

# Ukraine in Popular Culture: Editorial for a Special Issue

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ABSTRACT	<p>This special issue explores how popular culture shapes local, regional, national, and global perceptions of Ukraine amid the ongoing war with Russia. Integrating literatures on popular geopolitics, vernacular and aesthetic IR, and Ukraine studies, we delve into the complexities of the knowledge-making about Ukraine that takes place at the interstices of the everyday, the aesthetic, and the international. Given the mutually implicated relationship between popular culture and world politics, the popular representations of the Ukrainian subject both mirror and shape prevailing narratives, practices, identities, and power relations. But we also inquire into how popular culture serves as a space for political resistance and activism by those existing at the margins of world politics. By centering the Ukrainian perspective in all its multiplicity, the special issue helps to challenge the Western- and Russian-centric prism through which Ukraine has been approached in IR and related disciplines.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

In 2021, season two of *Emily in Paris* came out on the Netflix streaming platform. We do not expect that you have watched it, but if you did, you would have noticed a minor character in the show: Emily, the protagonist, at some point meets a fellow French class student named Petra “*from Kyiv*” (thanks for spelling it correctly, Netflix). The only character from Eastern Europe in the show by our account turns out to be (spoiler alert) a petty thief. This characterization did not go unnoticed and even prompted a statement from the Ukrainian culture minister Oleksandr Tkachenko and lots of indignant comments from Ukrainian women. Arguably, this was a minor gripe compared to the avalanche of bad press Kazakhstan had to endure in the wake of Borat’s release (SAUNDERS 2008; SCHMID 2010; ALIKHANOVA 2018), but, in hindsight, it added a significant touch to the often very ignorant collective Western portrayal of Ukraine. Whether we like it or not, these popular culture vignettes will serve as a source of knowledge for many international audiences. What would an average American person associate with Ukraine? The Ukrainian mafia (*Dexter*, 2012), the section of Brooklyn informally referred to as Little Odessa (*Little Odessa*, 1994), mail-order brides (*Love Me*, 2014), and the Russian language (Petra at least speaks Ukrainian instead of Russian, unlike in most Western portrayals of Ukrainians) – all in all, it is an Orientalized and imperial view of the country that is shaped by its representations in series and movies, which are often full of crude stereotypes. And now this average American citizen will go to the polls to decide, among other things, whether the new president will continue to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia’s invasion. And that is if they even know that Ukraine exists, – for example, *Friends* (1994) fans might still think that Minsk is in Russia, and not in Belarus, as was stated in season 1 episode 10 of the show.

It is not only popular culture that shapes the understanding of Ukraine. The proliferation of social media provides a “near-real-time” experience of the war for the “digitally advanced” (DER DERIAN 2009). Most of the authors and editors of this special issue saw the full-scale invasion in 2022 unfold in real time, often learning about missile strikes and troop movements before they were reported by mainstream news media and using social media to reach out to their friends and family. The immediacy and urgency of social media have obviously impacted the way the war

is perceived and theorized. Thirty years ago, media scholars spoke about a CNN effect; in 2022 multiple articles tracked emotions, misinformation, and policy decisions on Twitter and Telegram. A much closer entanglement of the publics, pundits, citizen journalists, trolls, and politicians has created a unique and by now, to an extent, destroyed ecosystem, where a “diffused war” has been marked by the availability and connectivity of the digital (HOSKINS – O’LOUGHLIN 2010). Moreover, the digital sphere, popular culture, and aesthetics have also become new battlefields where cultural artefacts and even memes have gained massive importance.

In this special issue, we turn to the scholarship on popular geopolitics, vernacular, and aesthetic approaches to international relations (IR) and Ukraine studies to analyze how global publics make sense of Ukraine in and through popular culture, with the term “popular culture” denoting a form of mass-produced entertainment available to large numbers of people (STREET 1997). Popular geopolitics argues that forms of popular culture are deeply geopolitical, which enables the exploration of popular culture as a platform for knowledge production and identity construction in times of war (DITTMER – BOS 2019; DITTMER – DODDS 2008; GRAYSON 2018). In turn, vernacular and everyday approaches to IR provide leverage for understanding how discourses about security, violence, and geopolitics circulate in everyday life and are (re)produced by ordinary non-state actors (BJÖRKDAHL – HALL – SVENSSON 2019; BUBANDT 2005; VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS – STEVENS 2015). Approaching the vernacular of the war with an aesthetic sensibility further encourages attention to the role of sensation, subjectivity, and affect in wartime imaginaries (BAKER 2020; BLEIKER 2001; SHEPHERD – MOORE 2010). Finally, spotlighting the Ukrainian perspective and experience provides a much-needed counterbalance to the tendency of IR to theorize world politics through predominantly Western- and Russian-centric lenses (HENDL ET AL. 2023). One of the side effects of this tendency has been the establishment of false moral and political equivalences between Russian and Ukrainian perspectives on the war, which perpetuate a distorted narrative that blurs the lines between the perpetrator and the victim. Attending to an understudied context with the help of non-traditional IR approaches represents a unique theoretical and empirical contribution to both the study of popular culture in global politics and the study of Ukraine in a global context.

Exploring the realm of popular culture proves invaluable for gaining a deeper insight into the diverse local experiences, narratives, and practices amid the ongoing war. This investigation is particularly illuminating as it acknowledges the role played by non-elite actors in shaping social perceptions of Russia's war. Beyond the purview of traditional elites, the interpretations, contestations, and (re)enactments of the war unfold in both online and offline spaces, providing a multilayered view of war-making. The issue places a key focus on emphasizing the importance of understanding micro-practices that contribute to the formation of knowledge about the war in local settings. It becomes evident that the war extends beyond the battlefield, permeating everyday life. In so doing, the special issue helps us to rethink the question of the perspectives, space, and practices that matter in the broader landscape of international politics, highlighting popular culture as a site for the performance of identities and (in)securities in everyday life (ROWLEY – WELDES 2012). Looking into the realm of the ordinary, the everyday, the quotidian, and the vernacular enables the analysis of how local discourses may challenge, transform, or reinforce the dominant elite discourses surrounding the war at national and global levels. This also requires reconsidering the evolving nature of audiences as active participants in the global politics of popular culture, with a stronger focus on audience interpretation, emotions, and affective responses (CRILLEY 2021).

This special issue therefore looks at the “synthetic experiences” that have shaped and will be shaping the knowledge about Ukraine, both within and outside of it. As Daniel and Musgrave (2017) point out, popular culture has been used in IR teaching, but much less so in theorizing, with popular culture being relegated to the status of a useful tool despite its potential for *reinforcing identities & beliefs* (SEE ALSO SCHMID 2023). We argue that this special issue goes beyond this. The authors here engage with a multitude of IR topics and theoretical frameworks. From taking stock of the IR & popular culture literature (Saunders) to looking at practices of crafting (Greet) to examining video games (Lassin) or poetry (Kazanova), which some reviewers would dismiss out of hand as non-IR topics, this special issue centers Ukraine as a theory-building empirical case, though this status is often reserved for Western countries (BUZAN 2020). Given IR's heritage as a discipline focused on imperial relations, “race development” (VITALIS 2018), and its own myths (LEIRA – DE CARVALHO 2018), this issue works further to

dispel the “superpower bias” that has led to “recreating the realist world of great power dominance” around the world simply because generations of IR academics do not engage with other approaches (DUNNE – KURKI – SMITH 2021) or even read beyond the canon (HENDERSON 2017; OWENS ET AL. 2022).

It is undeniably disheartening, from a human and an international relations theory perspective, to acknowledge that the outbreak of a war is often a catalyst for heightened scholarly and public interest to the given region (KOVAL ET AL. 2022). The fact that scholarly attention tends to peak only when countries are plunged into the chaos of armed conflicts reflects a failure of the humanity in the attention economy (HARSIN 2015). It is indeed a somber reflection on our priorities that academic interest in international relations often surges only in the wake of devastating conflicts rather than in the pursuit of knowledge (VORBRUGG – BLUWSTEIN 2022), with a number of scholars using the war as a means of advancement of their careers instead of considering the ethical implications of their research (BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; HENDL ET AL. 2023) and its often extractivist nature (MORRIS 2024).

In light of the unfolding destructive war the significance of studying Ukraine as a full-fledged agent in global politics must be foregrounded. Within the realm of IR and its subdisciplines – peace and conflict studies, security and military studies, and foreign policy studies – the established hierarchies of knowledge production have resulted in a long-standing erasure of the Ukrainian subject in the study of global affairs (BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; KURYLO 2023; MAKARYCHEV – NIZHNIKAU 2023). Part and parcel of the prevalent decontextualized (yet far from unbiased) analyses of the war has been a skewed perception of Ukraine derived from Western- and Russian-centric epistemic frames. Recognizing Ukraine as an active agent of its decolonial resistance is essential for becoming receptive to its agency and distinct subjectivity, which are too often denied to it by the Western IR scholarship (MÄLKSOO 2023). The wide range of localized studies comprising this special issue presents an explicit response to the scarcity of empirical knowledge about Ukraine and the side-lining of Ukrainian and East European scholars in IR (O’SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). To rectify this, the special issue’s articles contribute to the recent efforts to “provincialize IR” by situating Ukraine’s complex history and identities within the global context (MÄLKSOO 2021).

What this thus far underscores is the intrinsically political nature of popular culture and, by extension, of the study of popular culture within the discipline of IR itself. Popular cultural artefacts establish lifeworlds and immersive experiences through which audiences design political maps of global politics. Within these constructed realities, audiences co-act in constructing narratives about proximate and distant societies that reflect and sometimes challenge prevailing norms, identities, and power structures. In essence, popular culture is a site in which situated actors are engaged in a perpetual battle over the prerogative to give meaning to global political events and processes. One implication of this is that every representation of Ukraine encapsulates a manifestation of power, wielding the potential to either marginalize or empower the nation. But there are also opportunities for Rancièrian acts of dissensus - moments of disruption and rupture in the established order driven by resistance from below. Politics and popular culture should therefore be seen as co-constituted.

The articles in this special issue operate under the premise that all knowledge is inherently socially conditioned and entwined with specific contexts and power relations. Thus, it has been imperative to engage thoroughly with Ukraine's complex history marked by imperial subjugation and the struggle for emancipation from Russian colonial violence (OKSAMYTNA 2023). By addressing these complex dynamics, the special issue endeavors to foster a more nuanced understanding of the intertwining of popular culture, Ukraine, and world politics. By explicitly centering the perspective of Ukraine, it harbors a broader ambition to contribute to the ongoing efforts to decolonize knowledge production within both IR and East European studies. In a wider sense, moreover, the special issue contributes to the endeavors within IR scholarship to reconsider the separation and hierarchy between academic and "popular" knowledges, challenging the assumption that academics always "know better" with regard to how wars and global politics work than the general public (CIUTĂ 2016). We thereby assert the call for greater reflexivity on the processes involved in the generation of knowledge on popular culture and global politics in a way that is sensitive to the inequalities and injustices embedded within the discipline and the world at large.

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In his contribution, *Robert Saunders* offers a bird's-eye view on the feedback loop of popular culture wherein the region's (non-)state actors adjust their images or make them mimic other images for consumption abroad, and specifically looks at how the "everyday foreign policy assemblage" (GAUFMAN 2021) works across borders, particularly in cases where nationalism is packaged into consumable products for foreign consumption in the Anglophone West. As Saunders argues, actors such as the State Meme Bureau (*Державне Бюро Мемів*) and Armed Memes of Ukraine (*Збройні Мемі України*) have successfully framed Russia's full-scale invasion in global popular-political cultural terms, and the resulting memes reach audiences much faster and more effectively than messages from pundits and journalists. Drawing from the years of his scholarship on popular geopolitics, Saunders provides the readers with a convincing account of the ways in which different publics and global audiences are intertwined through popular culture(s).

Zooming in on the specific issues of ontological security in popular culture, *Anastasiia Poberezhna*, *Olga Burlyuk*, and *Anja van Heelsum* highlight how certain narratives not only serve to consolidate Ukrainian identity in times of war, but also serve a deeper psychological purpose for the Ukrainian population. The authors explore political myths that contributed to Ukrainian subjectivity becoming securitized in at least three ways: by mythologizing the superiority of the Ukrainian military, which gives people hope for victory and comfort in the face of victims and losses; by mythologizing acts of bravery of ordinary citizens, thereby encouraging unity and keeping the common aim in mind; and by mythologizing the connection between Ukrainians and the land as an unbreakable link between the people and their territory.

In line with a vernacular approach to geopolitics, *Jacob Lassin* explores the development of non-elite geopolitical knowledge, focusing on how the online video game community has responded to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The article examines how players form their geopolitical understandings through game-playing, identifying noticeable differences between Anglophone and Ukrainophone content. The study sheds light on how diverse online communities use video games to interpret global

issues, which impacts offline perceptions of history and current events. It also raises questions about the implications of using the video game *EUIV* as a means of making sense of Ukraine's history and politics for the broader engagement of ordinary people with geopolitical events.

*Alina Mozolevska* moves the analysis to the visual discursive dimension of the Russo-Ukrainian war. She analyzes how visual artefacts on Ukrainian and Russian social networks, particularly memes, participate in forging collective national identities on the basis of a heightened distinction between the self and the other. The article offers a comparative perspective on the divergent meaning-making mechanisms and iconography sources in the Russian and Ukrainian participatory environments, shedding light on the competing narratives and cultural differences that were intensified by the invasion. The analysis reveals that both participatory cultures tend to frame the Russo-Ukrainian War as a struggle between good and evil but with drastically differing means and implications.

*Mark Sachleben* offers a counterweight to the American popular culture's view of Ukraine & Ukrainians in film. By looking at the films of Oleksandr Dovzhenko (also transliterated as Alexander Dovzhenko), he shows that cinema is both a reflection of the evolving national identity and a medium for its construction and reinterpretation. Examining films from the 1930s, a period marked by violence, persecution, and emigration, he captures the struggles of maintaining a coherent identity narrative during turbulent times. The paper emphasizes the significant role of popular culture in shaping collective memory. It also illuminates the symbiotic relationship between film and politics, illustrating how cinema is inescapably political.

In her contribution, *Elżbieta Olzacka* delves into the significance of war-related posters in contemporary conflicts, with a focus on the surge in Ukrainian posters during the Russian invasion. The article focuses on two main issues: the impact of online media on poster creation and their transition to offline formats, on the one hand, and posters as tools of participatory propaganda, on the other. Despite the decline of print media, Olzacka argues that posters maintain their importance in wartime propaganda by adapting to digital channels while retaining a presence in physical spaces. Online platforms enable the creation of personalized political



posters, thus contributing to participatory propaganda. The case of war-time Ukraine illustrates how posters transcend state control, becoming tools for grassroots activism.

*Yulia Kazanova's* article is one of the deeper interdisciplinary contributions to the special issue. While the term “soft power” is well-established in IR literature, there have been relatively few contributions on poetry in IR (EDKINS 2013; JENSEN – CORPORAAL 2016), even though there are several interventions that argue that, for instance, Russian culture is often weaponized as a tool of imperial conquest, prompting a deep reflection in the Ukrainian cultural space (ZHURZHENKO 2021; KURAPOV ET AL. 2022; AVERBUKH, 2023). Kazanova's contribution offers a reflection of the ways poetry functions during the war, which include shaping the national narrative of the war by undertaking factual and emotional witnessing of the wartime reality, and fostering international poetic solidarity and collective resistance within Ukraine (ZHADAN 2023):

*and language, like a lung burnt out by pain,  
comes back to life, does its work  
pours sounds into us like wine  
like lighting*

*[і мова, наче легеня, спалена болем,  
оживає, відлунює, творить свою роботу,  
наповнює нас звучанням, ніби вином,  
наче світінням]*

Finally, *Winter Greet's* engagement with traditional embroidery can be connected to the exploration of crafting in international relations. The vyshyvanka, a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt, has become famous around the world as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine in times of war, and a spiritual armor. Greet provides a short history of the vyshyvanka in her contribution, reflecting on the feminist, commercial, and identity-building aspects of the garment. As she notes in the conclusion, she sought to

“uncover how something that was once a domestic, feminine pursuit, has developed into an internationally identifiable symbol of ‘Ukrainianness’ in the face of Russian neo-imperialism.”

## CONCLUSION

This introduction to the special issue has set out the argument for why it is crucial to study Ukraine in popular culture in order to understand the ways in which the social imaginaries of Ukraine develop in non-elite settings. Analyzing popular culture allows researchers to explore the ways in which individuals and communities navigate complex geopolitical realities, elucidating the socio-cultural dynamics at play in identity and war-making. As the contributions to the special issue attest, popular culture serves as a powerful mirror reflecting societal values, perceptions, and the collective consciousness, but it also plays a subtle role in constituting them. Exploring the popular representations of Ukraine amidst the Russo-Ukrainian war provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which cultural elements, ranging from memes to poetry and posters, participate in “*the continuation of war by other means*” (Saunders, this issue). The collection of articles in this special issue also sheds light on the role of popular culture in shaping geopolitical narratives and encouraging political resistance, and its potential impact on foreign policy. Examining how Ukraine is depicted in various forms of media, including films, literature, and social media, offers insights into the construction of national identity, the shaping of public opinion, and the dissemination of narratives related to the war. These representations not only influence domestic sentiments but also contribute significantly to the global perception of the Ukrainian subject.

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