geographic imagery specifically has not yet been studied by journalists or academics. For this reason, this essay studies these visuals and their symbolic meanings and functions in media communication. Throughout the text, I discuss examples from Ukrainian and Russian digital popular culture as well as maps used by state media.

What Do Maps Tell Us about the Russo–Ukrainian War?

Borders, reflecting the manifold consequences of the war, become spaces of violence. For some, they symbolise the demarcation of newly acquired territories, and for others, they become symbols of resistance and freedom. Indeed, maps play a crucial role in the visual representation of the war’s developments, but they not only map boundaries and separation lines. They can also intensify people’s sense of nationhood, identity, and belonging, as well as serve as popular mobilisers. From the constructivist perspective, maps represent powerful symbols that can visually not only materialise the territorial dimensions of a state, but also symbolise the nation.

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- 7 Bradley E. Wiggins, “Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict”, *International Journal of Communication* 10, 2016, 451–485; Myloka Makhortykh and Juan Manuel González Aguilar, “Memory, politics and emotions: internet memes and protests in Venezuela and Ukraine”, *Continuum* 34/3, 2020, 342–362; Mykola Makhortykh and Maryna Sydorova, “Social media and visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine”, *Media, War & Conflict* 10/3, 2017, 359–381, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217702539>; Anastasia Denisova, “Russian Resistance and Propaganda through Memes in the 2010s”, in: Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*, London: Routledge, 2019, 154–185; and Valentyna Ushchyna, “From conflict of discourses to military conflict: multimodality of identity construction in Russo–Ukrainian war discourse”, *East European Journal of Psycholinguistics* 9/2, 2022, 130–143, <https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2022.9.2.ush>.
- 8 Daryna Antoniuk, “Making sense of Ukrainian war memes: From watermelons to Saint Javelin”, *Kyiv Independent*, 29 November 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/making-sense-of-ukrainian-memes-from-watermelons-to-saint-javelin> [accessed: 31.07.2024]; Ilan Manor, “Do memes matter for the Russia–Ukraine War?”, *Medium*, 13 July 2022, <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/do-memes-matter-for-the-russia-ukraine-war-c86887b5b7f5> [accessed: 31.07.2024]; and Aja Romano, “Reckoning with the war meme in wartime: Is it ever okay to meme at a war?”, *Vox*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2022/2/25/22950655/ukrainian-invasion-memes-political-cartoons-controversy> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

According to Benedict Anderson, nations as ‘imagined communities’ are tightly connected to the spatial shape of their territory. In modern times, maps can be used as one of the pillars of building and maintaining nation-states and as skilful tools for visually associating the nation with its territory on an international scale.⁹ Currently, in the age of digital media, the power of the map as a representational tool is not limited to the national community itself: maps and iconographic images that are repeatedly reproduced in media can be used as means of meaning-making and as tools of transferring national narratives to wider international audiences.

After the full-scale invasion, the geographical contours of Ukraine, previously unknown to most of the global population, suddenly monopolised the headlines of leading world media and flooded social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Prior to the invasion, Ukraine had been an Eastern European country that was not ‘European’ enough to be integrated into the larger European family, yet also not so distant and unfamiliar to be interesting – a country that always resided in the shadow of its ‘older brother’ Russia. Yet, following 24 February 2022, it became the centre of global media attention. In this media environment, maps not only transfer factual information but also act as symbols. Alexander J. Kent and Peter Vujakovic suggest that maps offer “selective representations that preserve and promote some features while suppressing or obliterating others”.¹⁰ Maps vividly mark digital epistemic divides, consolidating different visions of the Russian aggression. While official military maps¹¹ track daily changes on the battlefield during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of other maps are uploaded, shared, and circulated by internet users and the press through social and traditional media. Some maps are attempts to accurately depict the situation in Ukraine and provide additional information about the country, while others justify the Russian ‘liberation’ of its ‘historical Russian lands’.

From the beginning of the full-scale aggression, world media used the maps not only to update about the war but also to place the country in a larger global context,

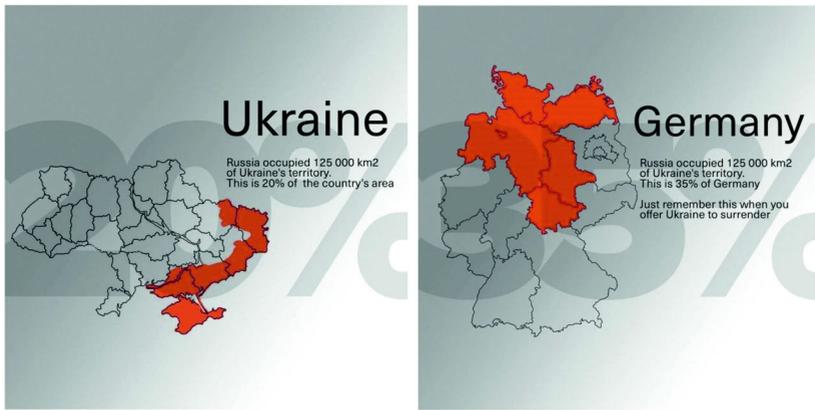
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- 9 Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, 174–179.
- 10 Alexander J. Kent and Peter Vujakovic, “Maps and identity”, in: Alexander J. Kent and Peter Vujakovic (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography*, New York: Routledge, 2018, 413–426, here 415.
- 11 See, for example, the maps of the Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom, the interactive maps of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by the Institute of Study of War, and the maps of the war in Ukraine from DeepStateMAP, which have been published/updated daily and re-circulated by Ukrainian and international media: Ministry of Defence  (@DefenceHQ), <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ>, X page, [accessed: 31.07.2024]; Institute for the Study of War, “Interactive Map: Russian’s Invasion of Ukraine”, <https://www.understandingwar.org/interactive-map-russias-invasion-ukraine> [accessed: 31.07.2024]; and DeepStateMAP, <https://deepstatemap.live/en#6/47.828/25.005> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

to show why Ukraine is important to Europe, and to tell the story of an invasion that reverberates all over the world.¹² Unlike military maps that often focus only on Ukrainian territory and the development of the war,¹³ these maps try to teach international audiences to think and talk about Ukraine as an integral part of the European or even global landscape.¹⁴ They show not only the geography and size of Ukraine but also provide information about its history, politics, and languages. In this case, maps are used not as a neutral representation of the territory, but as social constructs¹⁵ that convey important messages, integrating the Ukrainian geobody into the mental map of the European continent and making it a part of a larger imaginary. They are also important in giving Ukraine agency and subjectivity and in showing the international community that EU political actors should not ignore this large European state.

Ukrainian government organisations and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have also released several map projects intended to make global audiences see Russian aggression not only as a Ukrainian war, but also as a war against Europe and global democratic values. These maps manifested the cruelty of Russia and the heroism of Ukrainian people, were largely shared on social media (e.g., X and Facebook), and provoked vivid discussions among internet users. For example, in July 2022, the independent analytical platform *VoxUkraine* published a map of occupied Ukrainian territory together with a series of maps of France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and other EU countries that illustrate the scale of the invasion (e.g., Figure 2). They use orange to mark territories occupied by Russian troops and to transfer these contours onto the maps of other countries. These maps reflect the general tendencies of military maps of the Russian invasion by using red or orange – colours associated with violence – to mark occupied territories and blue to show de-occupation.

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- 12 Sara Chodosh et al., “How to Think About Ukraine, in Maps and Charts”, *The New York Times*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/02/25/opinion/russia-ukraine-invasion-maps.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
- 13 This statement can be illustrated by the military map of the Russian invasion by the UK Ministry of Defence, which is often used by Ukrainian social media information channels: Ministry of Defence  (@DefenceHQ), “The illegal and unprovoked invasion...”, X post, 15 May 2022, <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1525767592316747776> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
- 14 The map used in the article of Sara Chodosh et al., “How to Think About Ukraine, in Maps and Charts” (*The New York Times*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/02/25/opinion/russia-ukraine-invasion-maps.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024]), for example, places the geographical countours of Ukraine on a map of Europe to illustrate the spatial dimensions of the country.
- 15 Jeremy W. Crampton, “Maps as social constructions: power, communication and visualization”, *Progress in Human Geography* 25/2, 2001, 235–252, here 240.

Figure 2: Image from VoxUkraine Eng, “Russia occupied 125 000 km² of Ukraine’s territory...”



VoxUkraineEng, Facebook post, 01 June 2022, <https://m.facebook.com/voxukraine/posts/3185241458401847/> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

The Ministry of Defence of Ukraine posted another series of maps on X in July 2022 to visualise the length of the frontline of the Russo–Ukrainian War. By placing the frontline in the middle of Europe, on the US–Mexican border, or in Japan, the authors wanted to demonstrate the scale of the resistance of Ukrainians, who, with a frontline of more than 2,000 kilometres, stand “between Freedom and tyranny”.¹⁶ The Ministry of Defence claimed that now more than a million Ukrainians hold the line, “protecting Europe from the Russian horde”¹⁷ (Figure 3). The German magazine *Katapult*, for example, also used similar geographical visualisations of Ukrainian resistance (Figure 4).

These maps make the Ukrainian experience more recognisable, bringing it closer to a European or Western geographical landscape. This spatial recontextualisation of wartime experiences of the occupation and resistance, and their placement into a geographical space familiar to media users from the referenced parts of the world, could lead them to think about further threats of the Russian invasion and its scale. These maps not only reshape and refine the image of Ukraine but also change the perception of the ‘Other’, the aggressor, by making the consequences of the war more visible.

16 Defense of Ukraine (@DefenceU), “The front line of more than 2,000 km...”, X post, 13 July 2022, <https://twitter.com/defenceu/status/1547324237895110657> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

17 Ibid.

Figure 3: . Image from Defense of Ukraine, “The front line of more than 2,000 km...”



Defense of Ukraine (@DefenceU), “The front line of more than 2,000 km...”, X post, 13 July 2022, <https://twitter.com/defenceu/status/1547324237895110657> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

Figure 4: Image from KATAPULT Magazin, “Davon werden an 1.105 Kilometern aktive...”



KATAPULT Magazin (@Katapultmagazin), “Davon werden an 1.105 Kilometern aktive...”, X post, 14 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/Katapultmagazin/status/1536691735514038275> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

Another politics of representation through maps and mapping exists in the Russian media space. Official Russian media used different mechanisms of territorial representation to justify the Russian invasion after 2014. The intentional use of mapmaking started years before the beginning of the full-scale invasion, when spatial relationships between Russia and Ukraine were redefined and the narrative of the nonexistence of Ukraine was instrumentalised to normalise the occupation of Crimea. The official media used maps as tools of imperialism; they explained the ‘correct’ visions of the historical development of Ukraine and deconstructed its territorial integrity. For example, Russian official news media repeatedly circulated a map of Ukraine where different parts of the country were marked by different colours. This map indicates the dates and historical personalities who “offered” these territories to Ukraine.¹⁸ It was used to propagate the narrative that Ukraine is an artificial state composed of disparate territories that historically belonged to Russia and were only incorporated into Ukraine through the actions of Russian tsars or Soviet government representatives.¹⁹

18 Roman Golovanov, “Ukraina состоit iz podarkov russkikh tsarey i sovetskikh gensekov” (“Ukraine Consists of the Gifts from Russian Tsars and Soviet General Secretaries”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Komsomol Truth), 18 May 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26680.3/3702227> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

19 For more examples, see: Natalya Pupkova, “Territorialnyy pazl Dlya Ukrainy on slozhil-sya blagodarya ‘okkupantam’ – rossiyskim tsaryam i bolshevikam” (“The Territorial Puz-

The same narrative was reproduced on Russian social media. Pro-Kremlin groups on VKontakte and Facebook, as well as individual users, posted and shared in comments maps that misrepresented Ukrainian historical development.²⁰

zle: For Ukraine, It Was Formed Thanks to the 'Occupiers' – the Russian Tsars and Bolsheviks"), *Krymskaya Pravda (Crimean Truth)*, 10 July 2014, <https://c-pravda.ru/news/2014-07-10/territorialnyj-pazl> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Yuriy Baranchik, "Ukraina: byt ili ne byt?" ("Ukraine: To Be or Not to Be?"), *regnum*, 08 January 2017, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2224728.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Aleksandr Gorokhov, "A ne 'dekommunizirovat' li nam territoriyu Ukrainy?" ("Should We 'Decommunise' the Territory of Ukraine?"), *Novoross*, 2019, <https://www.novoross.info/politiks/55184-a-ne-dekommunizirovat-li-nam-territoriyu-ukrainy-mnenie.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Kirill Somov, "Ukraina na tret sostoit iz rossijskikh 'podarkov'" ("Ukraine is One-Third Comprised of Russian 'Gifts'"), *Federalcity.ru*, 19 March 2021, <https://federalcity.ru/10283-ukraina-na-tret-sostoit-iz-rossijskikh-podarkov-jeks-pert.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; *Sevastopol.su*, "V GD predlozhili vernut' Rossii pol-Ukrainy posle slov ob 'okkupatsii'" ("In the State Duma, They Proposed to Return Half of Ukraine to Russia after Talk about 'Occupation'"), 08 January 2018, <https://sevastopol.su/news/v-gd-predlozhili-vernut-rossii-pol-ukrainy-posle-slov-ob-okkupacii> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Maria Lisitsyna, "Rossiya 24 pokazala kartu s 'territoriyami-podarkami' Ukraine" ("Russia 24 Showed a Map with 'Gift Territories' to Ukraine"), *RBC*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/02/2022/6216280c9a794717da17a93d> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Alexander Samsonov, "Pohoronit antiruskiy proyekt 'Ukraina'" ("Bury the Anti-Russian Project 'Ukraine'"), *Voennoe Obozrenie (Military Review)*, 2022, <https://topwar.ru/192827-pohoronit-antiruskij-proekt-ukraina.html> [accessed: 23.03.2023]; Elena Bylkina, "VGTRK pokazal kartu Ukrainy s territoriyami, podarennymi tsaryami i gensekami" ("VGTRK Showed a Map of Ukraine with Territories Gifted by Tsars and Secretaries-General"), *Pravda (Truth)*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/society/1685414-ukraina/> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Daria Dmitrova, "Telekanal 'Rossiya 24' sostavil kartu podarennikh Ukraine territoriy" ("TV Channel 'Russia 24' Compiled a Map of Territories Gifted to Ukraine"), *Gazeta.ru (Newspaper.ru)*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2022/02/23/17334445.shtml?updated> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

20 For example, such publications and comments can be found in the pro-Kremlin VKontakte groups like Chto Tam U Khryuklov? (ChTUKh) (What's Up with the Oinkers?) or Zapadenets News. See: Chto Tam U Khryuklov? (ChTUKh) (What's Up with the Oinkers?), VKontakte page, https://vk.com/chto_tam_u [accessed: 23.07.2024]; and Zapadenets News, VKontakte page, <https://vk.com/zapadeneznews> [accessed: 14.03.2024]. A series of publications, *Ukraine does not exist*, are also available on VKontakte through the page Stalinskii Polk – Sovinformbyuro (Stalin's Regiment – the Soviet Information Bureau): Stalinskii Polk – Sovinformbyuro (Stalin's Regiment – the Soviet Information Bureau), VKontakte page, <https://vk.com/sovinformbyuro> [accessed: 23.07.2024]. Moreover, the image *Gifts for Ukraine from Russian Tsars* has more than four million likes on the patriotic platform *Prezidentpress.ru*, which incited a wide spread of this visual: *Prezidentpress.ru*, <https://prezidentpress.ru/news/2816-ukraina-podarki-russkih-carey.html> [accessed: 14.03.2024]. Individual users also post similar maps to their personal pages. See, for example: Alexander Ulyanov, "esli USSR vykhodit iz sostava..." ("if the Ukrainian SSR leaves..."), VKontakte post, 01 April 2022, https://vk.com/wall249749579_8993 [accessed: 14.03.2024].

Other maps reconstructed the geographical contours of Russia, joining to it the annexed territories of the Crimean Peninsula and representing the ‘new’ space of the Russian Federation. The marking of Crimea as Ukrainian or Russian on international maps and the use of typical geographical representations of the two states (with or without Crimean Peninsula) remained a sensitive topic for more than eight years and became one of the emblems of the epistemic divide. While Ukrainian government and official media recirculated the slogan ‘Crimea is Ukraine’²¹ and desperately fought for the visual recognition of its geographical integrity, Russian officials claimed to have the right to mark Crimea as a part of their territory. The ambiguous mapping and the clashing media narratives provoked a series of scandals that reflected one or another spatial vision of the Russo–Ukrainian War that started in 2014.²² Similar strategies of the integration of Ukrainian regions into Russian topography appeared after the fraudulent referendums on occupied Ukrainian territories in September 2022.²³ Even though the ‘new’ map of Russia has not yet been officially issued, it is broadly circulated in news media to mark political decisions and confirm the ‘successes’ of the Russian troops in the ‘special military operation’. Again in this case, mapping does not serve to represent internationally recognised borders, but to reaffirm the political decisions and imperial ambitions of Russian officials. Thus, maps reproducing Russian aggression function as propaganda, a construction that recreates space following the demands and ambitions of people in power.

These documentary or pseudo-documentary forms of content often overlap in new media with artistic and symbolic representations of the two nation-states that create new visual narratives of the war or metaphorically reproduce existing narratives. Rebeca Pop notes that as the war develops and the narrative of the aggression

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- 21 This slogan was first introduced in 2015 and used by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy and the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in numerous information campaigns. For more, see: Zhytomyrska oblasna derzhavna administratsiia (Zhytomyr Oblast State Administration), “V Ukraini startovala komunikatsiina kampaniia ‘Krym – tse Ukraina’” (“Communication Campaign ‘Crimea is Ukraine’ Launched in Ukraine”), 01 March 2016, <https://oda.zht.gov.ua/news/v-ukrayini-startovala-komunikatsijna-k/> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; and *Radio Svoboda (Radio Freedom)*, “MZS Ukrainy bude monitoryty, yak poznachaiut Krym na kartakh svitu” (“Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry Will Monitor How Crimea Is Marked on World Maps”), 02 December 2015, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/27402854.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 22 *The Moscow Times*, “Crimean Map Scandals: Choice Between Offending Russia or Ukraine”, 29 July 2016, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/07/29/map-scandals-topography-aft-er-annexations-a54796> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 23 For example, Russian official media outlets published a new map of Russia which incorporates the occupied Ukrainian territories: Polina Devyatova, “Novaya karta Rossii. Infografika” (“New Map of Russia: Infographics”), *Argumenty i Fakty (Arguments and Facts)*, 28 September 2022, https://aif.ru/politics/russia/novaya_karta_rossii_infografika [accessed: 14.12.2022].

becomes more complex, new maps appear to tell a multifaceted story of the invasion.²⁴ Maps themselves not only represent places physically but become conceptual containers filled with new meanings, both for those who live inside and outside the borders of Ukraine. These geographic representations of Ukraine and Russia are intimately integrated into the visual mediascape of the two countries, constructing opposite visions of war experiences.

Geographical Imagery and a New Spatial Reality

In today's digital media, geographical outlines of Ukraine and Russia are highly recurring symbols. Hundreds of images circulate on social media, combined with other symbolic representations of the countries, such as the colours of their flags (yellow and blue for Ukraine and red, white, and blue for Russia), national emblems (the trident for Ukraine and the two-headed eagle for Russia), or other symbols (e.g., sunflowers for Ukraine and a bear for Russia). These emblematic images not only stand for the respective geographical spaces but, in some cases, might also act as symbolic representations of the countries' populations. Similarly, they convey messages that have deep conceptual, cultural, and epistemological meanings for their nations, helping to support and construct national narratives. In the case of Ukraine, visual narratives widely shared by internet users on social media through groups and private profiles incorporate iconographic geographic images to tell the story of Ukrainian resistance and fighting. Meanwhile, for the Russian regime, the recurring visual narratives serve to affirm Russian imperialism.

From the very first days of the Russian aggression, images inspired by the geographic contours of Ukraine, including artistic and popular ones, flooded Ukrainian media spaces. They served to tell the story of the invasion and the violation of the borders of Ukraine, or were used to express and share collective emotions. Simple visuals conveyed complex information and helped not only to relate to the grief and sorrow of Ukrainians but also had the potential to join people around a common goal and form a narrative of victory and heroism. Often, these images function as metaphors that convey the fight against the invader and portray the nation heroically. In these cases, the geographical representations of Ukraine are combined with images of Ukrainian soldiers. The representations of Ukrainian combatants can be incorporated into the geographical contours of the country or they can stand between the Ukrainian geo-body and the aggression of the enemy. For instance, the artwork of Oleksiy Bondarenko depicts a Ukrainian soldier "holding the sky" in order

24 Rebeca Pop, "Similar Stories, Different Maps – A Visual Narrative of the War in Ukraine", *Everviz*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.everviz.com/blog/similar-stories-different-maps-a-visual-narrative-of-the-war-in-ukraine/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

to protect Ukrainian lands (see Figure 5). Often, the cartographic imagery is combined with the visualisation of ordinary Ukrainian people and Ukrainian national symbols to reinforce a sense of unity and national belonging. This can be illustrated by the work of Alyona Zhuk, where the map of Ukraine is composed of a multitude of faces of ordinary people of different ages and professions united by the common goal to defeat the enemy (see Figure 6). Some works personify the Ukrainian geobody to illustrate the active participation of different parts of Ukrainian society in the country's war efforts.²⁵ These images often carry slogans such as “no to war”, “stand with Ukraine”, or “I am Ukraine/Ukrainian”, as well as the word “freedom”. The images convey the existential position of many Ukrainians, for whom this war turned into a battle for the survival of their nation. Lastly, the images' messages are easily recognisable for those seeing them beyond the borders of Ukraine, suggesting that they mean to mobilise people from all over the world.

Carrying important national symbols, these images tend to express significant messages for Ukrainians and intensify their feelings of national belonging. The clearest example of this are maps that combine words with similar spellings but opposing meanings: “Бійся – бийся” (“Biisia – byisia”, “Be afraid – fight”) or “Війна – Вільна” (“Viina – Vilna”, “War – Freedom”).²⁶ These conflicting concepts placed in a single iconographic image aim to reflect the contradictory reality of many Ukrainians and help to mobilise the population in their fight for freedom. Other common phrases include, “Home”, “I love Ukraine”, “Ukraine – my home”, and “Ukraine my zone of comfort”. These express affection and love towards the homeland and also tend to reinforce a sense of belonging.

The unity of the nation is particularly important in the visualisation of Ukrainian resistance and is also expressed by the combination of the spatial contours of the country and the common phrase “Як ти?” (“Yak ty?”, “How are you?”). In the digital space of social media, there are several anonymous works in this style. Another common motif incorporates real stories of resistance or common difficulties that

25 For example, an illustration by Nikita Titov posted on Facebook depicts the collective body of Ukraine as a courageous and fearless creature ready to fight the aggressor. This illustration was also used by official outlets to showcase how Ukrainian artists visualise the resistance and resilience of Ukrainians in the face of war. For more details, see: Iryna Petrenko, “Kakym byl 2022 god: retrpspektiva v illustratsyyah Grekhova, Maydukova, Titova, Drachkovskoy” (“How was the year 2022?: retrospective in illustrations by Grekhov, Maidukov, Titov, Drachkovskaya”), *Liga.net*, 28 December 2022, <https://life.liga.net/ru/rozvagy/cards/kakim-by-l-2022-god-retrospektiva-v-illyustratsiyah-grekova-maydukova-titova-drachkovskoy> [accessed: 14.07.2024].

26 For example, the artwork of Natali Hall combines the geographic contours of Ukraine, the colours of the national flag and the slogan “Війна – Вільна”, insisting on the importance of freedom for the Ukrainian nation: Natali Hall, “Ukraine will always be free!”, 30 March 2022, <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/aGB4Kk> [accessed: 14.07.2024].

Ukrainians have experienced daily during the last 10 months (e.g., power cuts or massive drone attacks). For example, the story of the unbreakable kitchen cupboard in one of the destroyed houses in the village of Borodianka inspired a widely shared image of Ukraine.²⁷ These maps of Ukraine, combined with simple symbols or slogans of unbreakable resistance, aim to convey the collective feelings of Ukrainians and to mobilise the nation, providing hope for the future.

Figure 5: Image from Oleksiy Bondarenko, “Hold the Sky”

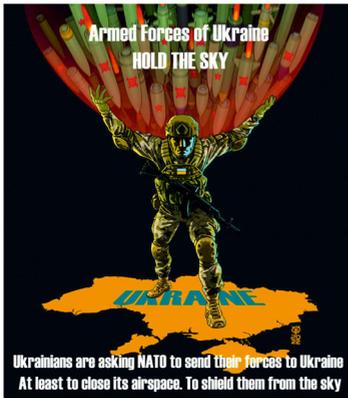


Image from Oleksiy Bondarenko, “Oleksiy Bondarenko – Donate To Artist”, ArtDopomoga, <https://artdopomoga.com/oleksiy-bondarenko/> [accessed: 14.12.2022].

Figure 6: Image from Alyona Zhuk, “Razom peremozhemo...” (“We’ll do it together...”)



Image from Alyona Zhuk (@zhuk_alyna), “Razom peremozhemo...” (“We’ll do it together...”), Instagram post, 20 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CckoEhBN6Pq/> [accessed: 14.12.2022].

Moreover, the mapmaking also helps to express emotions, negative and positive, and to share them with other members of the community. The images present the pain of loss and the traumatic experience of the violation of Ukraine’s borders through red, the colour of blood and one associated with aggression, as well as symbols like scars, bandages, or adhesive plasters that indicate collective trauma. For example, an illustration by Anna Foralberg visualises the war trauma of Ukrainians through the combination of the individual body of a human being and the collective

27 Kyiv24.news, “‘Ty yak? Trymayus!’ Kukhonna shafa, yaka vtsilila pislia znyshchennia budynku u Brodyantsi, stala symvolom vytrymky Ukrainy” (“‘How Are You? Holding On!’: The Kitchen Cabinet That Survived the Destruction of a House in Borodianka Has Become a Symbol of Ukraine’s Resilience”), 09 April 2022, <https://kyiv.media/news/ty-yak-trymayus-kukhonna-shafa-yaka-vczilila-pislya-znyshchennya-budynku-u-borodyanczi-stala-symvolom-vytrymky-ukrainy> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

body of the country, reflecting the deep trauma inflicted by the conflict and symbolising how the pain of war permeates both personal and collective identities (see Figure 7). Artem Gusev's artwork depicts Ukraine's war trauma using the image of the bleeding collective body of Ukraine while highlighting the healing effect of popular mobilisation and consolidation in the face of danger (see Figure 8). Positive emotions such as love, affection, and belonging to the homeland are expressed with floral motives or depictions such as a heart incorporated into the contours of Ukraine.²⁸

These representations of the geo-body are directly associated with the physical body of Ukrainians, as they openly stand for the suffering of many people or the intensification of a sense of belonging and an affirmation of national unity and sovereignty.

Figure 7: Image from Anna Foralberg, "V dome mnoho sveta..." ("There's a lot of light in the house...")



Anna Foralberg (@foralberg_art), "V dome mnoho sveta..." ("There's a lot of light in the house..."), Instagram post, 27 March 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbnoYNQNff/> [accessed: 14.12.2022].

Figure 8: Image from Artem Gusev, "9 udariv po Poltavshchyni..." ("9 strikes on Poltava Oblast")



Artem Gusev (@gusev_art), "9 udariv po Poltavshchyni..." ("9 strikes on Poltava Oblast"), Instagram post, 25 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccw9XnjNCw/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

28 For example, an image posted on Instagram in March 2022 created by Oleksandra Olishavska portrays a young girl who is holding tightly to the collective body of Ukraine. A painted heart at the centre of Ukraine's body symbolises the deep emotional connection between the land and its people. Later, this artwork was shared by the official page of Ukraine on Facebook: Ukraine.ua, "Hold you tight and will never give you to anybody. Our one and only Ukraine", Facebook post, 24 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=336827915142831&set=a.237166015109022> [accessed: 28.02.2023].

Despite the variety of the messages and ideas expressed through the maps, the spatial integrity of Ukraine is present in all the analysed images, with Crimea and the Donbas included within its borders. The wholeness and unity of the nation and its territory are the most important parameters in the spatial expressions of Ukrainian artists.

In Russian digital discourse on social media, geographical imagery about Ukraine reproduces the main narratives of Russian state propaganda. Ukraine is always shown as an object: it is not given agency, and its territory is violated, manipulated, or used as a tool.²⁹ In many visual representations, Russia is presented as a saviour, an older brother ready to help, while the US and NATO are depicted as enemies who want to invade Ukraine or take advantage of it.³⁰ The images portray relationships of superiority and inferiority through the representation of Ukraine as weak, helpless, and always threatened by external dangers. They also often depict Ukrainian geography as a stage or arena for the 'political games' of superpowers and lack any of the affective components present in Ukrainian digital discourse.

This visual discourse reaffirms Russian imperialism and strives to incorporate new territories into the collective visions of Russia. Since 2014, Ukraine has been depicted without Crimea in Russian official media and on social media, and after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, new practices of ordering reality appeared, especially in social networks like VKontakte and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels. Paralleling official propaganda, 'new' or 'improved' maps of Russia and Ukraine are created and widely circulated on social media.³¹ They map the newly occupied territories in the colours of the Russian flag. Interestingly, some of these maps move be-

29 For example, a cartoon created by Aleksandr Troitsky depicts Ukraine as a bullet, labelled NATO, loaded into a weapon. This visual metaphor not only deprives Ukraine of its agency but also propagates the narrative that Ukraine is a tool used by NATO to advance its geopolitical interests against the Russian Federation. See: Zlobodnevnye Karikatury, "Oдна iz oboimy – Aleksandr Troitsky" ("One from the clip – Aleksandr Troitsky"), Telegram post, 10 October 2022, <https://t.me/caricaturaru/1097> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

30 For example, an image depicting the US and NATO as monstrous creatures devouring Ukraine while a human hand in the colours of the Russian flag (blue, red, and white) reaches out to protect or save the country is often used on Russian social media to visually frame the Russo-Ukrainian War. See: Nonamenews, "Otobrazhenye realnoi situatsyy na Ukraine" ("Reflection of the real situation in Ukraine"), Pikabu.ru post, 14 March 2022, https://pikabu.ru/story/otobrazhenie_realnoy_situatsii_ukraine_8924195 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

31 For instance, the telegram channel "Povernutye na Z voyne" ("Crazy about Z war") that has more than seven hundred thousand subscribers posted an image of the 'correct' map of Ukraine, where the occupied Ukrainian territories were marked with the colours of the Russian flag, openly indicating their belonging to the Russian Federation. See: Povernutye na Z voyne (Crazy about Z war), "Pravilnaya karta" ("The correct map"), Telegram post, 30 September 2022, <https://t.me/voenacher/30076> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

yond Ukraine and spread to the European continent.³² These maps reflect Russian *pobedobesie*³³ and slogans that propagandists used since the beginning of the full-scale invasion,³⁴ revealing Russian imperial aspirations. These images show that in the spatial imaginary of the artists and those who share the images, Russian borders are not firm and can be modified according to political needs.

Conclusions

Maps are powerful tools for re- and deconstructing, communicating, and sharing spatial imagery and collective identities. This article revealed that the Russian aggression against Ukraine provoked the emergence of (counter-) mapping practices that propagate different visions of geographical spaces and serve to support or co-construct the existing narratives of war. In the case of the Russian regime, the modified maps of Russia that include the annexed Ukrainian territories are used to justify aggression against a sovereign state and the realisation of the special military operation. In the case of Ukraine and its Western allies, the visualisation of the spatial integrity of Ukrainian territory represents the support and reaffirmation of Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. Ukrainian popular cultural productions inspired by the geographic contours of the state considered in this text represent an attempt to assert the collective identity and spatial wholeness of the nation-state. They are also combined with other images and symbols of war and aim to consolidate and share collective experiences and emotions triggered by the war. Meanwhile, in the Russian digital social media space, maps reaffirm a Russian vision of the historical developments of Ukraine and its role in today's political arena and strive to propagate Russia's imperial narratives.

32 For example, the image of a map of the Russian-backed self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics that incorporated European countries using red contours was widely shared on Russian social media. This map visually extended the influence of these territories across Europe, symbolically asserting Russian power and geopolitical dominance. See: Tyurbab, "Strategicheskaya_Karta_Genshtaba_Rossii" ("Strategic map of the Russian General Staff"), Pikabu.ru post, 25 February 2022, https://pikabu.ru/story/strategicheskaya_karta_genshtaba_rossii_8867983 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

33 *Pobedobesie* is a pejorative term used to describe the Victory Cult in the Russian Federation.

34 For instance, the maps are combined with slogans that support continuing the 'special military operation', such as "Go till La Manche" or "Go till Berlin". See: Olesia Bida, "Pryishli zvilnyaty vid natsikiv. Shcho na rosiyskomu telebachenni govoriat pro viynu z Ukrayinoyu" ("They Came to Liberate from the Nazis: What Russian Television Says about the War with Ukraine"), *Hromadske*, 2022, <https://hromadske.ua/posts/priishli-zvilnyati-vid-nacikiv-sho-na-rosiyskomu-telebachenni-govoryat-pro-vijnu-z-ukrayinoyu> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

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