



THE WAR OF MAPS? SPATIAL (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR IN THE DIGITAL CONTEXT

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Maps beyond Icons: Semiotic Analysis of Maps of Ukraine During the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

This essay explores different maps of Ukraine and map-related activities carried out in Ukraine in 2022 and 2023 after the start of the Russian invasion, including among others maps of Ukrainian cultural losses, air raid alerts, and the defence of Kyiv as well as a flash mob setting a record in drawing maps of Ukraine. To do so, the essay applies a semiotic approach and draws on the Peircean typology of signs. By focusing on the ways selected maps of Ukraine relate to the diverse messages they convey, in addition to conventional icon maps the essay distinguishes symbol maps, index maps as well as maps combining indexicality and symbolism. Based on the analysis of new meanings and functions that the map of Ukraine has gained since 2022, the essay argues that the indexicality and symbolic weight of these maps have grown. The essay concludes that in the context of the ongoing war, the map of Ukraine has become increasingly present in the everyday life of Ukrainian citizens as an important element of the daily wartime routine of receiving updates, consuming news and communicating with colleagues, family and friends.

Introduction

In the context of conflict, existing signs and symbols tend to acquire new meanings (Kaschuba, 2000; Lambert, 2023). As has been shown elsewhere (see e.g., Kolstø, 2016; Luxmoore, 2019; Marandici, 2023), the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has already had a major impact on both identities and symbols in the war-affected areas and beyond. This essay attempts to decipher the new meanings and functions that the map of Ukraine has acquired since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. The essay argues that since 2014, and even more so since 2022, the map of Ukraine has become present in the everyday life of Ukrainian citizens in a new way. This change occurred due to maps of Ukraine being instrumentalised as an information envelope¹ containing diverse messages sent by various actors to Ukrainian citizens, as well as from Ukrainian citizens to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and to the international community. To demonstrate this, the essay discusses a selection of maps produced and map-related activities carried out in Ukraine in 2022 and 2023.

To unpack the enriched meaning(s) of maps of Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war, this essay uses a semiotic approach and analyses these maps as signs on an abstract level, without looking into the details of graphic representation or specific map legends—a realm studied by separate sub-fields, cartographic design and the semiotics of maps (see e.g., Bertin,

2011; Schlichtmann, 2009). The essay draws on a semiotic tradition started by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce², who developed one of the two³ dominant models of what constitutes a sign. The Peircean semiotic tradition distinguishes three types of signs—icons, indexes and symbols—depending on the way the signifier relates to the signified. Icons relate to a signified object on the basis of likeness (e.g., a portrait of a person as an icon of that person), indexes relate to the object through some existential fact (e.g., a weathervane as an indicator of wind), and symbols establish relation to the signified object through a conventional connection (e.g., the word “house” and a house on a street). The three types almost always co-exist in a form of a hierarchy, with one of them inevitably being dominant over the other(s) depending on the context (Jakobson 1966/1990 in Chandler 2022, p. 58).

Iconicity is an “indispensable” quality of maps as it manifests the principle of the “map’s analogy to objects, places, relations and events” (Wood and Fels 2011, p. 231). Equally, a map is a sophisticated multilayered sign system or a “highly complex <...> synthesis of signs” (ibid., 247) that often combines several types of signs at the same time. Maps are “indexical in pointing to the locations of things, iconic in representing directional relations and distances between landmarks, and symbolic in using conventional symbols” (Chandler 2022, p. 57). As we will see below, in the situation of conflict a map could obtain new meanings and func-

1 In semiotic terms, one would say “a signifier” or a “sign-vehicle”—a form in which a sign appears (Nöth 1990, p. 89).

2 For more on Peirce’s theory of signs, see: Atkin 2023; Chandler 2022; Merrell 2005.

3 Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure developed the other dominant model of the sign as being composed of a signifier and the signified. For more, see Chandler 2022, pp. 15–30.

tions leading to a strengthened iconicity, enlarged indexicality and heightened symbolism. The map of Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022 is a particularly vivid example of this.

The majority of maps analysed in this essay are freely available online, while others are found in smartphone apps⁴ developed by Ukrainian and global companies as well as NGOs and private individuals⁵. Two principles were central for selecting maps for analysis: the content of maps, to ensure coverage of a broad range of themes, and the date of map release, with earlier-released map-containing websites and apps being preferred.

Maps as Symbols

Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014, and even more so since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the map of Ukraine showing Ukraine's borders at the moment of its independence in 1991 and as guaranteed by the 1994 Budapest Memorandum has become a recognised symbol of Ukraine's territorial integrity. One manifestation of the heightened symbolic meaning of the map of Ukraine domestically was a flash mob that took place in Dnipro Region on June 1, 2022—the International Day for Protection of Children—when a national record of 174 simultaneously coloured maps of Ukraine was set (National Police of Ukraine, 2022).

The flash mob was comprised of children and policemen. The accompanying press release specified that children are the future of Ukraine, so the performance was planned as an action to safeguard the future. The scenography of the flash mob was well thought out and deeply symbolic: a map of Ukraine drawn with chalk on the pavement was a central site of the performance. The inscription “Peace” was located in the centre of the map (Figure 1). Police officers stood on the drawn perimeter of Ukraine, while children were inside it during a painting session. Each child participating in the flash mob was given a pre-drawn map of Ukraine with state and administrative borders, as well as the capitals of some regions. The task was to paint the map in the colours of the Ukrainian flag—yellow and blue (Figure 2a and 2b). The performance was filmed on several cameras, including from a drone, which allowed the communications department of the Dnipro region police to release a short video of the flash mob with some powerful map-centred images (Figure 1). Each drawing of Ukraine's map was accompanied with children's wishes to the Ukrainian soldiers, extending the flash mob to the front line where Ukraine's borders are contested by military means.

⁴ See the full list of analysed maps and links to their sources at the end of the essay.

⁵ For example, Roman Slobodianiuk led the development of the eAlert app (0542.ua, 2022) and Vitaliy Nakhmanovych led the team working on the Chronicles of the Defence of Kyiv project (Kuzmenko, 2023).

Figure 1: Flash Mob Which Set a Record of Simultaneous Colouring of Maps of Ukraine in Dnipro Region (Drone Footage)



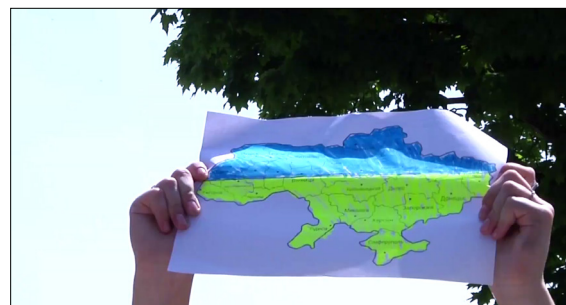
Source: Video by the National Police of Ukraine, freely available online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltonypz3sgM>]. Screenshot by the Research Institute for Eastern European Studies at the University of Bremen.

Figure 2a: Colouring Maps of Ukraine as Part of a Flash Mob in Dnipro Region



Source: Video by the National Police of Ukraine, freely available online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltonypz3sgM>]. Screenshot by the Research Institute for Eastern European Studies at the University of Bremen.

Figure 2b: Waving Coloured Maps of Ukraine in the Air as Part of a Flash Mob in Dnipro Region



Source: Video by the National Police of Ukraine, freely available online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltonypz3sgM>]. Screenshot by the author.

Another recent example of turning the map of Ukraine into a symbol is an embroidered map of the country (Figure 3a) that has been prepared as part of the All-Ukrainian Conference of Workers of Children’s Libraries in October 2023 in Zhytomyr. Both the map itself and, even more so, the very act of creating it within the framework of the conference (Figure 3b) carry a strong symbolic meaning. The organisers underlined that the handcrafted map symbolises the professional community’s “togetherness in this difficult time for Ukraine” as well as their unity in creating “identical national-patriotic, cultural and educational spaces” (Ostapchuk, 2023). Needless to say, both the Dnipro flash mob’s map-painters and the librarians gathered in Zhytomyr depicted Ukraine’s borders *de jure*.

Figure 3a: Embroidered Map of Ukraine Created at the All-Ukrainian Conference of Workers of Children’s Libraries in Zhytomyr in 2023



Source: Zhytomyr Regional Library for Children and Youth and National Library of Ukraine for Children (with permission).

Iconic representations of the map of Ukraine has also been used in digital contexts, including on logos of several websites, Telegram channels and smartphone apps that have been launched to equip Ukrainian society to deal with the everyday realities of life in wartime. One such example is the official air raid alert map (<https://map.ukrainealarm.com/>). The logo of this map depicts a white outline of Ukraine’s territory in a black circle on the background of the Ukrainian flag.

In this context, it is not surprising that visual representations of Ukraine’s territory diverging from its internationally recognised map has led to several international scandals. In June 2023, Hungary released a short video advocating for peace talks between Ukraine and Russia that included a world map with Ukraine’s territory marked in red, but without Crimea. Ukrainian

Figure 3b: Piecing Together the Embroidered Map of Ukraine at the All-Ukrainian Conference of Workers of Children’s Libraries in Zhytomyr in 2023



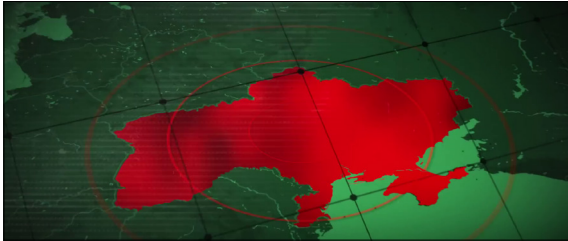
Source: Zhytomyr Regional Library for Children and Youth and National Library of Ukraine for Children (with permission).

representatives demanded the alteration of this video that displayed Ukraine’s borders incorrectly (Pryschepa, 2023). Although no official response from the Hungarian side followed, the map in the video was corrected already the next day (Figure 4). According to Ukraine’s MFA, in 2022 alone there were 25 similar cases of incorrect representations of Ukrainian territories that were corrected following a complaint of Ukrainian embassies (Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security 2023).

Countering the misrepresentation of the map of Ukraine in a systematic way has been an important task of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at least since 2015. For this purpose, a dedicated project, “Crimea on the World Map,” was launched to monitor—with the help of Ukrainian citizens—digital and printed cartographic materials worldwide as well as navigation systems and products (Radio Liberty, 2015). A year after the start of the full-scale invasion, the problem of cartographic misrepresentation of Ukraine’s borders had reached a new level. In April 2023, the civic initiative “Stop Mapaganda!” (https://t.me/stopmapaganda_en) was established. In June 2023, the roundtable “Territorial Integrity vs. Cartographic Propaganda” gathered public officials, scholars and activists in Kyiv to discuss the ongoing challenge of countering cartographic propaganda (Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security 2023).

As it follows from this collection of anecdotes, the cartographic element that has become central to the symbolism of the map of Ukraine since 2022 are state borders. Maps-symbols can be meticulously decorated as the Zhytomyr embroidered map, or very minimalistic as the white map from the logo discussed above—this does not affect their meaning-making capacity,

Figure 4: Video “Elég volt a háborúból!” [“Enough of war!”] by the Government of Hungary



Source: freely available online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vm6TWpt444>]. Screenshot by the author.

as the main focus of attention is on the circuit/contour. Such a focus on maintaining the correct contour of Ukraine’s borders on maps worldwide is a way to defend Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty. As Maxim Mayorov, one of the June 2023 roundtable participants, put it: “the cartographic image of one’s country is a part of the nation’s identity, as are state symbols: coat of arms, flag, anthem. The aggressor seeks to impose a ‘new image’ of its territory on everyone, while the defending country seeks to defend its own” (Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security 2023).

Maps as Indexes

On February 24, 2022, at 11 am—six hours after the start of the full-scale invasion—*Suspilne*, one of the major media outlets in Ukraine, shared interactive maps of shelters and lists of their addresses in different regions of Ukraine (Mirer, 2022a). Although the use of maps as an everyday index of spatial orientation has become increasingly common with the proliferation of smartphones, in Ukraine the repertoire of maps-indexes has grown far beyond this use since the invasion began. The maps shared by *Suspilne* conveyed a clear message that in times of war one must distinguish between relatively protected and unprotected locations, and that a map is not a mere indication of where one is, but also whether one is in relative safety or not, and if not, where the nearest place of relative safety is.

As much as the information about the nearest shelters, the information about air raid alerts has become an everyday necessity in Ukraine. The first edition of an air raid alert map was released as a website in March 2022, first at war.ukrzen.in.ua, then at alerts.in.ua. It was designed to be used as a real-time indicator of air alerts, and later grew to encompass other potential threats—i.e., threats of shelling, ground combat, chemical attacks or radiation. When the map highlights a region in red, it means the region is currently being targeted in an air raid or other attack and its citizens should immediately seek shelter. In addition to

this air alert website, several air alert apps have been developed, including “eTryvoga” [English: “eAlert”], among others.

Some smartphone apps have introduced new functions since the start of the invasion. One such example is the EasyWay app that tracks the location of public transport in major Ukrainian cities. Since the start of the invasion, the app takes into account infrastructural damages caused by bombardments and shows routes, stops, travel times and estimated waiting times on a map in real-time. The app also reminds its users when a curfew starts in a selected area (Mirer, 2022b). With approximately 3.7 million internally displaced persons in Ukraine (IOM, 2024), the app has been highly useful for those who need to find their way in an unfamiliar city due to displacement.

A particularly interesting set of map-based apps enable a link between Ukraine’s civilians and the military, giving the population the tools to not only navigate the dangers of living in a war zone, but also to report threats to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. One app following this logic is “ePPO” [English: “eAir Defence”]. An app user who sees or hears a missile or a drone can notify the system about it by pressing a big red button. The app then transmits the user’s coordinates to the system, and the AI projects probable vectors of air targets on the air defence map that is available only to the air defence personnel. If the target approaches a user’s location, they will receive a warning to move away from the windows and seek shelter (Yagori, 2024).

Another app of a similar kind is the Mine Action Ukraine app. Developed by Ukraine’s State Emergency Service, the app contains a map showing areas with confirmed and unconfirmed explosive devices. The app includes detailed instructions for those who find an explosive object and thus helps Ukrainians to protect themselves from injuries and save lives. The app also allows civilians to notify Ukraine’s State Emergency Services of any explosives or suspicious items found. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this app given that about 30% of Ukraine’s land requires demining, making Ukraine one of the most mined countries in the world (Yagori 2024). Importantly, to get access to the two abovementioned apps, a Ukrainian citizen must prove their identity via the online public service portal “Diia.”

Maps-indexes have particularly contributed to a heightened presence of maps in the everyday life of Ukrainians since the start of the full-scale invasion. These maps are re-posted in both public and private chats, in social and traditional media, and have become an important element of the wartime daily routine of receiving updates, consuming news and communicating with colleagues, family and friends.

Combining Indexicality and Symbolism: Maps as Evidence Containers

In the last set of examples, maps act simultaneously as indexes and symbols, with their symbolism focusing on matters beyond Ukraine's territorial integrity. These maps serve as tools and results of documenting Russian aggression and war crimes committed by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, and are intended to bring awareness about the scope of destruction to both domestic and international audiences. The process of compiling these maps overlaps with an investigative practice of forensic architecture—producing evidence by examining elements of built environments and presenting this evidence in juridical and political forums to push back against state and corporate claims and atrocities (Weizman, 2017, p. 9).

A prime example hereof is a map of cultural losses of Ukraine (<https://uaculture.org/culture-loss/>) that was released in April 2022 by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (UCF). By March 2024, the map and its accompanying archive included 553 entries about damaged and destroyed objects of the cultural heritage and cultural institutions of Ukraine. The map aims “to demonstrate the extent of the destruction,” to “refute the statements of the Russian leadership that the Russian army conducts targeted strikes exclusively on military infrastructure” and to be used as an argument “to exclude the Russian Federation from the ranks of various international cultural organisations or associations” (Yavorovich 2022). A sister site (<https://culturecrimes.mkip.gov.ua/>) has been put into operation as a platform where members of the public can register a damaged or destroyed cultural artefact. Once the information is verified, the entry is added to the UCF archive and map.

Another important example is the project “Chronicles of the Defence of Kyiv” funded by the Kyiv City Museum and released in September 2023. The project website contains news reports, expert commentaries,

personal accounts, and photo and video footage as well as maps (<https://chronicles.defense.kyiv.ua/maps/>) telling the heroic story of the defence of Kyiv day by day. According to project leaders, the aim of the project is “to preserve valuable information and to provide an opportunity to learn about the history of the Russo-Ukrainian war to anyone interested” (Kuzmenko 2023). The project map collection includes nearly 300 items coming from five sources: 1) the Institute for the Study of War, an American think tank; 2) the independent global news and information website “Live Universal Awareness Map” (“Liveuamap”), run by a team of programmers and journalists; 3) an independent project, *MilitaryLand.net*; as well as two independent military analysts, 4) US-based “Jomini of the West” and 5) Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov, who is also editor-in-chief of the online news portal Censor.NET. In the multi-modal and multi-perspective storytelling about the defence of Kyiv, maps are treated as crucial visualisations allowing the visitor to re-imagine the recent past.

Concluding Remarks

This essay offers the reader a semiotic toolkit for a better understanding of the numerous maps of Ukraine that have been produced in Ukraine and for Ukrainian citizens since the start of the full-scale invasion. As mentioned above, two or all three types of signs (icons, indexes and symbols) almost always coexist with one another, but in each map one type typically dominates the process of meaning-making. Looking at the way a map has been used to relate to the objects it signifies, one could distinguish maps-symbols and maps-indexes, as well as maps combining indexicality and symbolism. This division is tentative and is offered for orientation purposes, rather than for building a strict typology. Symbolism, iconicity and indexicality are strongly intertwined in contemporary maps of Ukraine, as these maps constitute one of Ukraine's lines of defence in an ongoing war of maps as well as territory.

About the Author

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List of Analysed Website-Based Maps

- Air Alert Map of Ukraine. Available at: <https://alerts.in.ua/>
- Chronicles of the Defence of Kyiv. Available at: <https://chronicles.defense.kyiv.ua/maps/>
- Demining Ukraine App. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.infotech.mines>
- Destroyed Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20231002170545/https://culturecrimes.mkip.gov.ua/>
- eAirDefence App. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ua.quick.brpg.pathfinder&hl=uk&gl=US>
- eAlert app. <https://app.etryvoga.com/>
- EasyWay public transport app. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.eway&hl=uk>

- Map of Cultural Losses of Ukraine. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230930163006/https://uaculture.org/culture-loss/>
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ANALYSIS

Mapping Trauma and Belonging: Cartographic Imagery in Visual Popular Art of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

This essay analyses the use of cartographic imagery in the visual representation of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Instagram. It explores how digital artists utilise maps and iconic geographic symbols to convey the trauma experienced by Ukrainians, reinforce a sense of national unity, and express love and affection for the homeland. By examining key examples of visual popular art, the essay demonstrates how these images function not only as documentation of conflict, but also as powerful symbols of resistance, resilience, and hope.

Introduction

An image can say more than a thousand words. Visual imagery, capable of encapsulating many layers of meaning, when amplified by new media can become a potent force for meaning production, representation, and narration of conflicts. It can ground the political, historical and ideational interpretations of a conflict in the fabric of everyday practices. Visuals can serve as affective anchors that reactivate or challenge collective memory and identities, while at the same time constructing emotional relationships between the audience and mediated conflicts (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Grigor and Pantti 2021). Moreover, visual popular culture is instrumental in providing a universal symbolic language for framing the vision of conflict, as well as constructing the image of the self and the other. The power of imagery lies in its ability to capture significant historical moments, but also in its agency in evoking emotional responses and provide shared codes for certain communities through artistic expressions and practices (Callahan 2020, p. 19). This symbolic language, able to transcend cultural barriers, also makes it possible to convey the pain of victims of the war and share the experiences of wartime.

This essay aims to explore the visual conceptualisation of the image of the self in Ukrainian popular art through a geographical lens. With the help of the multimodal and visual analysis approach (O'Halloran 2011, Rose 2011), it studies how the geographical representations of Ukraine are used by Ukrainian digital artists to portray the trauma, resilience and resistance resulting from the conflict. The essay summarises over 250 depictions of the national geobodies or maps of Ukraine based on the screening of 50 Instagram accounts of Ukrainian visual artists and illustrators since the start of the full-scale invasion. Instagram was chosen for data collection as it is one of the most popular worldwide social media platforms, counting more than 15 million Ukrainian users (Economichna Pravda 2022). Together with other social media, Instagram was actively used as a site for the distribution and sharing of war-related visual content, but also for the promotion of the resilience of Ukrainian society and amplification of Ukrainian voices internationally (Specia 2022; Kot et al. 2024). By analysing geographical symbols depicted in the artworks, the essay seeks a deeper understanding of how the imagery and the new narratives of the Russo-Ukrainian War are being constructed in real time. In this way,

it contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection between collective identity construction, geographical imagery, and digital platforms.

Maps as Wartime Symbols

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, many visual symbols have emerged vividly illustrating the resistance of Ukrainians, the bravery of the Ukrainian army, the pain of war and the cruelty of the enemy. Among the most popular visual symbols are the sunflower, representing resilience and hope; the Ukrainian tractor, embodying civilian ingenuity and resilience; and Patron the dog, a heroic bomb-sniffing canine symbolising loyalty and bravery, among many others (Smagina 2022). Geographic imagery, the use of lines of separation, maps or national geo-bodies of Ukraine and Russia to visualise the war, is also among the recurring symbols of the conflict. These images help capture the disproportionate power dynamics of the war or interpret it from an emotional perspective of belonging to a certain territory.

Metonymically representing the nation, its people, or sometimes the leaders of the state, these visuals evoke strong sentiments of national identity and resistance. Unlike other symbolic representations, geographic imagery not only reflects the present of the nation, but is also intimately tied to the historical, political, and physical realities of its national sovereignty and cultural identity. This gives such visuals a unique power to encapsulate powerful messages and influence public perception of the conflict. Combined with traditional visualisations of Ukraine and Ukrainians, such as the blue and yellow colours of the national flag, the trident, or the embroidery of the *vyshyvanka*, the cartographic symbols of wartime co-create a new visual story of the fight for freedom and independence that have the potential to resonate deeply with both Ukrainian society and the international community.

One of the most powerful examples of the cartographic representation of the war is Solomiia Shalaiska's illustration of the conflict (Figure 1). The image was created at the very beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and quickly went viral. It uses a Mercator map projection that massively enlarges Russia and exaggerates the true difference in size between the Russian federation and Ukraine. From a cartographic perspective, this represents an inaccurate map, but used in the artistic work, it helps more strikingly visualise the

disproportion in territorial dimensions, population and military potential between the victim and the aggressor.

This artwork was shared hundreds of thousands of times by official Ukrainian state accounts, media outlets and anonymous internet users. For example, on February 28, 2022, the artwork was posted by the official X account of Ukraine¹, where it collected 127,000 likes and was shared more than 18,000 times. It was also later used as a main visual symbol on the welcome page of the official platform about the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, [WAR.UKRAINE.UA](https://war.ukraine.ua/)², which is available in nine languages and has been visited by millions of users³. This cartographic representation served not only to illustrate the scale of the Russo-Ukrainian War, emphasising the disproportion of power involved, but also to remind viewers of the fearlessness and bravery of Ukrainians in the face of a much more powerful enemy. This image, offering a certain vision of the war and shaping the images of the victim and the aggressor, reached hundreds of thousands of internet users, helping them to better understand Ukraine's fight for freedom.

Maps represent powerful symbols that can visually not only materialise the territorial dimensions of a state and symbolise the nation, but also express power dynamics, reaffirm inequalities or performatively consolidate nationalist sentiments and state boundaries

Figure 1: Realize the Scale of Ukrainian Heroism.



Source: Reproduced with permission from Solomiia Shalaiska; published on Instagram, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaeuH21J3YI/>

1 Ukraine, official page, available at: https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1498171407154483200?s=20&t=X6SSe-BnKjmBkZ-tLGniOA&utm_campaign=fullarticle&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=inshorts

2 The official platform about the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine [WAR.UKRAINE.UA](https://war.ukraine.ua/), available at: <https://war.ukraine.ua/>

3 According to the statistics of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the site has been visited by more than 700 million Internet users from all over the world. For more information, see: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/oficijnu-platformu-ukrayini-pro-vijnu-z-miljonnoyu-auditoriyeyu-warukraineua-onovleno-dlya-nadannya-dokaziv-rosijskogo-teroru-v-ukrayini>

(Dodge et al. 2009, 54–57). Maps have traditionally been seen as representational tools that connect nations to the spatial shape of their territory. They were understood as one of the pillars of building and maintaining the integrity of nation-states, and as skillful instruments for visually associating the nation with its territory on an international scale (Anderson 1991).

From the contemporary perspective, by contrast, maps are no longer perceived as stable and unchangeable entities, but rather as being defined through their active use and practices of counter/mapping, constantly being redefined, unfixed and remade (Dodge et al. 2009, 54). Following Crampton and Krygier, this performative aspect of mapping opens avenues for their use as means of resistance in counterhegemonic practices, such as in activism or various social movements, to challenge established socio-political norms and spatial perceptions of the place (Crampton and Krygier 2005, 24–25). Because of their ability to not only represent certain territories, but also convey cultural messages and senses, involve emotions and embodied experiences of the place, mapping has also been used in various contemporary artistic practices to “say things about [...] society and its values” (Perkins 2009, 6).

Currently, in the age of digital media, the power of the map 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 knowledge-production, as well as tools of transferring national narratives to wider international audiences. Furthermore, in times of border struggles or military conflicts, the borders and collective bodies of the states are not only used as physical demarcations of the territories in question, but rather act as symbols that narrate the story of the violent rebordering, visually representing the identity, sovereignty, or the lost geographical integrity of the nation and the trauma of separation.

In today’s digital media, the geographical outlines of Ukraine represent a highly recurring symbol. Instagram’s performative and visual-centric nature amplifies the impact of the cartographic imagery, not only allowing for the rapid dissemination of the artworks, but also promoting the audience’s engagement via such functions as liking, hashtagging, reposting, and sharing. These digital interactions enhance the visibility of Ukrainian cultural productions and help to promote visual symbols and narratives created by digital artists.

It is worth noting that Ukrainian artists tend to use the visualisations of the collective body of Ukraine in its full integrity including the territories annexed by Russia in 2014 and after the beginning of the full-fledged invasion. This approach underlines the illegitimacy of the annexation of Ukrainian territories by the Russian regime and serves as a powerful reminder of

Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The inclusion of the occupied territories within the national borders also reinforces the national unity of Ukrainians and emphasises the determination of the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland and preserve their territory. This fetishisation of the image of a “whole” Ukraine is common to all analysed artworks, illustrating the importance of this visual representation of Ukraine (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Free People
Translation of the Text of the Image:
“Free People. It Was Like That, It Will Be Like That”



Source: Reproduced with permission from Yaroslava Yatsuba; published on Instagram, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbf7BbBN3BU/>

Figure 3: My Comfort Zone
Translation of the Text of the Image:
“My Comfort Zone Is 603.548 Square Kilometers” (the Area of Ukraine)



Source: Reproduced with permission from Oleksandr Grekhov; published on Instagram, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbA3S05tDx6/>

Mapping the Trauma of War

Geographic imagery is used by Ukrainian artists to tell the story of the invasion and share the collective emotions and trauma of war. While preserving the territorial integrity of the state, the artists employ varied artistic techniques to convey the suffering of Ukrainians caused by the conflict. The collective Ukrainian body is often depicted using red and black colours, symbolising violence and destruction. This body is portrayed as violated, wounded, and subjected to physical pain, allegorically connected to the physical suffering of Ukrainians (Figure 4). These powerful visual representations serve not only as a documentation of the ongoing atrocities, but also as a medium through which the deep emotional traumas of Ukrainians can be expressed.

The use of such imagery not only captures the brutal reality of war, reminding us of its terrible cost, but also frames the conflict in human terms. As the war continues, new visual images emerge to remind us about the human losses caused by the Russo-Ukrainian War. For example, the work of Bohdana Chilikina published on Instagram in 2024 (Figure 5) combined the map of Ukraine with the phrase “people are here.” This artwork illustrates how human lives are affected by the war, reminding us that simple people continue to live in Ukraine and suffer daily from the Russian aggression.

Figure 4: Heal Ukraine



Source: Reproduced with permission from Artem Gusev; published on Instagram, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccw9XnjNCw/>

Such imagery of violence is often combined with a focus on the resilience of the Ukrainian nation. Despite all the suffering and uncertainties brought about by the conflict, Ukrainians are depicted as united by a common goal and ready to protect their country. One example of this can be found in the work of the artist Nikita Titov, in which

Figure 5: People Are Here



Source: Reproduced with permission from Bohdana Chilikina; published on Instagram, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-syjwlwKJ/2024>

the red colour, symbolising violence and destruction, is combined with the phrase “we will survive” integrated into the body of Ukraine⁴. This artwork juxtaposes the reality of the war with a message of resilience and determination. This duality in visual popular art, combining symbols of trauma and the resistance of the Ukrainian people, captures the complex emotional landscape of a nation’s struggle against its aggressor. The collective body helps to not only reflect the collective pain of the people, but also to represent the popular mobilisation of the nation in the face of the existential threat against it.

Cartographic Imagery and Belonging

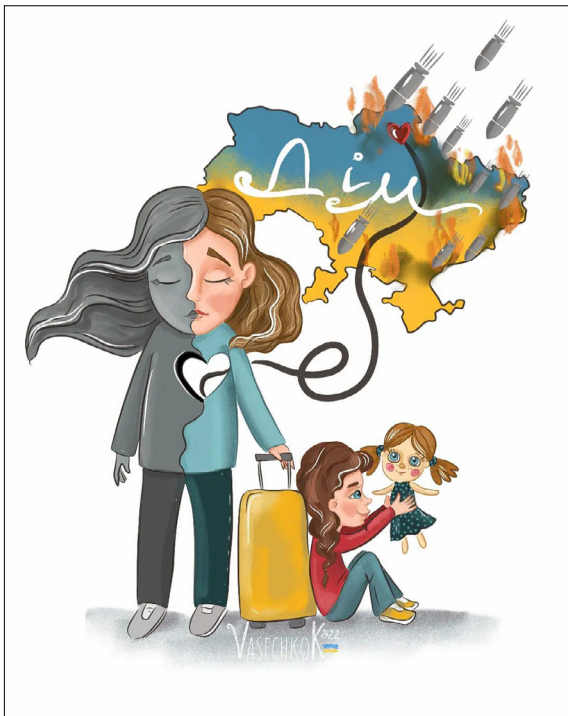
Another important function expressed through geographic imagery in Ukrainian digital popular art is the expression of affection and love for the homeland. The images containing the Ukrainian geo-body, often combined with traditional Ukrainian national symbols, convey significant messages of national unity that resonate deeply with Ukrainians, intensifying their feelings of belonging. Using the easily recognisable geographic contours of Ukraine, the artists appeal to the deep connection to the land and to the feeling of Ukrainians of being at home. This artistic approach is illustrated in the works of Ekateryna Vasechko (Figure 6) and Anna Foralberg (Figure 7). These artists integrate the individual bodies of Ukrainians into the body of Ukraine in their depictions of the war, showing the invisible connections between the territory and its people. They represent the nation as a part of an individual’s

4 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmON6EitYPN/>

body (Figure 7), making clear the impossibility of existence of one without other.

The artists also use more emotionally charged visual metaphors, visualising the connection between Ukraine and its people as the connection between a mother⁵ and a child—one might say that the girl and the country in the Figure 6 are tied with an umbilical cord as a mother and her baby. This depiction deepens the understanding of the complexity of the relationship between a people and their territory, visualising the emotional connection and interdependence between the two. By emphasising the ties between personal and collective bodies, the artists portray Ukraine not so much as a certain physical space as a symbolic one with profound meaning for the nation. This serves to strengthen the emotional ties of the people to their country and fosters a collective sense among Ukrainians despite the variety of their war-related experiences. It also helps to create a strong focus on the unified narrative of unity and resistance of the nation.

Figure 6: Home
Translation of the Text of the Image:
“Home”



Source: Reproduced with permission from Ekateryna Vasechko, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfBJ-azNllx/>

Conclusion

Cartographic imagery of the Russo-Ukrainian War has become a potent tool for conveying emotional experi-

Figure 7: Where it Hurts?



Source: Reproduced with permission from Anna Foralberg, https://www.instagram.com/p/C5IWhomJkVV/?img_index=1

ences of Ukrainians and for narrating their fight against the Russian invasion. Being easily recognisable and visually simple, and at the same time conveying deep connection to the place and territory of a community, these images have become a powerful tool for narrating wartime experiences of Ukraine. Posted and circulated on Instagram, which enables rapid dissemination and visibility of the artworks, these powerful images help to create and propagate shared wartime symbols. The artworks visualise Ukraine’s territorial integrity, consistently representing the nation as a unified whole, including territories previously annexed by Russia.

The visualisations of the collective body of Ukraine convey the traumatic experiences of Ukrainians, communicating the profound physical and emotional impact of the invasion on the Ukrainian population. Moreover, the geographic imagery aims to consolidate Ukrainian society by reinforcing national identity and sense of belonging through the connection to the common territory. Through visual affirmations of shared experiences and the common goal of resisting the aggression, this geographic imagery used in visual popular art helps to strengthen the bonds within the community and promote unity in the fight for sovereignty and freedom. However, it is worth noting that such focus on the unified narrative of unity and resistance might lead to neglecting the voices or silencing the experiences that do not fit into the dominant unifying framework of visual representation of the war.

Please see overleaf for Information about the Author and References.

5 The word “Ukraine” is feminine in Ukrainian.

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From Above and From Below: Challenging Flat Representations of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in the International Context

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Abstract

This text presents a critical analysis of selected maps representing the Russian invasion of Ukraine produced by international actors to analyse and document the war. It focuses on maps produced by the Institute for the Study of War (a non-profit located in Washington D.C.) and how other organisations and media circulated these maps, contributing to a mainstream visual perspective on the war. With the control of terrain as the focal concern of these maps, they establish a vision of space in war as concentrated on the shifting frontline. The military perspective is enforced with a timeline view and the production of daily maps which organise the war into short fragments of time. In doing so, these maps rarely offer more context—whether by lacking a more complex temporal view, or insights into different aspects of war such as humanitarian actions, movement of civilians, long-term ecological damage, geopolitical relations, etc. In reading the maps, the paper will demonstrate a critical map analysis approach that accounts for mapmaking's social, material and temporal relations. By proposing a set of questions on map data, design, purposes, perspectives, uses and effects, the paper aims to introduce the reader to critical ways of reading maps representing the war.

Introduction

The Lviv Centre for Urban History recently organised its second annual event under the title *The Most Documented War*, a name aptly describing the urgency of, and the technological capacity for, current war documentation. They called for experts and participants to discuss how the “overwhelming scale of documentation initiatives affects our perception of the ongoing war.” In looking at various mapping projects which contribute to these extensive documentary practices, questions arise on how these maps and visualisations frame, represent and enclose our ways of seeing and experiencing the war.

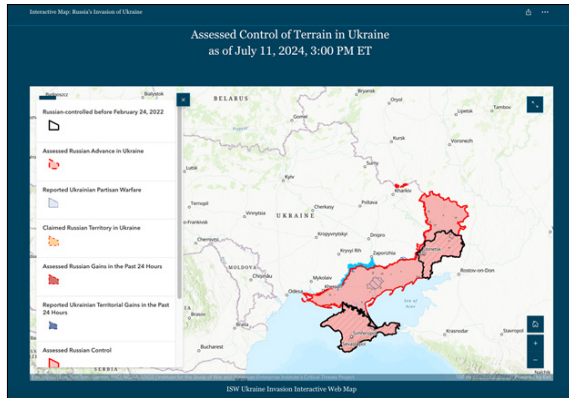
In the history of warfare, maps have taken up powerful uses in producing images and understandings of the world as divided into blocks or spheres of influence (Barney 2015; Monmonier 1991, p. 118), asserting territorial claims (Leuenberger and Schnell 2010, p. 33) while also shaping military actions and determining casualties (Monmonier 1991, p. 56). Since February 2022, various organisations, institutions and media have initiated digital mapping projects documenting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, especially external observers (e.g., international NGOs and think tanks) and bottom-up actors (e.g., activists and independent media in Ukraine). These projects reflect recent mapping developments, particularly concerning digital technology's uses.

Most of the maps used allow for immediate documentation of conflict and direct mediation of first-hand experience through social media integration, such

as geolocated Telegram or Twitter posts. As social media and participatory platforms become constitutive to digital maps (see e.g. *LiveUA Map*), we also witness an increase in activist, volunteer and crowd-sourced maps. While these digital tools and innovations have been explored in cartography for over a decade (Goodchild, 2007; Dodge & Kitchin, 2013), the war in Ukraine presents a context within which their use has proliferated for the purpose of conflict mapping and developing the widely circulated visualisations thereof.

This shift in proximity to war and the move towards maps as crowdsourced living documents reactivated old challenges, questions and tensions in cartographic research and practice in regard to applications of new technologies (Goodchild, 2007; Dodge & Kitchin, 2013). The danger remains in how new technological tools might—with increased efficiency—reproduce existing cartographic conventions and approaches which align with traditional goals of territorialisation and boundary-making (see e.g. discussions by Crampton 1996 or Branch 2013). But these tools might also be used to reveal the field of cartography as ideological and complicit in modes of control (Barney 2015, 60), as a means of counter-cartography and critical mapping. However, the steadfast increase in the production of maps, and how they reproduce or appropriate hegemonic forms of representing territory, requires a response with critical methods which can continue to trace the complicity of maps in war-making, or observe their radical potential.

Figure 1: Interactive Map: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine



Source: screenshot taken on July 18th, 2024; <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

In this short text, I will introduce the reader to a critical map-reading approach which can be useful in dealing with cartographic representations of war, especially within peace and conflict research. The focus will be on the interactive map of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (Figure 1) initiated and managed by the Institute for the Study of War, a US think tank which presents itself as an analytical authority on this conflict. Its daily maps and updates are widely shared by international media (e.g. the Financial Times, Der Spiegel, The Guardian) and shared by thousands on social media (their X account has over 700,000 followers). In the critical analysis, their mapping work will be compared and juxtaposed with other examples produced by international organisations, NGOs, and activists. Introducing these examples will allow me to discuss and explore the different visions of conflict they produce, and articulate the tensions between their different perspectives.

Critical Cartography in the Context of Conflict Maps

To read and analyse maps critically means to ask questions about how they are constructed, used and interpreted, rather than to accept them as fixed products which truthfully represent the world. Each map is produced from a specific perspective: they are never neutral and are always positioned within specific ideologies and assumptions about the world. For these reasons, it is important to review them critically: how their title responds to their content, who the author is, how they source and analyse the map data, as well as what tools the author uses to create it.

This includes critically examining the elements of the map, such as the legend, for example—how it supposedly makes the map data analysis transparent, while in fact often being based on conventions and assumptions long taken for granted (e.g., in legends of ethnic distribution maps representing areas “belonging to” homogenous ethnic groups). The choice of projection is also crucial, especially since certain map projections (such as the popular Mercator projection) reproduce colonial and Eurocentric ways of viewing the world. Furthermore, critical map analysis is also about the subject matter of the map and the political choices it reflects—for example, choosing to map locations of army units rather than affected civilians. These are some of the insights that critical cartography offers us in its call to look at maps critically and understand “what we choose to represent, how we choose to represent objects such as people and things, and what decisions are made with those representations” (Crampton 2010, 41).

In looking at the digital maps of the war in Ukraine, I follow the guidelines we have been developing within the KonKoop¹ project and its Multiperspective Visualisation Lab for Peace and Conflict Cartography (VisLab)² charged with the critical analysis of maps. The critical approach of the VisLab is based on the work and methods proposed by different scholars in cartography, such as Denis Wood (2009) and Georg Glazze (2009), but also other disciplines such as visual analysis (e.g., Rose 2006, or the questionnaire developed by Mattern 2013). Its goal is to propose a method of reading maps which responds to the specific context of peace and conflict, and foregrounds issues such as representation of territorial control, conflicting perspectives, missing data, complex authorship in crowdsourced maps, etc.

The VisLab approach underlines the socio-material and temporal aspects of maps and mapping, calling for a focus on the processual aspects of design, as maps in this context develop through time and relations of different actors as the conflict unfolds. As maps are not only produced but also used together by multiple people coming from different positions, looking at their socio-materiality can lead to a greater understanding of how they are shaped through specific interactions and relations, within specific material settings. This aligns with the discussions in processual approaches to cartography, which propose looking at the “diverse, discursive and material processes” (Kitchin, Perkins, and Dodge 2009, p. 17) through which maps were made. Processual

1 The research network “Cooperation and Conflict in Eastern Europe: The Consequences of the Reconfiguration of Political, Economic, and Social Spaces since the End of the Cold War” (KonKoop) comprises six academic institutions from across Germany and is associated with many partners worldwide. It examines various conflict constellations and dynamics of cooperation in Eastern Europe, Southeast Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

2 The Multi-Perspective Visualisation Laboratory for Peace and Conflict Cartography (VisLab) was established at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde – IFL) within the KonKoop project.

understanding foregrounds maps as “always in a state of becoming; as always mapping; as simultaneously being produced and consumed, authored and read, designed and used” (Kitchin, Perkins, and Dodge 2009)

In the following sections, I will provide a glimpse into the analytical approach, focusing on map data, design, perspectives, uses and effects³. I will address how these different elements of maps and the mapping process reveal social, material and temporal relations within mapmaking. Articulating these relations helps bring to light the underlying assumptions of territory and conflict which guide the participants in the mapping process. Furthermore, by focusing on socio-material aspects of mapping processes, we can reveal complexities of map authorship (e.g. differences in perspectives between expert and crowdsourced maps), or the uses and effects of maps across time (e.g. the long-term circulation of maps in media).

In doing so, this text will aim to delve into the question of how war is visualised, and how certain perspectives are prioritised in the process. Maps are inherently selective propositions (Wood 2010) of particular arguments which represent specific worldviews. While this affords them purpose and function, it is still necessary to understand why they prioritise certain information and arguments over other, perhaps equally deserving information and arguments, and how they use visual tools to communicate their propositions. This is especially important in the context of conflict, in which selective and persuasive visual tools can create oversimplistic representations (e.g., of victim-perpetrator relations) or leave out crucial contextual and historical information (e.g., geopolitical relations and external actors).

Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine in the Eyes of ISW: A Critical Comparative Reading

As the ISW map presents one of the dominant perspectives on the war in Ukraine in the international context, it is important to understand how it (re)produces specific accounts of this war, as well as challenge it by comparing it with other examples. The goal of this paper is to give snippets of analytical concerns while focusing on the tensions between single-perspective maps and visualisations which engage with contextual or multi-perspective visions of war. The ISW map, in that sense, focuses on visualising the expert knowledge on one specific dimension of the invasion (the progress of territorial

control), while enforcing the selective view with a simplified territorial vision and representation.

Data, Sources and Analysis

I will start by looking at the map title and legend, as well as how the data was analysed for this map. The map titled *Interactive Map: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine* “complements the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW daily produces with high-fidelity and, where possible, street level assessments of the war in Ukraine” (ISW, n.d.)⁴. As the legend indicates, the map is focused on territorial control—it contains eight types of territories differentiating Russian and Ukrainian control and military advances across different periods (e.g., control in the last 24 hours or since February 24th, 2022).

This is complemented by the area symbol for the “Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir.” ISW methodology “relies on standard US military doctrinal definitions of tactical mission tasks as well as centuries-old conventions for displaying conventional military operations on terrain” (ISW, n.d.). The Institute makes the map to complement their daily updates on the territorial control change in Ukraine by using “only publicly available information” accessible in Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media (mainly Facebook and Telegram), as well as “commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data” (ISW, n.d.). Hence, ISW relies on a variety of data⁴ from different sources (government, social media, geospatial) to visualise territorial control by using area and line symbols to indicate borders, frontlines, and territorial control lines, with an integrated timeline for observing daily changes.

In collecting and analysing their data, the ISW focuses on military movements and changing front lines to analyse developments and provide updates on the interactions of armed forces on the ground. The maps complement reports which bring these updates from the ground as well as political statements, insights into strategies, support from allies, etc. The variety of data and sources are fully integrated into the ISW interface without distinction, creating a unified and simplified image and achieving a homogeneity which suggests reliability and trust.

Map Construction and Design Features

Line symbols are used to depict borders between these different territories, combined with colours—mainly

3 These are some of the key elements and aspects for critically reading maps. A more detailed approach can be found in the questionnaires and guidelines developed by the VisLab at <https://konkoop.de/index.php/vislab-peace-and-conflict-cartography-2/>

4 In the methodology statement, the ISW explains that they produce their reports and maps based on “publicly available information” and “[draw] extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data.” In the list of sources in one of their reports (e.g., their July 15th report available at <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-15-2024>), they list as references links to Russian media articles, US government and media statements, and government reports from different EU countries, while geospatial data is often sourced from X, Facebook and Telegram social media posts, etc.

red to represent Russia and blue to represent Ukraine. In the tradition of typical military maps, they use a base map with accentuated terrain (depicting mountains and rivers), offering an additional view with the 3D Experience Ukraine feature. A notable feature offered is a timelapse view which allows the viewer to select a specific day or timeframe and see how the map changes through time.

The most striking design feature of the map is its use of colours, namely red for Russian and blue for Ukrainian military actions and territories. Such use of contrasting colours is suggestive and stereotypical in representing the aggressive party with red and the defending side with blue (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020). The use of red for the “hostile” party and blue for the “friendly” one is also prescribed in NATO’s cartographic standard, while Soviet/Russian military map symbology counters these standards by using red to symbolise its own troops and blue to mark enemy forces (Bartles 2022). Apart from the use of stereotypical colours, the map appears as a visually classical representation suggesting a neutral and scientific framing of the territory.

The tone of the map and the website is classic and serious, with appropriate fonts and colours. However, the centring of territory becomes interesting when we look at the daily maps⁵, which are the most commonly shared and reproduced derivatives of the ISW’s interactive map on social networks and by the international media. As these maps trace specific areas of warfare, their framing is focused on a smaller scale (e.g., an area where the front lines are shifting) and a specific timeframe (daily reports).

In such representations—coming back to the question of data, especially that which may be missing in the map—the broader context and the larger scale can be lacking, particularly in terms of factors which contribute to military action. Other digital maps representing the conflict, such as ACLED Ukraine Conflict Monitor or the Eyes on Russia maps, often use point-based data (e.g., violent events, position of units) to mark locations and cross-reference them with texts, photos and videos provided in social media posts. Over time, many of these maps become collections of large numbers of points in space and time; however, still missing are map elements which can support reading and meaning-making—e.g. by providing more context to these points and the relations between them. For example, timelines are used in many of these different maps to monitor the progress and movement of points and lines through time, but they rarely indicate important turning points which could help contextualise what is on the map.

This brings us to the question of perspectives—firstly, the temporal perspective of change. Besides the lack of temporal context, the majority of these maps slice time into days, creating a temporal regime of organising the war into shorter portions of time, events and points without making connections between them. This focus on the small scale and linear time corresponds with the limited framing of the territory to the frontline.

Maps foregrounding territorial change, even when based on crowdsourced data, interpolate these data from diverse sources into a singular perspective of the war. Timothy Barney, a scholar with expertise in maps representing war and peace, argued in 2022 that the first digital maps of the war in Ukraine recreated the well-known image of a battle between the “East” and the “West,” and that they lacked any information beyond the military focus, such as data on infrastructure or the movement of refugees. At the same time, he also pointed to examples of maps which succeed in providing multiple perspectives. Other valuable examples are the maps produced by Bellingcat or the Ukrainian Data Explorer by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which focus more on different scopes of war effects, especially on civilians.

In addition, maps can make the process of selecting and visualising their data more transparent in terms of which perspectives are accounted for and in what ways. For example, the LiveUA map authors clarify their production process (see the “About” section) and the engagement of expert analysts, editors and software developers, while the map feed (“News Live”) makes visible how the selected data populates the map.

Another aspect of understanding maps critically is how their uses and effects develop through time. As mentioned, the ISW maps are widely appropriated in media and public discourse, which can lead to perpetuating and reproducing the focus on the military perspective and the front line as the only site of the war. For example, international media such as the Financial Times, Der Spiegel and The Guardian all use ISW data or add additional layers to ISW maps to produce their own versions. However, the ISW territorial perspective remains as the base map of these reproductions, and their military focus remains dominant in media through such appropriations.

Concluding Thoughts: On Alternative Visions of the War

When compared to more “bottom-up” maps, such as the LiveUA map, which renders the sources of its data transparent via a news feed, the ISW flattens the back-end

5 See examples here: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-1-2024>

process of map production to represent a more authoritative synthesis of different perspectives. In the legend and through the map's use of colours, territories are marked as "Russian" or "Ukrainian" (advances, claims, gains, etc.). This on the one hand conflates military activity with the nation-state, but also risks claiming that the states involved directly represent fully homogenous groups as those making territorial claims in the war. In addition, the knowledge and vision of war that the ISW produces in their maps is highly limited by their focus on the territorial change within a limited spatial or temporal scale.

Accordingly, the cartographic perspective the ISW's maps take enforces the primacy of the nation-state and its territorial claims as the driving forces of war. While normalising these ideas, their maps fail to engage with the broader context and geography of war, as well as the multiple other valid perspectives, such as the civilian or environmental experience of the conflict. The concerns with how such limited perspectives enclose the understanding of war are multiplied when specific maps become representative of an overall visual discourse on the war, as might be occurring with the global circulation of the ISW maps.

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How to Normalize the Occupation: Russian Authoritarianism and Maps

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine extends beyond physical conflict into the realms of history, narratives, and worldviews. While historians have analyzed Russia's manipulation of historical narratives to justify its actions in Ukraine and Georgia, the spatial component of Putin's ideology is less explored. Russia's spatial ambitions, deeply rooted in imperial and soviet traditions, link national identity with geographical knowledge, emphasizing maps. This paper examines how maps can support war narratives without depicting conflict directly—more specifically, how Russian authoritarianism uses cartography to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine, shaping public perception and supporting expansionist agendas. Through a critical analysis of Russian state-endorsed maps, the study uncovers the power dynamics, historical distortions, and ideological underpinnings of spatial knowledge construction.

Introduction

The ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine is a conflict not only over physical spaces, but also over histories, narratives, concepts, and worldviews. It is well known and has been studied by many critical historians that Russian justification of the military intervention in Ukraine and, previously, the military intervention in Georgia mobilized a variety of twisted historical narratives, politicized memories and the extensive production of cultural and historical silences on the local, regional and national levels.

What is equally obvious, but less well-described and explained, is the spatial component of Putin's ideology. The existing generalizations quite often simplify the spatial ambitions and identities of the Russian state as "imperial." However, in practice, the narratives surrounding the Russian geographies under Putin's regime are more complicated. They are based on the long-standing imperial and soviet tradition of linking national identity and patriotism with spatial literacy and geographical knowledge, with a very specific role of maps in communicating that. Maps play a crucial role in spatial education worldwide, but Russia has a specific tradition of emphasizing the importance of map-based education as part of a patriotic upbringing; spatial literacy through maps was and remains a sign of a good, responsible citizen. Since the major shift in geographical education in 1930, which put geography in the centre of the school education, maps have become the "alpha and omega" of geography, and hence of geographical education, first in the Soviet Union and then in Russia.

In this paper, I want to briefly talk about how maps can be *about* the war, without showing the war. The basis for the justification of violence, military interventions, and territorial claims could be rooted in very specific manipulated geographical knowledge. This justification draws on a specific vision of space, tradi-

tions of geographical knowledge production, and the interlinked areas of patriotism and geography curricula, which have co-evolved since the 1930s. The paper delves into this intricate interplay between Russian authoritarianism and the construction of the state-sponsored spatial narratives, particularly through cartography, which aim to legitimize the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It transcends the immediate battlefield maps and instead scrutinizes how deep-rooted spatial histories are meticulously crafted and disseminated by the Russian government.

By examining the evolution of these spatial representations, the paper elucidates how they have been strategically utilized to mold public perception, justify aggressive actions, and perpetuate a narrative conducive to the expansionist agenda of the Russian state. Through a critical analysis of the cartographic depictions endorsed by Russian authorities, the paper unveils the underlying power dynamics, historical distortions, and ideological underpinnings that underlie the construction of spatial knowledge. Moreover, it sheds light on the broader implications of such manipulative cartographic practices, not only within the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, but also in shaping geopolitical discourse and justifications for military interventions on the global stage. Ultimately, this exploration serves to underscore the pivotal role of cartography as a tool of propaganda and political maneuvering in the contemporary landscape of international relations, highlighting the urgent need for vigilance and critical engagement with spatial representations in understanding and addressing geopolitical conflicts.

Power, Silences, and Production of Space: New Maps of the Russian State

As outlined in the introduction, I want to show how maps could be *about* the war without directly showing

it. The commencement of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Ukraine's Eastern regions has required the Russian state to react quickly on many levels, including the production of new maps which include the newly annexed territories.

In February 2023, Gerard Toal, prominent political geographer of the former Soviet space, underlined that in the current war the Russian state has not been using maps in propaganda or justification as much as it had in previous wars¹. For the Russian Federation, which has been actively developing very specific geographical knowledge as well as forming close ties with the Russian Geographical Society, such a light usage of maps in pro-war propaganda and in media is unusual. Thus, in what follows I will examine the relationships between the Russian state and its legislation of the war, and how those are represented and/or connected with the Russian map tradition.

A year after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, in January 2023, the discussion on the new law which would classify any maps that “question the territorial integrity” of the Russian state as extremist materials started in the Russian Federation. The initial grounding for this were the complaints from 2022 that Ikea was portraying Russia in its maps without Crimea within its borders. The initial reading of the law stated that any maps which “question the territorial integrity” of the Russian state should be classified as extremist materials, and therefore that their authors could be prosecuted. However, the final readings were slightly milder and stated that only those maps which consciously questioned Russia's territorial integrity would be considered as extremist.

In parallel to these events, the new map of the Russian Federation, presumably responsible for setting the standard of mapping in Russia, was issued and widely distributed². At first glance, this map seemed to have very little to do with any war. It looks like a *standard* map of Russia, developed in the scales, colors and projections closely aligned with the Soviet and early post-Soviet Russian cartographic tradition. One of the most standout features of such a representation is the clear mixture of the physical geographical content with a very prominent and thick red border of the Russian state (all other borders are not marked up on the map).

This static snapshot produced on the backdrop of the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine is, of course, not the only map that has been produced and circulated since 2022. However, it presents an interesting phenomenon in the (re)production of a specific status quo, the integration of the newly annexed territories as inseparable parts of the Russian Federation. This new map of the Russian Fed-

eration features not only the annexed Crimea as an integral part of the state—it also includes the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, and the close up of the border stretching beyond Kherson. Those areas are the spaces of active warfare that have been occupied by the Russian State during the years of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine.

Such a straightforward spatial statement of the new borders of the Russian State opens up several directions of scientific curiosity and inquiry, which deal with the cartographic representation of the conflicts and, more broadly, with the relationships between maps, power, state, state-sponsored violence, and conflicts, specifically in post-Soviet Russia. Among these are the discursive techniques used for the production of space through maps. By simply including the areas of active warfare in Ukraine, as well as occupied Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine, as part of the Russian Federation, the map first erases the conflict from the reader/viewer perception, but also normalizes it, stating the Russian “new order” as fact.

This discursive method is well known as one of the methods of imposing myths in the society, and was firstly introduced by Barthes before being taken further by Svetlana Boym (Boym 2009) regarding the production of the cultural silences in late Soviet period. “Stating things as the matter of fact” (Barthes), especially in maps—a medium which is perceived as “scientific” by wide audiences and guarantees high levels of trust—is a very powerful way of legalizing and normalizing war and violence through its *lack* of presence. This technique is quite widely used in territorial wars: the territorial claims of each side are simply presented as matters of fact to their respective audiences.

More specifically to this case, this technique is also based on a very long Soviet and Russian post-Soviet tradition of production of spaces, both through cultural media and in scientific representation. Among others discursive techniques, for example, was the inclusion of the spaces which have not yet existed as integral parts of the Soviet space. The construction of the future socialist utopia, be that the book “Moscow Faces Reconstruction” (Gorfunkel, 1938), not showing the “blank areas” on maps, or showing the socialist cities “how they will be in future” were the common discursive practice in Soviet cultural production. The cartographic tradition of developing “cartographic silences” and mapping the “Soviet space” by showing Soviet projects which were not yet necessarily developed in practice (“mapping of intentions,” one could call it) is well known by scholars of Soviet cartography (Gavrilova 2021; Baron 2007).

This was a technique of the Soviet state to impose its power, to show grand projects that had not yet been con-

1 Toal's statement was made during the KonKoop conference in Berlin, ZOIS, in March 2023 during the roundtable discussion on war and cartography.

2 For more on this, please refer to: <https://blog.leibniz-iftl.de/2023/11/power-silences-and-production-of-space-new-map-of-russian-state-2023/>

structed or developed. That tradition started with early modernization in the 1930s, and reached its peak in the late Stalinist period. What we see in today's official Russian State cartography is how similar methods are now being used to downplay the war against Ukraine. Apart from other methods which are used in state-sponsored propaganda, including the ban on the word "war" in relation to the current aggression and the concealment of the number of casualties, the erasure of the conflict through maps works to normalize and justify of the military aggression.

Implicit Territorial Legitimization in Media

In other media, for example, in school textbooks and atlases, the *war* with Ukraine has not been presented as such, Russia's territorial claims instead being represented a bit more vaguely. In geographical atlases for high schools, for example, borders are shown as of a specific date, the books being updated and reprinted yearly. If we examine the maps presented in contemporary Russian educational media in detail, which I have done elsewhere (Gavrilova 2024, upcoming), we can clearly see another set of discursive techniques are used there to justify the ongoing aggressions. In short, these methods and techniques include the *historicization* of space by developing specific spatial narratives and histories of the Russian Federation and so-called "near abroad" countries. The discourse of the *historical development* of the territories is commonly known as one of knowledge production under authoritarian states.

The third interesting example is the way the territory of the Russian Federation and its territorial claims are presented in RIA NOVOSTI, one of Russia's largest media outlets, which have been producing a bevy of maps of the ongoing full-scale invasion almost daily (similar to ISW). The borders and territories of the Russian State are shown there according to the following divisions:

- Territories of the Russian Federation
- Territories which have been taken over and controlled by Russia since the beginning of the "special operation"
- Settlements which have been taken over in the last 24 hours
- Territories which have previously been taken over by Russia, but are now under Ukrainian control
- DNR and LNR boundaries at the start of the special operation

This method of representing the war, though of course differing from the blind ignoring of the war in the case of the first map, still underplays the role of Russia's territorial claims and represents them as integral part of the state. The method used in this case is different from the normalization mentioned in the first: for the representation of these territories of different status, dif-

ferent colors have been chosen. The territory of the Russian state (including annexed Crimea) is shown in the same color as the other states on the map, apart from Ukraine, which is colored in pale grey. The annexed territories are shown in dark red (for the DNR and LNR), red (for the territories under Russian control), and dark grey for those which remain under Ukrainian control. Therefore, this map does quite the opposite from the state map. It does not normalize the territorial claims using cartographic silencing, but rather underlines their different status and emphasis their annexation through the active warfare. We witness how this method of dealing with conflicts (ignoring them, imposing the Russian perspective as ground truth) is used in the school textbooks and atlases, for example, in relation to other regions as well.

Among the many constellations in which these areas of research, and the theories that stand behind them, could relate, this map presents an example of one particular way conflicts can be cartographically represented—they can be ignored. Within the landscape of all possible ways of mapping wars and conflicts, is omitting them entirely perhaps the most powerful form of representation? To some extent, this might be true. While other maps acknowledge the war, the conflict and show the active warfare, the Russian State shows the "*Russkyi Mir*" order as something that has been already established, as the outcome of the war.

Conclusions

So, to conclude this brief note, the new map, issued as the "official" map of the Russian State for 2023, poses many questions that needed to be answered. Will we witness even further monopolization on the production of geographical knowledge in Russia, where the spatial dimension of the *Russkyi Mir* would be the only legible cartographic representation of Eastern Europe for internal consumption? Did the Russian government consciously not put maps in the spotlight during this war, while still normalizing the *Russkyi Mir* spatial order through them? What is the role of the Soviet cartographic tradition in silencing the places in the post-Soviet Russian map production? How do these new silences relate to the production of patriotic narratives in Russia? And finally, what does this normalization and this silence tell us about the relationship between state-sponsored violence, conflicts, wars and maps?

It is hard to grasp the answers to those questions all at once, especially as the full-scale invasion is still ongoing and maps of the conflict are still being produced on a daily basis by multiple actors. However, what we are witnessing is that the Russian state refuses to produce maps of *war*, similar to the public ban on the usage of the word *war* in relation to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Please see overleaf for Information about the Author and References.

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ANALYSIS

Red Arrow/Error: A Map Designed to Justify the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Takes on a Life of Its Own in Media and Memes

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Abstract

On 1 March 2022, a few days after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, a video of Alexander Lukashenko presenting a map appeared on social media. The map was intended to tell a story and take control of a situation, a combination of a military and a geopolitical map. Initially intended for the Belarusian public, the map travelled around the world and has been read, interpreted and obscured by a much wider audience in memes. We critically analyse the map itself, its presentation by Lukashenko, and its journey through the (digital) media.

Introduction

On 1 March 2022, a few days after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, a video of Alexander Lukashenko presenting a map to the Security Council and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus appeared on social media. In this paper, we critically analyse the map itself, its presentation by Lukashenko, and its journey through the (digital) media.

In the context of conflict, maps play an important role in the spread of information about the hostilities. But maps are a central feature of media communication even in peacetime (Vujaković 2018; Barney 2018). They help to shape geopolitical discourse, especially when used by states to support their geopolitical agendas (Harley 1988; Vujaković 2014). But we also need to consider them in terms of their embeddedness in performative practices of map-making, presentation and interpretation (Crampton 2009).

Figure 1: The Map Lukashenko Presented at the Joint Meeting of the Belarusian Security Council and Council of Ministers From a Video Published by BelTA



Source: Video published on the BelTA Youtube channel for free access (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxEaU0deUU>), screenshot by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen.

As we know, maps are never neutral. They are condensed information with carefully chosen cartographic symbols, colours, and other details geared at conveying a message (KonKoop VisLab 2023). They become particularly relevant in times of conflict, as they convey information quickly and often in an easily comprehensible way. At the same time, they have an important military function as well as being used to inform the wider public in the media (Clarke 1992; Herb et al. 2009).

Finally, maps can become a resource to challenge or confirm the information and messages they convey (Crampton and Krygier 2006; Mortensen and Neumayer 2021). Through their dissemination in the media, a map enters the public realm and, with the help of various technologies, can easily be appropriated, thus giving rise to new maps and meanings (Leszczynski 2015).

A map is, however, not an immutable artefact. Meaning is created in the interaction with the reader and user, lending the map a performative character. The appropriation of the map and its layers of information in various forms in the (digital) media sets in motion a cycle of reproducing new and different versions of the original map, or parts thereof. This can be considered to be a performative effect of the map (Wood 2012; Gerlach 2018). This performative effect sometimes focusses on details that may be used to satirize, transform, or even completely reverse the signification of maps.

The map we want to discuss here has the intention to tell a story and take control of a situation. It is a mixture of a military map and a geopolitical map. Initially intended for the Belarusian public, the map travelled around the world in an entirely unintended way: after a broad attention of some details by Western media, it has been appropriated as a blueprint for satire, polemics and critique.

The Map and Lukashenko's Presentation

BelTA, the Belarusian state news agency, a propaganda instrument, released a 50-minute recording of the abovementioned meeting on 1 March 2022. To date, it has been viewed 6.6 million times, making it one of the top five most-viewed items on the *BelTA* channel (Informatsionnoe Agentstvo BelTA, 2022).

Staging the Map

Lukashenko's speech is characterised by military and geopolitical rhetoric. The chaos of the first week of the Russian invasion raised many questions centred on Belarus' role in providing a corridor for Russian troops to enter Ukraine from the north and a possible participation of Belarusian troops in the invasion. The meeting on 1 March gives Lukashenko an opportunity to present his view of the situation in a reassuring way.

For the first half hour of the video, the Belarusian leader offers a version of the history of the conflict that echoes the Kremlin's narratives on Ukraine and security in Europe. His entire speech essentially boils down to justifying Belarus' support for the Russian invasion. At some point in his speech, Lukashenko turns to the events of 24 February, which he explains using the printed map.

Figure 2: Lukashenko With the Map and the Participants of the Meeting



Source: Video published on the *BelTA* Youtube channel for free access (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxEaU0deUU>), screenshot by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen.

Lukashenko interacts with the map in a gesture of power. He stands there like a teacher, explaining the Russian attacks on Ukraine to the participants, calling one of them up like a pupil to answer questions in a condescending way and later allowing him to sit back down. The presence of the media is intended to ensure that the message gets out that he entirely is in control of the situation, and that Russian forces are attacking Ukraine also from Belarusian territory.

This message is important because parts of Belarusian society (and beyond) perceive Lukashenko as a puppet of Putin. It is around this time that the EU declares Belarus a co-aggressor in Russia's war against Ukraine because it allows Russia to station troops in Belarus and ultimately to attack neighbouring Ukraine from its territory. Various analysts debate the extent to which Lukashenko was informed in advance of Putin's intention to invade Ukraine, suggesting that this happened very late or even just a few hours before the attack. Opposition forces even call on the international community to declare Belarus a temporarily occupied territory (Bohdan et al. 2022).

The Map

It is likely that the Belarusian Ministry of Defence produced the map in cooperation with the Russian Ministry of Defence for informational purposes, with an emphasis on military-strategic content that the authors apparently did not think necessary to conceal from the public. Titled 'The Situation around the Republic of Belarus', the map includes areas about 500 km to the north, 750 km to the south and west, and about 1000 km to the east of the country (Compare Figure 1).

The map shows Ukraine divided into four sectors, corresponding to the operational sectors of the Ukrainian Ground Forces and various military infrastructures. It shows a border between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine, and no border of Crimea as part of Ukraine with the Russian Federation. It includes several geopolitical designations: the Transnistrian region and the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic are clearly marked. In 2021, Belarus had recognised Crimea as Russian territory, but not the self-proclaimed republics in eastern Ukraine or Transnistria.

The perceived threat posed by the NATO military alliance is brought to the fore in both the map and the rhetoric around it. This focus is made clear by the inclusion of a (highlighted) map of Canada and the United States in the top left-hand corner. Other inserts, totalling 20 per cent of the entire map, provide military information on the size and nature of NATO forces, NATO and US air groupings in Europe, and the increased US military presence in Germany, Poland, Latvia and Romania. The military presence on both sides is represented by red (for Russia) and blue bars (for the enemy, here NATO) with descriptions (illegible) corresponding to traditional Soviet and Russian military cartography (Bartles 2022).

It is interesting that Lukashenko's speech does not deal with most of the layers depicted on the map, and instead focuses on the threat posed by NATO's military presence on Belarus's western border and a possible threat from Ukraine. An important design feature can be found in the red arrows coming from Belarus and the Russian Federation, indicating the planned directions of the attack on Ukraine.

Arrows have long been used as symbolic features to highlight movement, particularly in migration, military and geopolitical maps. They are powerful sugges-

tive symbols, as widely discussed and criticised (Cheshire and Kent 2023; van Houtum and Lacy 2020; Sturm 2021). These arrows represent the attacks during the first days of the invasion in February 2022, with the exception of a depicted landing in Odesa and an arrow pointing from Odesa to Transnistria and Moldova.

International Reaction and Distribution

It is this small detail, a graphic feature not referred to in Lukashenko's speech about the perceived Western threat through NATO, that catches the attention of Western media and leads to its appropriation for various sorts of satirical content. *Pul Pervogo*, a channel close to the Belarusian president, published a three-minute clip of the presentation of this map (Pul Pervogo 2022). A mere hours later, Tadeusz Giczán, a Belarusian opposition journalist in exile, publishes the video on Twitter, where he emphasizes one red arrow along the Odesa-Transnistria-Moldova line (Giczán 2022). The next day, based on this tweet, America's Fox News and the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reports on the Lukashenko map and the red arrow pointing towards Moldova, fuelling fears that Moldova, with its separatist region of Transnistria, would be the next target for Russian forces.

Fox News runs with the headline 'Belarus President Lukashenko appears to stand in front of map of planned Moldova invasion: reports' (Stimson, 2022) and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* publishes 'Das Rätsel um Lukashenkos Kriegs-Karte' ('The mystery surrounding Lukashenko's war map') (Gierke 2022). The same day, Romanian and Ukrainian media report about the red arrow and Lukashenko's map, and the resulting fear of a Russian attack on Moldova (Ionaşcu 2022; Ukrainska Pravda 2022).

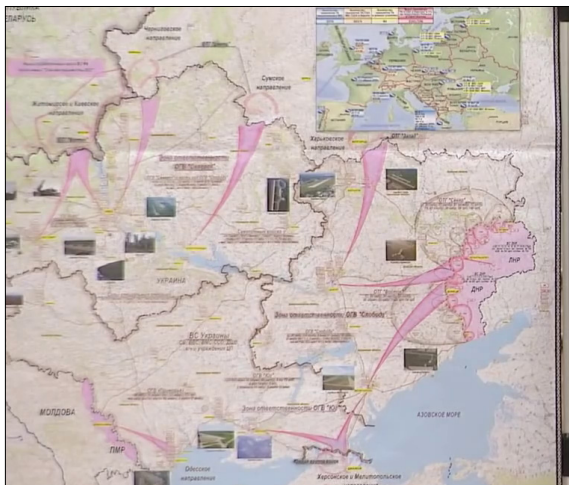
Interestingly, the reaction in Moldovan media is more muted. Nevertheless, the Belarusian ambassador to the Republic of Moldova is immediately summoned to the Moldovan Foreign Ministry on 2 March to explain the red arrow heading towards Moldova from Odesa circulating in social media. He declares that this has been presented incorrectly by the Belarusian Ministry of Defence (Interfax 2022; Ukrainska Pravda 2022). On 9 March, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence informed journalists after numerous inquiries that this arrow had been drawn incorrectly (Belsat 2022).

The small red arrow in a map undermined the entire presentation of the Belarusian president.

Memes of Lukashenko and the Map

The international and social media attention to the red arrow was not the only unintended outcome of Lukashenko's presentation of the map. In the digital media, maps can easily be appropriated and (re)produced to convey a different meaning from the one originally intended. Memes are critical rhetorical or

Figure 3: Red Arrows

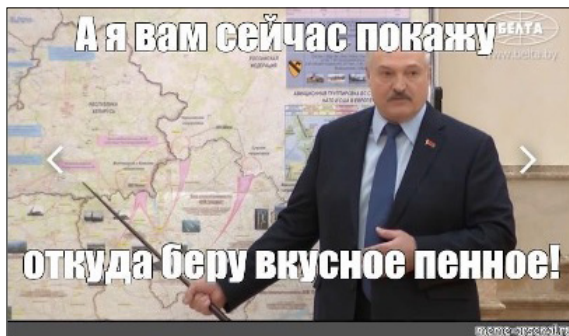


Source: Screenshot from the video published on BeITA (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxEEaU0deUU>)

visual reflections that challenge or confirm political power and public discourse in terms of ‘spatial mediation’ (Leszczynski 2015). Perhaps it was the broad media attention on the map that provoked social media to caricature the whole setting in many different ways. Memes about Lukashenko’s map criticised and satirised the map itself, but also his pose and presentation. Finally, many of them also caricatured a phrase Lukashenko used to justify the invasion in a meeting with Vladimir Putin on 11 March 2022 as being a response to a Ukrainian invasion plan: ‘And now I will show you where the attack on Belarus was prepared from’. This makes Lukashenko’s justification appear even more absurd.

Mememes are not necessarily critical; they can also be affirmative. The mememes we selected show Lukashenko as someone talking about food and drinks in front of a military and geopolitical map, taking neither the person nor what he is talking about seriously. There are a number of mememes starting with the phrase ‘And now I will show you where...’ displaying and caricaturing the absurd justification that Ukraine had planned to attack Belarus. For instance, the mememe in Figure 4 states ‘And now I will show where I can get a good beer.’

Figure 4: ‘And Now I Will Show You Where I Can Get a Good Beer’.



Source: <https://www.meme-arsenal.com/memes/de26ec826d7445646dea5ab3c9044cf6.jpg>

Other mememes take a critical look at the map he is presenting and replace it with other maps and images. One uses a map of Hogwarts from the Harry Potter novels (Figure 5). This could refer to the evil wizards fighting the good wizards, without specifying who is who.

Another shows Russia, depicted as a red monster chasing and swallowing Ukraine, represented as a pig trying to escape. The accompanying phrase ‘For what?’ can be read as a criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Belarusian president as a co-aggressor. On this version of the map, the phrase ‘30 points’ is written in Cyrillic in light pink. The word for ‘point’ is

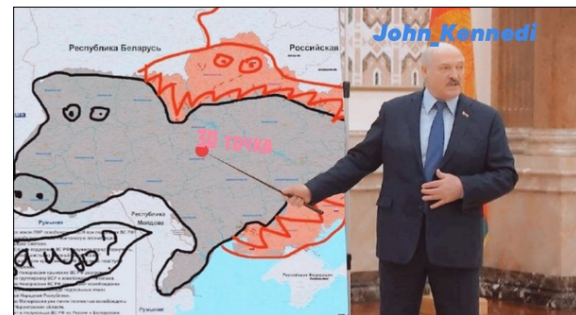
tochka in Russian and Ukrainian, and is a linear measure. However, *Tochka* is also a Soviet strategic ballistic missile which has been used in the present war. The meaning is difficult to interpret, which is typical of mememes, which often leave the interpretation to the reader. ‘John Kennedy’ is written on the mememe, which might be a pseudonym of the author.

Figure 5: Mememe Using a Map of Hogwarts From the Harry Potter Books



Source: https://avatars.mds.yandex.net/i?id=56b7de336c7604641b94b7c950fc1a64_1-5734287-images-thumbs&n=13

Figure 6: Mememe With a Drawing Superimposed on the Map



Source: https://sun9-53.userapi.com/impf/clZT8hy5e7cdcfkvxRy6AzteCCp_Ec7hPtp5A/sXWYQYemX4Q.jpg?size=604x329&quality=95&sign=d72047d2bf8869968f4369bf8d432dab&type=album

Another mememe uses a child’s drawing of Russian soldiers, tanks and aircraft fighting. One tank has a flag with a reversed swastika. It is not clear who is fighting whom. This can be read as a critical assessment of Putin’s obscure narrative that Russian forces are fighting Nazis in Ukraine (Figure 7). But again here, it is up to the reader to interpret the political message behind the image.

Conclusion

The map presented by Lukashenko is a vivid example of how maps in general, but also in the specific context

Figure 7: Meme Using an Unattributed Child's Drawing



Source: https://avatars.mds.yandex.net/i?id=97d76eb3833773c9e9816ec4bca1791_1-5221624-images-thumbs&n=13

of the Russian war against Ukraine, are used to frame information in the (social) media. It shows how power is exercised through maps and how maps are used in the scripting of geopolitical discourse and public opinion.

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It also shows how quickly and independently (social) media is able to appropriate maps, and obscure and undermine, but also critically analyse them.

The memes that circulated on social media highlight and criticise the message that was originally conveyed through this map, namely a justification of the invasion largely based on false claims and Lukashenko's personal vision of the situation. The diversity of memes shows how the map itself and its presentation is used in the service of various interests, interests revealed in caricatures that obscure the map's original intent and offer an alternative reading of the issue.

Another interesting aspect of the map is the red arrow pointing towards Moldova, which took on a life of its own, demonstrating the suggestive power of visual elements. Lukashenko's speech makes no reference to this layer of the map's narrative, but it is this visual element that attracts media attention and contributes to the political and public discourse on whether Moldova and Transnistria will be the next target of Russian aggression.

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