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Zelenskyj – Defending the Democratic Spirit

A semiotic case study on political personalisation

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Abstract

Since Russia initiated their war in Ukraine February 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyj went from being a national celebrity to becoming a global phenomenon. With international news media reporting on his every move, the representation of Zelenskyj has become central to how distant audiences make sense of the war, gaining immense popularity among Western audiences particularly. For Ukraine, having no formal alliance, the vitality of winning international popular support cannot be exaggerated. What makes Zelenskyj an unusual case interesting for the study of political personalisation is largely due to how he has been represented visually. The research field has previously focused more on verbal or written communication, predominantly studying personalisation within national election contexts. This thesis therefore aims to provide new insight on the significance of visual representation, within an international context of representing leaders' to gain popular opinion. For this purpose, we apply a semiotic approach to convey the cultural meanings in pictures of Zelenskyj, furthermore analysing his image in comparison to pictures of his opponent, Russian President Vladimir Putin. The analysis found ideological notions and myths embedded in visualising Zelenskyj dressed as a soldier in the field or together with world leaders, ultimately representing him as a "defender of liberal-democratic principles" and "member of the Western family".

Keywords: personalisation, visual representation, semiotics, political leadership, political myth

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1. Becoming a Global Phenomenon

“We have shown our strength. We have shown that, at a minimum, we are exactly the same as you. So do show you are with us. Do show you will not let us go. Show that you truly are Europeans” – Volodymyr Zelenskyj to the European Parliament, March 2022 (Genté & Siohan 2022, 154)

On February 24th 2022 Russia initiated their war in Ukraine, shocking the international community while making connotations to the devastating conflicts of the previous century. In its most traditional form, Europe had not seen a conventional war on the continent since the Second World War. Furthermore, Russia’s attack brought the memory of The Cold War to the surface, with fears of destructive escalation and threat to the liberal-democratic world. Those who believed it would be a swift Russian victory were proved wrong, as battles in Ukraine are ongoing at the turn of 2022 with no resolution in sight. The war however is not just a conventional war between two states, but to a large degree also an information war where both sides try to control the narrative of events, to influence public opinion at home and abroad. The latter becomes particularly important for Ukraine, with no formal allies for military backup.

Since the media domain in modern society has transformed the traditional public sphere, such information war and international mobilisation efforts are primarily played out across media networks (Hartley 1992, 5). This makes the concept of representation increasingly relevant to how people understand events that happen far from their direct proximity. Representation is also central to the tendency towards personalisation in politics, developed as its own research field in recent decades. A general definition of personalisation suggests a trend toward focusing on individuals rather than collectives (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2014). In politics, this can be characterised by making sense of political processes through the representation of political leaders. With the global attention, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyj became a world celebrity overnight and the most central actor in news media’s reporting on the war, besides Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. Zelenskyj’s popularity among Western audiences is maybe best framed by Time Magazine's choice of Zelenskyj as Person Of The Year 2022 with the title “Volodymyr Zelensky and the Spirit of Ukraine” (Time Magazine, 2022).

Undoubtedly, what's made Zelenskyj a global phenomena however is not so much the circumstances of the war itself but to a large extent how his leadership is represented, and particularly how his visual expression has become vital to how international audiences know him. The research field on personalisation of political leaders has primarily focused on domestic politics to study the phenomena in national elections, mainly taking interest in the verbal or textual rhetorics of political leaders and in the media. Therefore the objective of this analysis is to contribute with new knowledge on how personalised leadership is expressed through visual communication in international politics, by examining the visual representation of Zelenskyj during the war. This objective proposed to the following research questions:

- What cultural meaning is communicated in the visual representation of Zelenskyj?
- How can the visual representation of Zelenskyj contribute to developing the field of visual communications' role in the personalisation of politics?

2. Personalisation of Politics

The purpose of this chapter is to map the research field of personalisation of political leaders. Initially going into the research phase different search topics have been of interest, leading to other topics to which the relevant research ended up becoming more and more narrow. The aim is therefore to position this study in relation to the previous research and clarify what methodological and theoretical approach would bring most value to the topic of personalisation of politics.

2.1 Mediatisation and performativity

Research on personalised political communication has to a large extent taken interest in its relation to populist leaders and a performative turn in politics. A conventional approach has been to analyse the rhetoric of leaders. Cañizález (2013) studied governmental communication in Venezuela in the period 2000-2010 under the administration of Hugo Chávez, and identified personality politics and populism as the main features in the president's speeches. It's common among scholars to view personalisation through the process of mediatisation, with political discourse adapting to the premises of spectacularity in traditional media. The relationship between politics and entertainment, with the media logic fostering "star politicians", has inspired studies such as Durántez-Stolle and Martínez-Sanz (2019) who analysed the leadership construction and communication of Spanish politician Miguel Ángel Revilla.

Recent research has examined Zelenskyj in performing his leadership role, recalling his former career as an actor and comedian. Kaminskij (2022) analysed the president's election campaign in relation to his character in the 2015-2019 Ukrainian Netflix series "Servant of the People". The aim was to gain insight Zelenskyj's personalised image in the light of growing global populism. Furthermore, Liubchenko et al. (2021) conducted both an intent analysis of Zelenskyj's key public speeches and a discourse analysis of the public's response. The aim was to map out the intended values in his communication strategy, identifying a strong tendency of communicating Western values.

2.2 Charismatic political leadership

Previous research on charismatic leadership in politics has been of interest to scholars in how political leaders promote certain cultural values often linked to the populist and nationalistic trend in Western politics. In studying charismatic leaders the prominent sociologist Max

Weber's theory on charisma is often applied in the research field, particularly those societies dominated by religious and cult leadership. A link between meditation and the charismatic political leader is something that Miconi (2015) found in his research paper about the rise of the Italian Five Star political movement and especially its charismatic founder Beppe Grillo. It is concluded by Miconi that Grillo gained popularity by using an authentic form of interaction with his supporters through his online blog, arguing a rise of populist leadership in digital environments (Miconi 2015, 1044).

Researchers have found myth to be a central component in creating the ethos of the charismatic leader. In their paper, Balakhonskaya et al. (2019) studied former Russian opposition leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy during his presidential election campaigns and found that myths like "enemy" and "hero-saviour" were central to his image-creation, forming his image of the Russian Patriarch (Balakhonskaya et al. 2019, 22-23). Furthermore, in his research Shaefer (2001) mapped the charismatic skills such as rhetorical and dramatic abilities for the members of the Israeli Parliament Knesset's chances of getting news coverage, by putting forward the question "who gets on the news?", and found a correlation between charismatic skills and media legitimacy (Sheafer 2001, 728).

2.3 Elections and political campaigns

Most studies on visual communication regarding political personalisation have focused on how national political leaders build their images during election campaigns, profoundly focusing on the semiotic analysis of posters, slogans and speeches. In their study, Baines et al. (2014) investigated the role of political positioning between two party leader candidates in the 2010 British Election and found that political positioning is a key target in the building of a coherent and consistent image of the political leader (Baines et al. 2014, 173-174). Turning to the visual representation of individual politicians, El-Nawawy (2016) applied a semiotic analysis of sign systems in president Al-Sisi's Egyptian presidential campaign in 2014. The key finding here was to promote the president both as a family man and a strongman. (El-Nawawy 2016, 2275).

2.4 Global politics and international relations

Political personalisation has mostly been studied on a domestic level. Scholars have only more recently started to focus on how the phenomenon manifests and impacts politics globally. A main theme of interest is the mediatisation of foreign policy, such as studies on

news media framing. Researchers Balmas and Shaefer (2014) conducted a long-term content analysis on a large sample of news items in six countries and found that Western news media increasingly focus on foreign leaders instead of their respective countries, a process they call “mediatized international personalisation”. The study found that strong charisma in elected leaders intensified the personalisation process of foreign media’s coverage of their country.

Focus on visual communication is seemingly rare in the research on the personalisation of global politics. A recent article by Hedling et al. (2022) analysed NATO’s use of social media marketing featuring Norwegian Influencer Lasse Matberg as “the face of NATO”. The objective was to examine visual narratives of social media promotion building on previous research on “the pleasure culture of war”, and how fantasy and appeal are used to deflect from political and military controversy. Masculinity in political discourse is a subject of interest in the field. Smith (2016) applies a semiotic approach in analysing the gendered construction of politics by comparing former US President Barack Obama with Russia's president Vladimir Putin, with the media framing them as representing the ‘new man’ and the latter as ‘traditional masculinity’ (Smith 2016, 99). Promoting certain values such as the capability of military experience and individual fitness versus the new man’s dynamicness and authenticity (2016, 103-104).

2.5 Conclusion

In mapping the research on the field of personification of contemporary politics, a few thematics have been identified which suggests a research gap and insufficient focus on the visual aspects of personified political communication. Lots of studies have taken interest in charismatic political leadership and how it relates to meditation and personalisation processes. However, the importance of visual representations of leaders might not be emphasised enough, as previous approaches have been dominated by narrative and discourse analysis. Furthermore, most previous research focuses on the construction of leadership images in presidential and political elections, mainly studying communication aimed at voters and domestic audiences. Few studies take interest in the visual aspects of personalisation in the context of international relations and global politics. Semiotics are uncommon in this field, and in political science in general.

3. Research Design

The following chapter presents the research design of choice. It motivates the chosen method of analysis in relation to the study objective, the strategies used for case and sample selection, and the relevance of applying a semiotic approach to answer the research questions. It further discusses a comparative element used in the analysis, and provides a discussion on the discursive aspect of pictures, which is relevant to interpreting pictures in research.

3.1 The power of example

To answer questions about the cultural significance of visual representation in personalised political leadership, a method is required that generates insight on the underlying social mechanisms of the phenomena. An appropriate method for this, as argued by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), is the case study. Flyvbjerg favours the case study when aiming for in-depth knowledge on context dependent and value based matters – a “phronetic” research ideal he considers best suited for social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 57). Such insight demands judgement from the researcher and that they can relate the concrete to a more general problem (ibid). The case study is useful for this, as it allows for both thorough analysis and generalisable knowledge in choosing a case with significance to the larger problem of interest (2001, 78-79). The choice to study the visual representation of Zelenskyj during the war is based on identifying it as an unusual example of visualised political leadership, and an extreme case of personalisation in a time of crises. Such cases, Flyvbjerg (2001, 78-79) suggests, may serve to dramatically illustrate a thesis due to their extreme nature. The case is arguably extreme in that Zelenskyj has gone from being nationally famous to becoming a world celebrity, with Russia’s attack drawing global attention. But it may also be understood as “critical”, defined by Flyvbjerg (2001, 78) as of strategic importance in regards to the study of a larger problem. This means that studying the visual representation of Zelenskyj has potential for more general insight on the meaning of visualised personalised leadership beyond the specific case.

3.2 Interpreting pictures

In analysing the material, the case study applies a semiotic approach inspired by Barthes’ (2007) research decoding mythology and ideology in pictures. It’s applied by examining visual representations on a twofold, denotative and connotative level, to answer what the pictures suggest about the cultural significance of the Ukrainian leader’s representation. It’s

an appropriate approach when interested in the meaning-making structures of cultural and societal phenomena, such as in the case of personalised leadership representations during times of war. Frank Jacob (2021) uses the term “war semiotics”, and argues that war provides various symbols and signs that may be studied through a semiotic lens (Jacob 2021, 7-8). He writes that it’s naturally common within the study of conflict to also consider the opponent, adding a comparative element (2021, 3-4). In line with this, a part of the analysis will include an examination of pictures published of the Russian leader since the launch of the attack, to be able to compare the representation of the two. In studying the cultural meaning of Zelenskyj’s visualised leadership in war, it’s arguably of relevance to examine his representation in relation to that of Vladimir Putin, as Putin’s image is an important part of the context.

The importance of context relates to the discursive aspect of pictures, as discussed by John Hartley (1992). Hartley notes that pictures are “real” objects in a physical and material sense, while their “reality” is a result of ideas and knowledge (Hartley 1992, 31). Their reality is determined by the way they are looked at, a product of their discourse. Therefore, Hartley argues, the material reality of pictures may be understood as traces of discursive politics in an empirical form (1992, 29). In studying social phenomena, it’s important to recognise that the facts are affected by both the context of the studied subjects and the context of the researcher (Flyvbjerg 2001, 32-33). In the case of Zelenskyj, then, it’s appropriate to note that pictures do not simply reflect his political leadership as such but engage with the discourse among international audiences, specifically in Europe and the West. Our interpretation of the visual representation of Zelenskyj is done within a Scandinavian cultural context, which means that we must analyse his pictures from this perspective. And because they are made known to us through the news media, our interpretation is also determined by how they are framed in the press. The caption of Zelenskyj’s pictures may in this regard assist the interpretation of a particular motive, for example by providing the location or the status of a person that Zelenskyj or Putin is photographed with when this is not revealed by the content itself.

3.3 Sample selection

The empirical data was collected using a strategic and non-random approach, suitable for the aim and research design of the study (Flyvbjerg 2001, 78). This means that the sample was strategically chosen based on its content, and gathered into a larger pool of pictures that was then organised based on identified patterns in the motives. For the visual representation of

Zelenskyj, two predominant themes emerged which were titled ‘Zelenskyj and the People’ and ‘Zelenskyj and World Leaders’. This process further guided the structuring of Putin’s pictures, including motives placing him in similar or contrasting settings and interactions. The pictures were gathered from news media articles published in Danish and Swedish press. Sweden and Denmark are both considered part of a Western democratic discourse, and respective members of international and regional alliances that Ukraine seeks support from. A benefit of turning to news sources from both countries, instead of just one, was that by identifying no difference in the contents or patterns of the pictures, one may assume the visual representation of Zelenskyj to be similar in the press of other Western countries.

The process meant going through the digital archives of the largest, most established news media outlets in Sweden (Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet) and Denmark (Danmarks Radio, Berlingske, Politiken). Pictures were to include Zelenskyj and/or Putin, and because the war context is central to the analysis in the representation of Zelenskyj, they were collected from articles published after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, narrowing our scope to February 24th up until December given the time limit of this thesis. From this, 46 pictures of Zelenskyj and 28 of Putin were gathered. The purpose for looking at more pictures of Zelenskyj was that his representation is “new” to international audiences, where Putin is already known internationally. Since pictures of the two state leaders are generally “handouts”, produced by the respective governments’ photographers and distributed to media networks like Ritzau/Scanpix and Thomson Reuters, it was common to find the same motives spread across the different media outlets.

4. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this following section is to present the theoretical frame that helps understand the material. Here, theory about leadership, myths and ideology and how it is manifested visually is applied to bring new knowledge on their cultural significance. The target has therefore been to provide a framework that most adequately helps answer the questions of the analysis. The prioritising of theories applied to the topic rests on what aspects the study wishes to enlighten.

4.1 Representing ideology, myth and metaphors

The theoretical framework for the analysis applies an understanding of pictures' political power based on Cultural Studies Professor John Hartley's (1992) book about "the politics of pictures". He argues that all pictures are "talkative", in a literal sense or in association to texts, contexts and discourses (Hartley 1992, 28). They are politicised when entering the public sphere, and their political status is achieved not due to their subject matter, but because of their frame and the relations they create with audiences and with other pictures (ibid). The main argument of Hartley's is that, because the public sphere is no longer a physical place but rather an increasingly mediatised one, the idea of visualisation and representation has come to saturate all levels of political practice (1992, 5-6). This background is relevant as to how pictures of personalised leaders such as Zelenskyj may be understood as clues to the "sense-making practices" of his image during the war, a term explained by Hartley as the ideological aspect of pictures (Hartley 1992, 29).

Applying an understanding of metaphors in politics is another useful way to understand how the visual representation of leaders manifests in a global political context. International Relations Professor Ben O'Loughlin (2017) writes about images of conflict, arguing for the recurrence of only a few dominant metaphors in the sense-making of global politics (O'Loughlin 2017, 25). These are mental images that are continuously reproduced and translated into material pictures in the media (2017, 31). The central argument of this metaphorical aspect to politics is that because they form our understanding of global politics, they influence the way we look at history and how international relations are practised moving forward (2017, 28).

Myths are central for understanding the construction of Zelenskyj's image. Giving theoretical birth to the study of myth is Roland Barthes, who argued that myths are an apolitical expression which naturalises ideological concepts (Barthes 2007, 236-237). This

theoretical notion helps analyse how the representations of Zelenskyj and Putin make use of competing myths representing ideology. Barthes established that myths are central in conveying ideology. Building on top of that, Mary Fulbrook (2007) defines that nations are themselves myths, a fixed reality (Fulbrook 2007, 72-73). This construction of reality is very important for creating a sense of nationhood (Fulbrook, 78-79).

4.2 Representing leadership

Leadership is one central aspect in personalisation of politics. One of the most prolific theorisations of personified leadership styles is that of charisma to which sociologist Max Weber (1968) gave its theoretical birth. The theory outlines charisma as central to individual leaders with unique qualities making them popular to their followers (Weber 1968, 18-19). The concepts of leadership styles can be applied to the topic in that it both tries to understand the political leader as a figure, but in a broader sense also to which the personalised leader represents the values of a political system. Further this can become clearer if one wishes to study the way political leaders represent political systems (1968, 46-47). Understanding the leadership style can be emphasised how the visual representation can ultimately communicate the political leader as an institution oneself.

4.3 Visualising global politics

Turning to the aspect of how these theoretical concepts are represented in global politics, the role of visuals becomes crucial. This is argued by Roland Bleiker et al. (2018) to which striking events, such as the 9/11 attack come to be understood through visual representation, which become crucial to how audiences understand it (Bleiker 2018, 4-5). Visual artefacts are ever present in the visual representation of the personified leadership (Bleiker 2018, 14). As argued by Laura Shepherd (2018) and Brent J. Steele (2018) central subjects to how visual artefacts are to be understood in global politics is militarisation and state. First of importance is that militarisation in which visual artefacts, such as military uniforms, flags ceremonies become central to how we understand war (Shepherd, 209-211). Further, visual artefacts are important in relation to how states position themselves. Such an example could be that of promoting militaristic values of the state. This is done by the state's aesthetic representation in creating an image symbolising values for the purpose of legitimation from domestic and international audiences. In representing the state, individuals can become symbols of cultural ideals (Steele 2018, 284-285).

4.4 Conclusion

The theory reviewed above will be applied to analyse the most central themes in visual representations of Zelenskyj, thus better understanding what the pictures communicate on a deeper level. The central point for the choice of theories is that they can help us analyse the representation, myths, metaphors and ultimately ideologies that the pictures of Zelenskyj represent.

5. Zelenskyj – Defending the Democratic Spirit

The following chapter aims to decode embedded cultural values, myths and ideology in the visual representation of Zelenskyj, to convey the meaning of his image in the war. The analysis has been divided into two categories based on identified patterns; ‘Zelenskyj and the People’ and ‘Zelenskyj and World Leaders’. It’s followed by a contrasting examination and comparison with the representation of Putin, and concludes with a discussion of the empirical findings.

5.1 Zelenskyj and the People

In this category, we see ‘Zelenskyj and the People’. Here Zelenskyj is commonly pictured among Ukrainian soldiers in the field, outside his presidential headquarters of Kyiv visiting war zones, military ceremonies and hospitals – the reality of many Ukrainian citizens. In most pictures of this category, it seems to be the setting of a post-battle, because we see artefacts such as after-smoke, building ruins, fork tape and heavily armed soldiers. This brings a certain heaviness to the pictures, because of the concrete, steel and armoury. Further, we can identify ‘the people’ as soldiers of the Ukrainian Army, since they wear military uniforms.

The soldiers protecting him appear to be his private guards because he is never pictured without a heavily armed escort surrounding him to which the same guards can be identified in multiple pictures. Even though, some soldiers can be identified, they are represented as anonymous compared to Zelenskyj in that they are presented in their military uniforms and masks. We can assume that these soldiers are well trained, given that they protect the president of a country at war, which is underpinned by his central location in the composition of the pictures. One such example was after the ‘Bucha Massacre’ in August 2022 when Zelenskyj visited the site and met the international press. Here we saw a sad and emotional Zelenskyj. The pictures have a dark tone, due to the understated invisible tragedy of the setting. This dark tone is a recurring theme across the pictures in the category where Zelenskyj visits war zones.

One of the most common situations in this category is Zelenskyj interacting with soldiers. We see that Zelenskyj’s facial expression varies in these situations, from showing sadness after a press conference, determination after a briefing with military leaders, joy sitting among ordinary soldiers and sympathy towards a wounded soldier. This constant

interaction with people becomes another recurring theme in this category of pictures because we see Zelenskyj among ordinary soldiers.

What does it suggest?

The context of war is ever present in this theme. The militaristic setting thus serves as a visual reference point for communicating cultural meaning and a “new normal”. The military context to which the theme is represented can be explained by referring to Laura Shepherd's (2018) definition of militarisation as a process that leads to militarism, creating a military ethos, which can be understood as shared beliefs and values among an entity (Shepherd, 2018, 209-210). Constructing the military ethos of Zelenskyj can be said to represent him as part of a united Ukrainian front against the Russian enemy.

Drawn from the military context, a central aspect to this theme is the representation of Zelenskyj as one of his people, due to how he is seen interacting and dressed as the soldiers, fighting alongside them. This interaction with his soldiers becomes central to the representation of him in the context. In understanding how the pictures are a representation of Zelenskyj's reality, myth becomes central to how cultural meaning is conveyed. In studying this Barthes definition of myths is central. According to Barthes (2007, 236-237) myth is an apolitical expression which can be applied in any given culture to convey meaning. This follows that the myth becomes a naturalised reflection of reality, which can be applied in this study's understanding of cultural meaning in the visual representation (ibid).

Defining myth in accordance with Barthes, it is relevant to draw upon Mary Fulbrook (1997), who argues myths as central to the construction of any nation, understood as an entity of cultural values. The myth of nationhood in its most basic form can be understood as a shared experience and common destiny to which there exists no such thing as a nation, but only a social reality (Fulbrook 1997, 72). In the example of Zelenskyj sitting and dining with ordinary soldiers, which can be interpreted by the caption, Zelenskyj dining with soldiers suggests an ordinariness to the President. What is then visually communicated is a sense of community to which Zelenskyj's ordinariness becomes represented as a sense of unitedness. In maintaining international military support key cultural values can be drawn from the visual representation in this theme of pictures, representing community and sympathy creating a hero-figure of Zelenskyj as the unifying figure of a united front.

The visual representation of Zelenskyj as connected to his people represents him as one of the many, someone who embodies the ideals of cultural values in the entity. In her chapter Fulbrook defines the myth of a hero, as someone who encapsulates stereotypes in

society. The most important part according to Fulbrook is that the hero figure serves to unify people, by creating a sense of community. This hero can also be a contemporary figure, representing values of a broader system of values (1996, 78-81). In some of the pictures discussed earlier, Zelenskyj is represented as the unifying figure, for example when he gave an interview to the international press after the Bucha Massacre surrounded by ordinary soldiers. In this specific example Zelenskyj is seen facing towards the international press showcasing the seriousness of the situation and communicating that he is taking responsibility of the situation. What is represented in the picture is the damaging consequences of war to which stands in clear contrast to the previous described pictures of Zelenskyj dining with soldiers, which represents the cycle to which the president personally becomes the individual who takes care of his people and takes responsibility of the situation, thus not distancing himself from the harsh reality.

Further, Fulbrook (1997) indicates that the feeling of nationhood may be especially reluctant in times of uncertainty, such as wars and crises to which a sense of broader unity is requested. This means that for the myth about community to be powerful, it needs to have a political context in opposition to a ruling system (1996, 72). In the context of the war in Ukraine, one could argue that what is seen in the pictures is that the community, the sense of nationhood, is under pressure, because the war, at its core, is a fight over belonging to one or another value system. The most damaging consequence is that the state and the values that it embeds may vanish if defeated. The example of soldiers dining together before comes to represent a reality in which the image of a community is influential in maintaining a strong front against the enemy.

Zelenskyj is represented as the sympathetic leader among ordinary soldiers, in that he is seen to be someone who breaks down the hierarchy between the soldier and the leader. This is seen in the pictures where Zelenskyj is seen interacting with regular soldiers in their contexts, which communicates that he does not try to distance himself from ordinary soldiers. One such example in the representation of Zelenskyj as an ordinary soldier is seen when he visits a wounded soldier at a hospital. Here, interestingly, it is Zelenskyj who is taking a selfie with the wounded soldier, which communicates that it is the soldier who is the hero, not the president. What it suggests then is that sympathy rather than hierarchy is a central aspect to his visual leadership. Zelenskyj is represented as sharing the ups and downs with his soldiers, joy, hope and sorrow. To which Zelenskyj comes to be the uniting figure in defending the people and the representation of a united front. The villain figure is represented by Putin in opposition to the sympathetic leader in Zelenskyj. The reason for this is that in the

competition between two value systems, the myth about the hero-villain becomes effective in how the two systems position themselves. All this together, the visual representation in the pictures suggests that Zelenskyj is represented as a man of the People.

5.2 Zelenskyj and World Leaders

The second prominent theme includes pictures of Zelenskyj meeting with other world leaders. Primarily he is seen alongside representatives of Western countries and transnational alliances, such as NATO and the EU. He's photographed with EU's High Representative Ursula von der Leyen, President of France Emmanuel Macron, President of Finland Sanna Marin and the U.S. Foreign Minister Antony Blinken, to mention just a few key global actors. He furthermore appears in pictures together with leaders from the Baltic region as well as former Soviet satellite states such as Poland's President Andrzej Duda.

The joint world leaders are depicted holding press conferences, walking together to and from formal meetings, and posing while shaking hands or standing united in front of the camera. In some pictures, the background and surrounding setting won't reveal as much context. In such cases, a high degree of formality can still be identified in the dress code of the political figures by Zelenskyj's side, dominantly wearing formal attire like suit and tie. Zelenskyj however is photographed solely wearing the same army clothing as in the first category, even in a formal context with world leaders. There are exceptions, although rare, to this recurrent contrast where Zelenskyj's company matches Zelenskyj's informal way of dressing. Finland's president Sanna Marin is one such example, wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans in a picture showing the two leaders standing side by side in front of their respective flags. On other rare occasions, visiting world leaders are photographed with Zelenskyj in a seemingly less formal environment, such as when Zelenskyj and Rishi Sunak were photographed together in the streets of Kyiv in November 2022. Sunak, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom since October 2022, appears beside Zelenskyj in an outdoor environment surrounded by the President's guarding soldiers. The light and colours of the general category are typically warm and bright, but pictures taken in this setting are darker and colder adding to a sense that Zelenskyj is showing his company the harsh reality of Ukrainians.

That being said, the vast majority of pictures with world leaders reveal a pattern of interpersonal meetings where the leaders are depicted in a governmental setting interacting

and posing for photographers, shaking hands, speaking to each other or jointly to the press. Pictures often include visual artefacts such as states' flags, and there is an overall distinction in dress code between Zelenskyj and the world leaders joining him. When the leaders are photographed in a group of three or more, Zelenskyj is positioned in the middle and at the forefront. When photographed in pairs, the focus is shared more equally between Zelenskyj and the accompanying leader. The general expression is friendly among the meeting leaders.

What does it suggest?

The most evident common feature in the representation of Zelenskyj is his army dress code. This theme of pictures clearly illustrates the way he is represented in military clothing regardless of the setting, company or formality of the situation. Photographed side by side, the contrast between the joint leaders' clothing communicates a duality in leadership images, signalling the presence of two leadership types. One illustrative example is when Zelenskyj is photographed walking to a press conference area together with French president Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi in June 2022 – Zelenskyj wearing his army green t-shirt, his visitors wearing traditional suit and tie. In the context of meeting with foreign leaders, his dress code suggests that Zelenskyj doesn't take time off from his mission to defend the nation, by signalling that he's arrived straight from the battlefield. His appearance within this particular frame represents him as a man whose top priority is to fight alongside his men, even when having to show up for quick meetings with powerful global leaders.

Zelenskyj's coherent use of military clothing as Head of State, may be understood in terms of what Brent J. Steele calls the "visual politics" of states, referring to state's aesthetic representation to create a bond to state values and ideals (Steele 2018, 284-285). Such aesthetic activities can be aimed at domestic audiences for the purpose of identification, but more interesting from an international perspective is how visual politics are used to "brand" states as attractive to other global actors (2018, 285). It's important to note, then, that the interpretation of state's visual politics is determined by the cultural context of their audiences (2018, 286). Bringing a military fashion into the domain of international relations, Zelenskyj's appearance challenges the traditional representation of political leaders and institutional power. Zelenskyj's deviation from this norm suggests an interesting merge between political and military power in his political image. Particularly significant in that it's communicated to international audiences of democratic countries, where military governments are traditionally associated with illegitimate regimes.

In this context however, and from within a democratic discourse, Putin is the one representing an illegitimate system of rule using illegitimate military force. Ukraine's position on the other hand is internationally recognised as in military defence. This is important in the context of mobilising international support, as Zelenskyj embodying militaristic values gets legitimised by his status in relation to Putin. Returning to Shepherd's (2018, 212f) definition of militarisation, she argues that fashion is a subtle yet meaningful visual practice in obtaining a positive general opinion toward the military. It's interesting to note that the support Zelenskyj seeks when appearing in front of global audiences is primarily military resources, which at the baseline requires an accepting outlook on military means as well as belief in Ukraine's military leadership to win the war if offered such help. Militarisation, according to Shepherd, ideologically influences peoples' understanding of the world through an acceptance of the use of force as the solution or response to problems (2018, 209f). Her arguments on fashion as a visual medium for militarisation stem from her studies on military fashion in popular culture. However, visual exposure to militaristic values through clothing isn't exclusive to the particular field, and may be applied in the context of leadership images too.

Furthermore, the theme of pictures also indicates a sense of allyship and unity among the photographed world leaders. One illustrative representation of this element is the picture of Zelenskyj with the Polish and Baltic region presidents Andrzej Duda, Gitanas Nausea, Egils Levits and Alar Karis, all joining hands in a pose associated with team play in sports. The visualisation of unity in pictures of 'Zelensky and World Leaders' holds significance in creating a sense of Ukraine's membership to international alliances, regardless of any formal enrollment. This can be understood in relation to Ben O'Loughlin's (2017, 25-36) argument on common historical metaphors that shapes peoples' collective understanding of international relations, making sense of new political events through just a few key concepts. O'Loughlin particularly emphasises the metaphor of "kinship", the idea of states belonging to an international family (2017, 28). In the news media, he argues, kinship is reproduced in visual representations communicating "people like us" (2017, 31). Through this theoretical lens, pictures of the joint world leaders holding press conferences together or smilingly shaking hands may be understood as signalling a sense of Ukraine belonging to a family of like-minded states. By also identifying the vast majority of world leaders by Zelenskyj's side as representatives of the West, the theme of pictures can be said to position Ukraine as part of the "Western family". An example of this is the visualisation of Zelenskyj's meeting with EU's Ursula von der Leyen, appearing friendly with one another. Such representations can be

said to shape people's understanding of Ukraine as culturally European, tying them to liberal democratic principles seen as Western. In this way, the theme of pictures serves ideological purposes, establishing the idea of a 'Westernised' Ukraine.

In the light of this, it becomes clear how ideology and myth are central to such positioning, where the recognition of Ukraine as part of the West inherently means crafting its national image in opposition to a projected image of the East – here personalised by Putin. Thus, Ukraine's geopolitical positioning in visualising Zelenskyj with leaders of the West relies on what Hartley explains as "binarist thought", the tendency to structure things into polar opposites when making sense of our social realities (Hartley 1992, 30). In this sense, the visualised kinship and like-mindedness represented in the category of 'Zelenskyj and World Leaders' is created in contrast to the constructed mental image of the opposition. The centrality of this notion will naturally be elaborated on further in the next part, when comparing the visual representation of Zelenskyj to that of Putin's pictures.

5.3 Picturing Putin in power

In studying how Zelenskyj is visually represented in pictures, the most interesting is comparing to what degree the representation of him stands in opposition to Putin, illustrating how they personally come to be a representation of different political and cultural values. How their leadership styles are represented visually serves to demonstrate how they embody two competing political systems, that of the East and West. Further, a comparison of the leaders draws a more visually significant picture of Zelenskyj to which this study aims.

Putin in the office

Putin is most often pictured alone, sitting behind his desk at the presidential office of Russia. In the pictures taken in this context, what is seen is Putin at his heavy wooden desk with a pen and piece of paper in front of him like he's about to sign an order. On his desk, multiple fast-net telephones can be seen in the background and behind Putin, the Russian flag and Code of Arms become a fixed inventory confirming that this is the home of the official leader.

Inspecting the troops

One of the rare contexts in which Putin is pictured is out in the field. What is seen then is Putin inspecting his men, such as him watching the Moscow Victory Day Parade on the 9th

of May 2022, or being present at a military exercise where Putin takes the central role in the composition. One such example is a picture where Putin seems to overview what looks like a military exercise, surrounded by his military officers. Here Putin is seen pointing his arm out at a target or giving orders, and the fellow army officers seem to subjugate to the expertise of the president. Given the fact that he is out in the field, it is thus interesting to see that Putin still wears his regular uniform of the suit.

Inner circle

On some occasions, Putin is pictured meeting with his inner circle, consisting of his government officials and regional alliances. Among the government officials, he's frequently photographed with Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Putin's Spokesman Dmitri Peskov. Most often Putin is located in the centre, or with his officials walking behind him. The pictures with his officials usually take place in the setting of Putin's office, and it appears that they are giving some kind of reporting, due to how Putin is located at the end of the desk. When Putin meets with regional alliances, it is frequently that of Chechen Republic leader Ramzan Kadyrov, president of Belarus Aleksandr Lukasjenko and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This type of picture indicates a friendly approach among the pictured leaders, as Putin is often seen shaking hands with and being photographed beside them.

5.4 Comparing Putin and Zelenskyj – What does it suggest?

Putin in the office

By comparing the pictures of Putin and Zelenskyj, it can be seen how their leadership styles are represented differently, ultimately communicating two opposite value systems, that of the East and the West. What is central to their visual representation is the question of authority to which their leadership styles represent a broader system of ideology and cultural significance. In the context of Putin in his office what is most obvious is how his personal leadership come to be a representation of the executive power of the president's office in which Putin is visualised as the Commander-In-Chief. To better understand how the leadership styles of the two political leaders is a representation of a broader value system it is relevant to apply leadership theory.

Max Weber (1968) defines charismatic leadership as an individual personality with certain qualities, by which they differ from ordinary people, due to their abilities to unite and spiritually guide their followers (Eisenstadt & Weber 1968, 18) In this, they are treated as heroes or at least celebrated for their unique strengths. For the charismatic leader to uphold their status they must be legitimised by their subordinates, in which the leader serves the interests of their people (1968, 19). In this case, it is Zelensky, who is visually represented as the charismatic figure, as he is communicated to be fighting in the interest of the people. Zelenskyj is most often seen on the go, communicating a sense of dynamicness and redistribution of authority to his subordinates. In the example where we see saw Zelenskyj visited the village of Bucha after the attack it suggest how his sense of authority is performed as involving and fast paced decision-making to which his authority not rest in his personal superiority, but his ability to oblige his people, serving their interests and not the other way around. He is represented as someone who provides spiritual guidance to the Ukrainian citizens, a key element in charismatic leadership, in that he sets an example of acting in the interest of his people.

Further, Max Weber (1968) defines another leadership style opposite to that of the charismatic, which is the traditional leader, an authoritarian patriarchal, which represents customs and traditions in a given society, most often seen in that of monarch rules. This society is dominated by a group of a few individuals, for example an oligarchy, who demand subjugation from their people (1968, 46-47). Putin is visually represented as the stereotypical strong and capable leader with military experience. Given that most pictures of Putin are him sitting in the presidential office it is also the context in which he is to be understood. As described in the denotative section the visual artefacts of superiority and power become central in how he is understood, such as the heavy wooden desk in the pictures of him in the presidential office. In the pictures of him, he is seen clinging his hands to the heavy wooden table, suggesting that he is clinging to the power of the office, an interesting myth of how authoritarian leaders may be understood as clinging to power. Another example of this is seen in the pictures of the famous long-table meetings with government officials, which suggest a clear distance between Putin and the people he interacts with. Interestingly compared to the pictures of Zelenskyj in the field rubbing shoulders with ordinary people to which his choice of dressing underpins be it with ordinary soldiers or world leaders. Summarised, all this communicates the question of how authority is represented in different political systems and how the individual political leader comes to represent it personally.

Moreover, Weber defines that for charismatic leadership there is no definite sphere of authority and competence (1968, 50-51). Interestingly, it is then seen that in the sphere of authority practised by Putin it is limited to the president's office communicating cultural meaning to which it represents a political system of the East. Whereas Zelenskyj actualises Weber's definition of no definite sphere of authority and competence, due to how he is pictured out in the field, which represents his office and in that he is not represented as the stereotypical politician with the qualifications of political experience normally subjugated by political leaders in both of the political systems. Zelenskyj is represented as a more moderate and dynamic leader of the West, imaging a persona and values comparable to that of other political leaders of the West, such as French president Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Inspecting the troops

Since the invasion in February 2022, Putin has been depicted to a lesser degree in a field context compared to his Ukrainian counterpart. However, the representation of Zelenskyj's in the field and pictures of Putin visiting military exercises or military parades make for an interesting comparison, as the visualised interactions reveal something about the depicted relationship between leader and soldier. The analysis of 'Zelenskyj and the People' found that the representations in this context communicated an absence of the traditional hierarchy in the relationship between the Head of State and his men in battle. As for pictures of Putin on the other hand, both his use of body language and the formal suit in this context reproduce a hierarchical top-down order.

The visualised power dynamic between Putin and his troops can be identified for example in a picture of the Russian leader making a commanding gesture, pointing out the direction for the soldiers, representing Putin as ultimately and individually in charge of the operation. This hierarchy is further illustrated in a picture at the 2022 national military parade, with Putin represented with his top military officials, walking in front of them appearing as he is leading the way. His traditional and context-independent suit serves to uphold this image, always placing him in the role of a superior. Both leaders use clothes as a medium for communicating their leadership style, only when Putin is represented dressed in the formal suit to signal his superior position, Zelenskyj appears in military uniform to closely associate him with the Ukrainian defence. Where Putin's visual expression differentiates him from the soldiers, Zelenskyj is depicted as a soldier alike.

This distinction illustrates clearly how they are represented as to personify opposite political systems. It's of significance for Zelenskyj's image that Putin's visual expression reinforces the collective Western view of the Russian leader as an authoritarian and illegitimate dictator. The familiarity regarding Putin holds particular importance for the construction of Zelenskyj's image among international audiences, in that there's a pre-existing narrative of Putin as the villain, Russia as the enemy. It's to this cultural background Zelenskyj's democratic status is constructed when depicted alongside his men. This illustrates how the sense-making of their representations relate to a complex chain of media imagery and rhetorics coloured by the East-West binary of The Cold War era. Returning to Hartleys (1992, 30) discussion on the sense-making practices of pictures, Hartley emphasises the way pictures' political statuses rely on comparative ground, in that the idea of "status" can only exist in comparison to something else. Binarist thought, he argues, is at the core of this. What's important to note is that binarism must not be viewed as illusory thinking but rather a social and political force with material consequences (1992, 31). For illustrative purposes, Hartley takes the binarist approach in the media during the Cold War as an example of how such rhetoric was used to legitimise or make the war less intolerable for the general public (ibid).

Inner circle

Where Putin is depicted with his top government officials in formal environments such as his presidential office, Zelenskyj's team almost exclusively appear beside him in a field setting, dressed accordingly. Like the Ukrainian President, Zelenskyj's inner circle is dressed as Ukrainian soldiers. The comparison demonstrates the visual politics in the representation of not just Zelenskyj himself but also his chosen government as servants of the Ukrainian people, united in battle regardless of status or position – a vital aspect in constructing the Ukrainian spirit and military ethos. Even more so, it demonstrates how Zelenskyj's image is constructed in opposition to representations of Putin's formal, hierarchical interactions and relations.

As for visualising the leaders' international support, Putin does too appear in pictures with allied world leaders, signalling allyship comparable to the category of 'Zelenskyj and World Leaders'. It is however relevant to note the limited scope of Putin's international allies due to the fact that the war is considered illegitimate by the vast majority of the global community. Situating the state leaders on Putin's side in the right discursive context sheds light on the ideological distinction between leaders meeting with Putin and leaders meeting

with Zelenskyj. Putin is for example pictured with Turkey's President Recep Tayipp Erdogan and China's President Xi Jinping, leaders who are also projected 'villain status' within a Western democratic discourse due to their authoritarian leadership styles.

Returning to the kinship metaphor, it's relevant to note how, as put forth by O'Loughlin (2017, 25), the concept of family inherently relies on an inside-outside binary, including certain states while excluding others. What's interesting is how the conditions for family membership have varied throughout history (2017, 29). Drawing on research by Ian Clark (2005), O'Loughlin emphasises how the kinship concept in the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries based states' membership on their levels of "barbarism" opposed to "civilization", further suggesting that membership at the start of the 21st century is based on states' level of respecting human rights (O'Loughlin, 2017, 29). This illustrates how myths and metaphors in international relations are not static but due to take on new forms in a historical process intertwined with ideological conceptions. The notion of human rights is ideological at its core, in that it favours a liberal-democratic system for organising society around the rights of individuals. The notion is mythological, in that it appears naturally given (Barthes 2007, 236). This aspect is central to understanding how embedded cultural values determine the political leaders' statuses when making sense of their representations. The visualised kinship of "people like us", found in the theme of 'Zelenskyj and World Leaders', is inherently constructed in opposition to those "unlike us". Hartley (1992, 207) uses the terms "Wedom" and "Theydom" to illustrate this binary, common in news media, when constructing a sense of community. In comparing the world leaders depicted with Putin and with Zelenskyj, this demonstrates how it's not something in their direct expression or appearance that suggests their place inside or outside this community, as much as it's a matter of discursive knowledge among audiences.

6. The Visual Turn of Political Personalisation

The aim with analysing Zelensky's visual representation during the war, has been to contribute with further knowledge on the significance of visual representation for personalised leadership in global politics. For the purpose of this, the following questions was posed; What cultural meaning is communicated in the visual representation of Zelenskyj? How can the visual representation of Zelenskyj contribute to developing the field of visual communications' role in the personalisation of politics?

First and foremost, a strong emphasis on prominent leaders in times of war is by no means a new phenomenon with Zelenskyj, nor Putin. Past political figures of historical conflict suggest the opposite. What might be considered "new" in the case of Zelenskyj, nonetheless, is his unusual expression through the use of visual artefacts representing him in military attires and settings unconventional for a President – suggesting he's stepped out of the formal position of a top government official and into the role of an ordinary soldier, representing him as a man of the people. He coherently stays in character regardless of the formality of the situation. In doing so, his representation challenges cultural norms regarding leadership representations, while managing to construct his image in association with leaders of the "free world" and in contrast to Putin's "villain status" among Western audiences. Applying a semiotic approach in analysing Zelenskyj's pictures helped decode how myth and ideology plays into his representation, embodying a set of values that resonate with a large proportion of the international community. Arguably, the conclusion of this is that visualising Zelenskyj as both a soldier and member of the West significantly serves to construct his image as a defender of liberal-democratic principles, of significance in gaining global popular support for helping Ukraine win the war.

Freedom is ultimately the value at stake in this conflict. The freedom of Ukrainian citizens to continue their lives, free of violence and occupation. But furthermore and what's particularly interesting in the light of our findings, is how the war reinforces a collective fear of threat to the liberal-democratic system as a whole within a Western discourse that holds freedom as the highest principle of all. A fear that is culturally manifested across societies, with striking events strengthening this fear over time – whether the threat to democracy is suggested to come from political developments inside the system, or a matter of external force. The Russian invasion on Ukraine aligns with this fear, and appears as hard proof of the naivety in the immediate discourse after The Cold War, where liberal democracy was viewed

as the winning ideology with the fall of the Soviet Union. In the decades since, the discourse has swayed towards anticipating democracy's demise, and calling for its protection.

What's of relevance here is not the extent to which this fear is legitimate or not in regards to a reality behind the threat, but how Zelenskyj's image engages with the narrative in question. Framing it as a war between East and West and thus the invasion as an attack on the "free world" resonates with this cultural fear among Western countries, and holds strategic importance nonetheless to Zelenskyj since Ukraine had no formal assurance to military backup from powerful states or transnational alliances when Russia launched their attack. The visualised kinship metaphor is particularly significant in regards to this, as family suggests a natural bond not dependent on formal inquiry. If Zelenskyj is seen as a member of a family tied together by shared values, there's an obligation to support him within the family. If he's a member of the West ready to personally fight to defend not only the freedom of his own citizens but the freedom for all, it's ultimately not "his" battle but "ours".

That being said, the visual performance of staging Zelenskyj in particular attires and settings is a dominant factor in outlining his character among international audiences. So what can the case tell us about the general phenomena of political personalisation and representing leadership to audiences located "elsewhere"? Arguably there are crucial aspects to the personalisation process in how it is manifested visually, at risk of being missed when overlooked by researchers in this area. The vitality of visual elements in this process shows the limitations of too narrow a focus on verbal and textual communication within the study of the personalisation of politics. This aligns with the conclusion of Hedling et al. (2022) who argues that there are advantages to a research design that considers the role of visual narratives and representations, and how these can engage international publics. The findings of this case study demonstrate that this applies to the field of political personalisation too.

During the course of the study new questions arose that did not fit within the aim of our thesis, for example regarding the relation between political and military leadership in democratic countries, particularly interesting in Europe following the course of this war. What role will militaristic leadership play forward in politics and global diplomatic processes? Another angle to be considered further is analysing the strategic elements of visual communication, and how visual personalisation can be understood in terms of performativity and dramatisation around the individual leader. Furthermore, this study is limited to analysing the representations, and not audiences' responses to the visual representation of Zelenskyj. Such a study requires another approach but would be interesting for future research, as online commentary on the war is highly accessible on social platforms

and may add insights on the co-creating side of political leadership by audiences. That being said, the mediatisation of warfare is at an historical high due to the technological developments with constant news updates. Future research should be interested in examining the role of smartphones and social networks in conflicts like the current one in Ukraine. This could obtain new knowledge on both the use of visuals in war, and on the sophisticated political communication by global actors, particularly relevant to the study of Zelenskyj as previous research showed that social media was of particular significance to his victory in the Ukrainian presidential election 2019.

Finally, we hope to see further research on visualised political leadership that decodes embedded myths and ideologies, and argue for the benefits of developing semiotics as an established approach within political science more generally due to its interdisciplinary nature, allowing for cultural aspects to be acknowledged.

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