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ANATOMY OF THE CONFLICT: TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSO-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS IN VISUAL CULTURE (1954-2025)

The research aim is to trace the memorial transformation of the image of Russo-Ukrainian relations in Ukraine's visual culture, from the Soviet «fraternal» narrative to the contemporary antagonistic discourse. **Methodology.** The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach including cultural anthropology, memory studies, and discourse analysis. The research applies an extensive corpus of visual sources (sculpture, photography, cinematography, posters, caricatures, memes, social media content) to analyze the semantic shifts in the visual representation of Russia and Ukraine, as well as the specifics of their relationship. **The novelty** lies in its comprehensive and long-term analysis of visual culture as the primary field of the Russo-Ukrainian mnemonic struggle. **Conclusions.** The study confirms the transformation from the «fraternal» image to «neighborliness» in the 1990s – 2000s, and eventually, to the emergence of metaphors like «foe» and «aggressor» in Ukraine after 2014 and 2022. Ukrainian media have consistently attempted to form a powerful visual counternarrative, yet this process was complicated by inherited conceptual paradigms and the absence of a visual «enemy» template from the Soviet era. In general, modern Russian memory politics, while reinforcing the Soviet metanarrative of «one people», simultaneously aimed to construct Ukrainians as a marginalized «Other».

Key words: Memory Politics, Antagonistic Memory, Russo-Ukrainian Relations, Ukraine, Russian War in Ukraine, historical memory, memory war/

Introduction and the formulation of the issue. The relationship between Russia and Ukraine has long been a subject of intense historical and political debate, especially in the context of memory war. For decades, it was framed through the official Soviet narrative of an «eternal friendship» and «fraternal unity» between «two great peoples», with the 1954 transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR serving as a symbolic touchstone of this enduring bond (Kasianov, 2025). However, the period from the mid-20th century to the present has revealed an intense transformation, culminating in the complete breakdown of this narrative in the Ukrainian media discourse and the emergence of an antagonistic, and even hostile, narrative. While this evolution was most visible in the military and

political arenas, this paper argues that the shifts that have occurred within visual culture are also quite revealing, and that the media narrative was presented as a powerful instrument to construct, reshape and contest the historical memories and the image of national identity.

The deep study of this visual transformation is critical for understanding the current Russo-Ukrainian memory war, as it reveals the underlying struggle over collective memory and historical legitimacy. Researchers in memory studies have long demonstrated how a nation's «usable past» is actively shaped to serve present political goals (Assmann, 2008). In the case of Russia and Ukraine, this process has been highly contentious, due to a shared history being interpreted in diametrically opposed ways. G. Kasianov has meticulously analyzed this «clash of antagonistic versions of the past», arguing that divergent memory politics in the post-Soviet period might have laid the groundwork for the armed conflict. It has also been explored how the manipulation of historical narratives and the instrumentalization of memory became a form of «casus belli» for the war (Kasianov, 2025).

This paper is laid at the intersection of history, memory studies, and visual culture. While some studies have explored the broader historical and political dimensions of the conflict (Snyder, 2018), and others have focused on visual propaganda (Zinovieva, 2024), few have comprehensively analyzed the long-term visual evolution from Soviet «friendship» to contemporary «foe» in the specific context of Ukrainian media and cultural production. This is a significant gap, as it is precisely within the realm of images – from monuments and posters to memes and cartoons – that the abstract concepts of «brotherhood» and «otherness» were given concrete form and embedded in the popular imagination.

The central issue addressed in this article is the visual transformation of Russo-Ukrainian relations from a fraternal to an antagonistic paradigm within Ukrainian visual culture from 1954 to 2025. The problem lies in two separate backgrounds. Firstly, the enduring legacy of Soviet memory politics, which promoted a «brotherhood» and «single Soviet people» narrative, complicated Ukraine's project of constructing a distinct «Other» image of Russia after gaining independence. Despite the political shifts of the 1990s and 2000s, Ukrainian historical policy was often weak and lacked a coherent visual counter-narrative to the deeply rooted Soviet one. This left a conceptual vacuum and a struggle to visually define the new independent relationship.

Secondly, the modern Russian state's memory politics, which paradoxically continues to claim Ukrainians and Russians are «one people» while simultaneously depicting Ukrainians as a dangerous, unworthy «Other», has created a powerful, aggressive visual narrative. This has been particularly manifested in its state media and propaganda, especially since 2014. In response, Ukrainian visual culture has been forced into an urgent and often reactive process of constructing a powerful counternarrative from scratch, repurposing inherited

symbols and generating new metaphors to cast Russia as the «aggressor» and «enemy.»

This paper therefore seeks to answer the following research questions: How did Soviet visual culture, beginning with the 1954 transfer of Crimea, construct the narrative of «brotherhood» and «eternal friendship»? What were the key visual metaphors and cultural elements used to convey a shift to «neighborliness» in the post-Soviet period? What is the origin of the image of «Other» in the Russo-Ukrainian relations? And how did the Russian aggressions of 2014 and 2022 force a rapid and complete visual re-evaluation from the Ukrainian side, leading to the emergence of a «foe» image? By examining this evolution, the research aims to reveal how visual culture has been both a tool and a reflection of the ongoing geopolitical and mnemonic conflict between the two nations.

Research Aims and Objectives. The primary aim of the article is to analyze the visual transformation of Russo-Ukrainian relations in Ukrainian media and visual culture from 1954 to the present. By examining the shift from a narrative of «brotherhood» to an antagonistic discourse of «enemies», this research seeks to investigate how historical memory and identity are constructed and contested through visual means. In order to achieve this aim, the study sets forth the following specific objectives:

1. To identify and trace the key visual metaphors and cultural elements (including posters, monuments, and memes) used to portray Russian-Ukrainian relations in the late Soviet period and during Ukrainian independence (1954-2025);

2. To analyze the semantic shifts in the visual images, revealing how representations of «friendship» and «unity» were replaced / repurposed into images of «neighborliness» and, eventually, open hostility in the Ukrainian media discourse.

3. To evaluate the role of Soviet memory politics and its enduring legacy in Ukraine and Russia's efforts to forge an independent visual narrative of each other.

4. To determine how the Russian aggression of 2014 and the full scale invasion of 2022 forced a radical re-evaluation of the visual language, leading to the rapid construction of an «enemy» image in Ukrainian media discourse.

5. To compare the specifics of visual representation of Russo-Ukrainian relations by Russian and by Ukrainian actors.

Research Methods. The article adopts a diverse methodological approach, integrating key concepts from cultural anthropology, memory studies, and discourse analysis. The research is qualitative and relies on a mixed-media corpus of visual sources, considering the visual material as a form of discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

In the context of memory studies, specifically «communicative» and «cultural» memory (Assmann, 2008), this paper investigates how the collective memory of Russo-Ukrainian relations has been visually constructed and

negotiated over time. The analysis explores how official state-sponsored memory (such as Soviet monuments, stamps and posters) contrasts with and eventually clashes against «counter-memories» expressed through more contemporary forms like internet memes. This leads to an understanding of how shared pasts are actively reshaped to serve present political needs.

Additionally, the research adopts the approach of scholars like W.J.T. Mitchell (2005), who argues that images are not merely passive reflections of reality but active agents in social and political life. By analyzing the visual samples themselves (from monumental sculptures to digital memes) the study reveals how the power of these images contributes to the formation of national identity and the framing of conflict. This methodology is particularly relevant for understanding how pre-existing visual tropes were subverted or re-appropriated in response to the full-scale invasion.

The research also proceeds through a series of chronological case studies by analyzing the visual rhetoric of different eras, such as the official posters of the Soviet period, the popular media images of the 1990s, and the digital memes and propaganda of the post-2014 and post-2022 periods. This comparative approach will highlight the persistent themes and rapid shifts in the visual discourse, providing a clear trajectory of transformation.

Results. Despite the complicated status of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the continuous mnemonic struggle to create the «correct» image of shared past by Russian imperial and later Soviet government (solidified by the Old Rus' ethnicity theory claiming the cultural-historic unity between Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians), the period from 1954 to 1964 marked an important phase in the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The «memory boom», centered on the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Agreement, became a powerful instrument of Soviet historical politics (Plokhy, 2015). The visual output was instrumental in cementing an ideological narrative of «eternal friendship|» and «fraternal unity» between the two nations, all in service of a broader Soviet identity. This effort was actively supported by the Ukrainian Communist Party elite and was, to some extent, accepted by the general population.

On the contrary, the positive image of Russo-Ukrainian relations, which had been constructing in USSR not from 1954, but since 1910-s – 1920-s with Vladimir Lenin's efforts and later authorized with the image of Russia as the «elder brother», went in contradiction to another narrative about Ukrainians that was mainly formed during the reign of Joseph Stalin – some marginalized Ukrainians who were shown as the «Others». This framework included the repressions against «kulaks» and «bourgeois nationalists» in 1930-s and the active persecution of OUN-UPA, the Ukrainian nationalist partisan movement who were in fact the counter-elites on Ukrainian territory in 1940-s, according to methodology of G. Mosca and later interpretation of J. Meisel (Meisel, 1962), and who were treated as the «fascists» for their cooperation with Nazi Germany. The

accent on the «otherness» was visible also in the media discourse: for instance, the famous controversial humorous story «Samostiina dirka» («The Independent Hole») by Ostap Vyshnia posted in the journal «Samostiina Ukraina» (1945-1946) wrote about the contemptuous attitude towards OUN-UPA and the nationalists. It is essential to recognize that these specific pursuits weren't merely an isolated development in the Ukrainian case, although they were highly visible there. Instead, they functioned as a core element within the set of instruments for «The Affirmative Action Empire» (Martin, 2001). This approach was fundamentally designed to accelerate the denationalization of newly incorporated regions and, crucially, to disempower local opposition by actively eroding its foundational support among the population.

Getting back to the Thaw and the instrumentalization of Pereiaslav Agreement, it may be stated that the aggressive denationalization strategies employed by Joseph Stalin's government ultimately required a compensatory visual campaign to publicly reconcile deep historical tensions between Ukrainians and Russians and to construct an image of a seemingly stable Soviet identity. This push, which had a solid background in the form of «Cultural revolution» of 1930-s and the image of «Soviet people united against the fascists» during the «Great Patriotic War», materialized under Nikita Khrushchev, whose leadership led to an unprecedented focus on monuments and artworks dedicated to the Russo-Ukrainian «reunification» theme. This strategy involved the party taking a particular interest in commemorative practices related to the shared history, ensuring the visual language was consistently shared across multiple media.

Firstly, 1954 marked the erection of the new monuments celebrating «reunification» of Ukraine with Russia. This action helped to solidify the meta-narrative related to Russo-Ukrainian relations and create the physical «places of memory» (Nora, 1989). A prime example is the monument in Pereiaslav-Khmelnytskyi (Image 1), which depicts two women, Russian and Ukrainian, hugging and going forward together with the Constitution, a clear visual metaphor for the «friendship of peoples« and «shared path». Moreover, the sculpture gave the womanly image to Ukraine and Russia as the countries, whether other monuments, including the later ones, with the man images mostly concentrate on the image of peoples (like the worker and the peasant). It shows the general narrative of depicting Russians and Ukrainians as the brotherly people, simultaneously presenting Ukraine and Russia as the «female» countries (based on the grammatical gender in Russian and Ukrainian languages). This sculpture, as well as the others presented Russians and Ukrainians in a state of harmonious collaboration, symbolizing their shared past and united destiny.

Image 1. Pereiaslav.City (n.d.) Monument in honour of the 300th anniversary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia in Pereiaslav-Khmelnytskyi (1961) [Photograph]. Available at: https://surl.li/nonovb (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Secondly, official posters, stamps, and commemorative medals were released to mark the 300th anniversary in 1954. For instance, posters of the period frequently showed stylized Ukrainian and Russian figures, often in traditional costumes, marching together, looking in a common direction towards the future or holding hands, often below slogans like «Eternally together» (Image 2).

Image 2. Koretsky, V.B., Ivanov, K.K., Savostyuk, O.M. and Uspensky, B.A. (1954) Together – Eternally [Naveki – vmeste]. [Poster]. Moscow, IZOGIZ. Available at: https://surl.li/qsprgb (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

A 1954 stamp series dedicated to the anniversary featured portraits / monuments of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Taras Shevchenko, Volodymyr The Great, as well as the key Ukrainian buildings and the flags of Soviet Russia and Ukraine, with the official narrative of «reunification» as the central theme (Volstamp 2025).

Thirdly, the educational materials and children's books during the Thaw were filled with illustrations that reinforced the same message of enduring friendship, often with an abstract image of a Cossack and Bohdan Khmelnytsky at the center. Usually the visual support was presented in the form of painting, one of the most common ones was by M. Khmelko – «Forever with Moscow, forever with the Russian people» («Naveki s Moskvoy, naveki s russkim narodom») (Image 3). These visual forms helped embed the narrative into the popular imagination from an early age. To be fair, the image was shown not solely, but in addition to the text narrative, claiming the «brotherly support» of Russian people to Ukrainians, the unanimous decision of Cossacks to «forever unite» with Russia in 1654 and the growing «friendship» between two peoples (Alekseev and Kartsov, 1961, pp. 32-37). This attitude impacted the further investigations regarding the Pereiaslav Agreement topic (Plokhy 2001).

Image 3. Alekseev, S.P. and Kartsov, V.G. (1961) Istoriia SSSR. Uchebnaia kniga dlia 4-go klassa [History of the USSR. A textbook for the 4th grade]. P. 33. Available at: https://surl.lt/vczngm (Accessed: 6 September 2025).

This visual campaign was not presented in isolation. The image of «Ukrainian-Russian friendship» was organically integrated with broader Soviet concepts of the «brotherhood of peoples», the «friendship of peoples», and the «family of peoples». This created a coherent visual system aimed at constructing the overarching idea of a «single Soviet people». The Russian people were consistently positioned as the «elder brother», guiding Ukrainians and the representatives of other Soviet republics toward a shared, prosperous future under a unified identity. In general, the Pereiaslav Agreement was reframed not as a military pact but as a symbolic origin point for the Russo-Ukrainian unity and hence – multi-ethnic Soviet family.

In conclusion, the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations during the Thaw was a calculative and expansive state project. It used a targeted approach with monuments, posters, and other media to embed a narrative of eternal friendship and union with Russia. By visually linking the Pereiaslav Agreement to the larger concept of the «Soviet people», the state effectively subordinated Ukrainian national identity to a broader, Russian-led identity, masking it as the «big Soviet family».

The visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations during the «Stagnation» period (around 1965-1985) underwent a delicate but visible shift. While the high-volume output of the Khrushchev era's «memory boom» subsided, the visual discourse of «friendship» and «brotherhood» became more sophisticated and symbolically charged. The focus moved from simple quantity to a more refined, ideological quality. The core message of the «friendship of peoples» was now seamlessly incorporated into a broader Soviet meta-narrative, often using major anniversaries to reinforce its legitimacy (Plokhy, 2015).

A decrease in the number of new monuments became noticeable, yet at the same time their symbolic weight increased. During this era the key anniversary dates, such as the 325th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Agreement in 1979, the 60th anniversary of the Ukrainian SSR in 1979, the 40th anniversary of the «reunification» of the Western Ukrainian lands with the Ukrainian SSR in 1979, and the 1500th anniversary of Kyiv's founding in 1982, incorporated the Russian-Ukrainian «friendship» into a grander historical and national narrative. This was a form of «cultural embedding», where the visual representation was less about specific historical events and more about the natural, organic state of the «Soviet family».

A prime example of this symbolic shift is the Friendship of Peoples Arch in Kyiv (1982). It is a monumental, public work that frames Russian-Ukrainian friendship as a cornerstone of the Soviet state. The arch itself, a massive symbol of unity, was paired with a sculptural composition of Ukrainian and Russian workers holding the Soviet Order of Friendship of Peoples. This was a clear, permanent visual statement designed to make the friendship not a historical event, but an eternal reality (Kasianov, 2025). Generally speaking, while working within the constraints of socialist realism, artists and architects of this monument, as well as other monuments during the Soviet era, acted as the creators and producers of the visual culture. While their work was ideologically controlled, they were the ones giving form and substance to the party's directives. They created the monuments and posters that visually defined the era's understanding of «friendship» and «brotherhood» of two peoples.

If we consider the posters of the mentioned period, since the second half of the 1960s, the number of requests from Moscow for the creation of Ukrainian posters with national uniforms has increased according to V. Kosiv (Kosiv, 2019).

Based on the research, at least 8 posters of the «Stagnation» period correspond to the image of Ukrainian women or Ukrainian men in national clothes, which gave Ukrainian poster art its color (Image 4).

Image 4. Mokhor, Yu. (1979) "Druzhba vichna, druzhba slavna!" [Eternal friendship, glorious friendship!]. [Poster]. Art Poster Collection. Available at: https://surl.lt/oljeat (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Overall, the visual representation of Russo-Ukrainian relations during this period was not accidental – it was a carefully managed state project. The main actors responsible for shaping and disseminating these visual narratives were the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) as the central decision-making bodies. They approved designs for posters and stamps, initiated the monuments project competitions, and controlled the narrative. They acted as the primary memory agents, creating the focus on the specific events to be commemorated and the way of their visual representation. In addition, the vast majority of media (newspapers, magazines, state television, publishing houses) were state-run and supported the official visual narrative. They controlled the flow of images, ensuring that approved designs and illustrations were widely distributed.

To summarize, during the Stagnation period (1964-1985), the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations moved from a «memory boom» to

a more symbolic project. While the number of new monuments and visual artifacts decreased, their ideological and symbolic weight grew significantly. This era did not invent the «friendship» narrative; rather, it cemented it as a fundamental and eternal truth, smoothly integrating it into the broader concept of the «Soviet people». Ultimately, this period's historical policy, as a form of «cultural embedding,» left a strong legacy, creating a powerful yet artificial visual history that would later complicate Ukraine's attempts to establish its own independent national identity after 1991.

The Perestroika period in Ukraine (1985-1991) marked a significant break in the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations, characterized by a decline in official messaging and an attempt to re-evaluate the historical narrative. This was a direct result of weakening ideological control from Moscow, which led to a genuine «stagnation» in the state-sponsored visual production of this narrative, weakened even more by the historic discussions of the nature of Holodomor 1932-1933 that kept ruining the image of «brotherhood» between Ukrainians and Russians. Generally saying, the state lost its monopoly over historical memory (Yekelchyk, 2007)

The visual culture of this era reflected the crisis of the Soviet system. Any remaining examples of the «friendship», «brotherhood» or «unity» theme were largely a continuation of earlier trends from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. This included visual elements like depictions of monuments on postcards and an emphasis on the friendship of all Soviet republics, rather than specifically on the bilateral Russian-Ukrainian relationship. The visual discourse became less about active promotion and more about maintaining a collapsing façade.

The agents of visual representation during this period shifted dramatically. The central Communist Party's role as the sole authority began to erode, allowing new actors and alternative narratives to emerge. The Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) and state-run media, while still in control, became less active in commissioning new pro-friendship monuments or artworks. Their visual policy was characterized by a lack of new initiatives and a reliance on old, pre-existing visual tropes. A key development was the rise of non-state actors. National democratic movements and dissidents began to use their own visual culture to promote an alternative historical narrative. They employed samizdat publications, handmade posters, and public demonstrations to reclaim symbols of Ukrainian statehood that had been suppressed for decades. This included images of the Cossack state and Cossacks, the Ukrainian People's Republic, and historical figures like Mykhailo Hrushevsky. This visual counter-narrative directly challenged the Soviet-era «friendship» discourse.

With the rise of glasnost, the public itself also became a more active participant in the visual discourse. There was a conscious effort to re-evaluate the historical legacy, so people started reinterpreting monuments and symbols from the past, sometimes in a critical or ironic way, and creating new, unofficial visual

content that was independent of state control. For instance, the Revolution on the Granite in 1990 revealed the public perspective of the visual narrative, which did not interfere specifically Russians but included a lot of Ukrainian blue and yellow flags, posters with the inscriptions like «A renewed federation – renewed shackles for our people», «USSR – the prison of peoples», etc. (Image 5). Such an approach significantly weakened the latent tendency of preserving the image of the «Soviet family» and the Russo-Ukrainian «unity».

Image 5. Radio Svoboda (2020) The Revolution on Granite. Lviv Students [Photograph]. In: Revoliutsiia na hraniti 1990 roku. 40 arkhivnykh foto. Available at:https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30869089.html (Accessed: November 14, 2025).

Hence, The Perestroika era marked a crucial turning point in Ukraine's visual culture, as the state's monopoly on historical memory eroded. The official, Soviet-era visual discourse of «friendship» began to collapse, with new visual narratives emerging from non-state actors. These groups reclaimed suppressed symbols of Ukrainian statehood like the tryzub, the blue-and-yellow flag, and images of historical figures like Mykhailo Hrushevsky, directly challenging the myth of a «Soviet family».

The post-independence period from 1991 to 2003 in Ukraine was a time of ideological and visual transition, characterized by a vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet narrative. G. Kasyanov draws attention to the fact that Ukraine, like other countries of the former USSR, had to form a historical self-awareness among its population, which was much easier to do through the «othering» of the history and role of individual countries. Thus, the label «Other» was assigned to the imperial and Soviet heritage (Kasianov, 2014, p. 12). Due to the dominance of the nostalgic imperial-Soviet discourse of memory in the Russian Federation, forcing the image of «Ukrainian-Russian friendship» was difficult, unprofitable and meaningless. At the same time, this era was defined by weak memory politics and a general lack of a strong, independent visual counter-narrative to the long-standing myth of «Ukrainian-Russian brotherhood». It is important to mention that the historical politics in Russia, despite the similar crisis, kept going on a strong level, which was caused by the mnemonic inheritance from the USSR and, in this particular case, the necessity to deal with the memory war over Crimea (and Ukraine in general) that was one of Russia's geopolitical aims.

The visual representation of this period from Ukraine's side reflected a cautious approach aimed at avoiding open conflict and maintaining a semblance of friendship, particularly during Leonid Kuchma's presidency (1994-2005). The Ukrainian state largely refrained from producing new, powerful visual symbols

that would antagonize Russia, often relying on a passive policy. Instead of a strong narrative of its own, Ukraine's visual culture primarily reflected moments of inter-state conflicts and diplomatic efforts to resolve them, without fully breaking from the past. Also, the virtual memory spaces like Bohdan Khmelnytskyi were re-shaped from the narrative of the «unity» with Russia to a more "nationalist" meaning, even though the new wave of monuments established in 1990-s still portrayed Bohdan Khmelnytskyi with the text of the agreement with Russia in 1654 (Image 6).
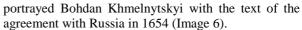

Image 6. Krynytsia, S. (n.d.) Pamiatnyk Bohdanovi Khmelnytskomu v Kirovohradi (1995) [Monument to Bohdan Khmelnytskyi in Kirovohrad] [Photograph]. Available at: https://surl.lu/pslonb (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Moreover, the Ukraine state concentrated on the text narratives rather than the visual narratives, which was probably caused by lack of finance support towards the visual agitation materials and uncertainty regarding the future relationship with Russia from top-down (Kuchma, 2003). At the same time, the Internet in Ukraine has not become popular yet, which caused the gap in the visual representation from the citizens' perspective in addition to the general lack of casus belli that would provoke the protests for / against Russia in public space.

However, the mnemonic struggle between Ukraine and Russia has already turned into its active phase during this period. Firstly, the Sevastopol and Black Sea Fleet Crisis (1992-1997) was the first major post-Soviet flashpoint. While this crisis was heavily covered in the media, Ukrainian official visual culture did not produce a strong, nationalist, anti-Russian message in response. The visual discourse remained largely confined to diplomatic meetings and negotiations. Photos of tense talks between presidents and military officials were common, but they got rid of the bold, state-sponsored propaganda of the Soviet era. This stands in stark contrast to the aggressive visual messaging that would later emerge from Russia, which claimed the fleet and Sevastopol as a point of national military pride and historical right.

Secondly, the Tuzla Island Conflict (2003) marked a significant Russian attempt of direct aggression and an escalation of rhetoric. Ukrainian media at the time, still heavily influenced by the lack of a coherent memory policy, did not produce a widespread, pro-Ukrainian visual campaign. The visual narrative was dominated by news reports of the Russian dam being built to the Ukrainian Tuzla island, Ukrainian border guards, local photos and official statements (Image 7).

Image 7. Ukrinform (2003) "Trebuem nemedlenno prekratit' provokatsiiu i pokinut' territoriiu Ukrainy" [We demand an immediate end to the provocation and to leave the territory of Ukraine] [Photograph]. Available at: https://surl.li/bcfszb (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

While there was a surge in patriotic sentiment and a broad representation of the conflict in the written format, it was not yet translated into a powerful, government-backed visual movement. This visual vacuum highlighted Ukraine's continued struggle to define a clear identity separate from its «brotherly» past.

To summarise, the visual culture of this era, rather than actively creating a new image, largely defaulted to ignoring the representation of Russo-Ukrainian relations, focusing on a generalized notion of «neighborliness». This could be seen in official government publications and state media that, while no longer promoting «brotherhood», also avoided visually portraying Russia as a threat despite the general subtle tendency towards claiming its «otherness». Ukraine's memory politics remained weak, as scholars like S. Plokhy (2015, p. 328) and other historians of the post-Soviet transition have noted. The state's focus was on nation-building from within, rather than on forging a powerful external «Other». This visual vacuum left Ukraine vulnerable to a new, hostile visual narrative from Russia, which would ultimately be used to justify the aggressive actions of the following decades.

The period from 2004 to 2014 was a pivotal decade that saw an irreversible transformation in the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations. While the previous era was characterized by a visual gap in Ukraine and the parallel representation of Ukraine as a «failed fascist state» and an «eternal brotherly nation» by Russia, this period was marked by a clear ideological and visual split in the Ukrainian collective memory.

First and foremost, the Orange Revolution was a turning point that gave birth to a powerful, distinct Ukrainian visual identity. It was a bottom-up movement, and its visual language was a stark contrast to the state-sponsored narratives of the past. The color orange became the central symbol, representing a break from the gray, Soviet-era past and a new, democratic future. This was not an active form of political expression presented both in text and visual formats. Protestors used orange ribbons, flags, and clothing to create a unified and visually compelling image of a nation standing for its independence. Additionally, the election of Viktor Yushchenko and his administration put a start for a massive campaign in politics of history that caused additional confrontation with Russian authorities. The most «uncomfortable» narratives, which had been actively discussed even between the presidents of Ukraine and the Russian Federation, Viktor Yushchenko and Vladimir Putin, related to the Holodomor of 1932-1933 and the role of OUN-

B in 1940-s for the Ukrainian territories, although the memory battles laid in smaller fields as well, such as the memory of the Battle of Poltava and the Baturyn tragedy that preceded it (Yushchenko, 2013). The depiction of Holodomor, which continued the general tendency of discussions since the perestroika times and the beginning of 1990-s between the historians, was reinforced by the 75th anniversary of the Great Famine in Ukraine (2008), so the series of actions were initiated by the President, which also included creating the visual representations of the Holodomor in forms of new memorials, monuments and the image of wheatear according to the decree 250/2007 (2007). These visuals did not represent the Russo-Ukrainian relations themselves, moreover, during the public speeches Viktor Yushchenko repeatedly made an accent on not blaming Russia for the previous crimes of the Soviet government (Kasianov, 2013, p. 83). Additionally, the image of OUN-B was glorified again, for instance, Viktor Yushchenko signed the decree No. 46/2010 awarding S. Bandera the Title of Hero of Ukraine, which caused a huge public discussion and was interpreted as the glorification of "fascism" by Russian narrative (2010). These images transformed the visual representation of Ukraine, or rather Ukrainians, from the «friends» and «brothers» to Russian people to the «victims» and the "opposers" of the Russian previous regime.

Russian state media began a systematic campaign to minimize and discredit Ukraine. The narrative of «brotherhood» was replaced by a more condescending and often hostile portrayal. Ukraine was no longer a «brotherly nation» but a failed, corrupt state plagued by «gas wars», political instability, and Western influence. The visual propaganda often depicted Ukrainian politicians as «puppets» of the West, with images of them meeting with European and American leaders meant to signify disloyalty to Russia. In addition, Russian narratives became quite popular in Ukraine itself, mostly due to the negative perception of the Orange revolution by the average population of the Eastern regions of Ukraine. It was caused by a set of different circumstances, including the closer informational, cultural and political integration of these territories with Russia as the closest neighbor and thus the popularity of votes for Viktor Yanukovych. For instance, in Luhansk there was a new museum opened in 2007 that was dedicated to the victims of Orange Revolution and accused the President Viktor Yushchenko of being guilty for everything happening in Ukraine, including closing the Russian-speaking schools and increased contacts with the West (Hrebenyuk, 2007).

Under President Viktor Yanukovych (2010-2014), there was an attempt to visually restore the old narrative of «brotherhood.» His presidency was marked by a symbolic pivot back to Russia, seen in gestures like the Kharkiv Pact (2010) and his use of pro-Russian rhetoric. Visually, this period was represented by the revival of Soviet-era symbols and a renewed emphasis on shared history, a clear attempt to reverse the visual momentum of the Orange Revolution. However, this attempt

was largely unsuccessful due to the counter-movement from Ukrainian civil society and the eventual outbreak of the Euromaidan Revolution.

Also, the status of the Russian and Ukrainian languages became a major visual flashpoint. Russian propaganda often created cartoons and posters that depicted Russian speakers as oppressed or persecuted in Ukraine, which was also noticed by Ukrainians. A telling example is the cartoon «Girl, move over, you are oppressing me» («Devochka, podvin'sya, ty menya pritesnyaesh», 2014), which visually summarized the Kremlin's narrative that the Russian language, despite its widespread use, was somehow under threat (Image 8). This visual metaphor of a powerful entity (Ukrainian language) oppressing a marginalized one (Russian language) became a staple of Russian media, in spite of the fact that the reality was often quite the opposite in Ukraine.

Image 8. Fedko, O. (2011) Devochka, podvin'sia, ty menia pritesniaesh' [Girl, move over, you're oppressing me] [Cartoon]. Available at: https://surl.li/zfcyfs (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

As a result, the Orange Revolution prompted a more fundamental shift in both Ukrainian and Russian memory politics. The Orange Revolution's visual language, with its bright colors and a powerful, unified public image, forced Russia to make an emphasis on abandoning the «brotherhood» myth and, in turn, began to depict Ukrainians as a separate «fascists» and Western-influenced entity. This paved the way for the aggressive, anti-Ukrainian visual campaigns that would come to define the post-2004 period. The visual discourse of this period also saw the final decay of the «brotherly nations» narrative. The Ukrainian side, driven by the Orange Revolution's energy, increasingly used visual culture to assert a distinct, European identity. In response, Russia's visual representation of Ukrainians moved towards portraying them as an «Other» – a separate, misguided people who were no longer part of the "Russian World" and were betraying their shared Slavic heritage.

The period from 2014 to 2022 represented a «memory war» with a huge emphasis on visual culture. Russia's aggression, starting with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, forced a rapid and complete re-evaluation of the visual language of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The old narrative of «friendship» and «unity» was no longer just challenged; it was actively weaponized by Russia and systematically dismantled by Ukraine. In fact, the memory war did not start in 2014, the roots of depicting Ukraine as a «failed state» and the «fascist country» by Russia have haunted Ukraine since the very declaration of independence. Moreover, anti-Maidan and pro-Russian narratives became widespread on the East of Ukraine, mostly due to the support of Viktor Yanukovych and the exploitation

of the fears of local population about «nationalists» and «radicals» by Russian propaganda, which was also broadcast on television (Wilson, 2014, pp. 69-72). Hence, to some of the local citizens on the East the idea of protection by Russia was considered as a solution and the defense from the «self-proclaimed» government.

The further representation of Russo-Ukrainian relations was also implemented based on the national law in both countries. For instance, Russia concentrated on the Agreement on Admission of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation (Russian Federation, 2014), whereas the admission of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) happened later, in 2022 (President of Russia, 2022). On the contrary, Ukraine intensified decommunization processes, including forbidding the propaganda of the Soviet symbols and clearly insisting on the unified Soviet-Russian discourse (Ukraine, 2015). Moreover, the images of «friendship» and «neighborliness» were finally withdrawn on the official level, according to the law No. 2643-VIII on the Termination of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (Ukraine, 2018).

This period was defined by a top-down and bottom-up struggle over historical memory. The official historical policies of both nations diverged dramatically. Russia's state-sponsored media used visuals to portray Ukrainians as the «Other» by calling them traitors and fascists. The «friendship» concept was not abandoned, but it was perverted. Russia's statement transformed into the accent on Ukrainians and Russians being one people, while Ukrainians were misled and betrayed the shared history. Hence, Russia made a lot of effort to bring them back into the Russian meta-narrative. Ukraine, in turn, intensified its decommunization efforts, dismantling Soviet monuments and symbols of «brotherhood» in a concerted effort to erase the visual legacy of the past.

At the level of ordinary Ukrainians, the visual discourse was raw and immediate. The imagery of the Maidan protests and the war itself directly contradicted the old narrative. Memes, cartoons, and street art became powerful tools for creating a new visual identity. The image of the Russian soldier transitioned from a liberator to an aggressor (Theisen 2025). The visual culture, born from a need to make sense of the new reality, provided the conceptual and emotional foundation for a new, antagonistic narrative. The bottom-up memory war used various new and reformatted images to present the image of Russia and its attitude towards Ukraine, as well as the image of Ukraine itself. One of the main indications of the distinct essence of the countries in the visual narrative remains the flag and the coat of arms (Ukrainian tryzub, Russian eagle). In addition, the folkloric stereotypes became actively used (Matryoshka, bear, balalaika, kokoshnik, etc.). It may be stated that the Ukrainians who mostly used the inherited narratives from the Soviet period could not reshape the Soviet image of Russia as there was none. During the Soviet time, there was no clear visual

association with Russia or Russian people, while Ukrainians were presented mostly in the traditional costumes and as the cossacks. Hence, there was an increased necessity to adjust the images of Russian that already existed in the visual public discourse, such as the images used during the Cold War and the media campaigns from the 19-th century.

Image 9. Oliinyk, Ye. (2015) Karikatura pro rosiiske vtruchannia v Ukraini [Caricature about Russian interference in Ukraine] [Cartoon]. Radio Svoboda [Radio Liberty]. Available at: https://surl.li/tjdjda (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Also the new images came to their use. The main examples, which were simultaneously forced by Russians from another perspective, were the image of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin, Crimea (as the main escalation point), St. George's ribbon and the «green men» who took power over the Crimean peninsula in 2014 (Image 9).

Supposedly, such bipolar use of the same images was caused not by the weak historical politics and lack of generative content ideas, but rather by the impact of globalisation and informatisation that led to the virtual cross-interaction between the opposed mnemonic camps.

At the same time, the physical confirmation of the specifics of Ukrainian-Russian relations also took place. For instance, one of the major memory spaces dedicated to the topic, the Arch of Friendship in Kyiv, underwent a huge symbolic reposition. In 2018, the activists painted the crack on the Arch to symbolize the «crack of friendship» with Russians and to support the political prisoners in Russia (UkrInform, 2018).

Ultimately, the concept of «Ukrainian-Russian friendship» as a viable visual narrative was completely discredited. It did not align with either Ukraine's pro-European project or Russia's «imperial» project. It became a central front in Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine, a tool of information warfare that was visually debunked by the reality of military aggression.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, represented the culmination act in the visual war of memories. It completely destroyed the last impact of the «brotherly» narrative and solidified a new visual reality. The official Russian narrative of «one people» and «liberation» was met with a powerful and unified Ukrainian visual counter-narrative of national defiance and resilience. Supposedly, Ukrainian solidarity was caused by the understanding of the existential purpose of war which demanded holding the strong and united informational front in addition to the real battlefield. According to the research of K. Kysliuk, the beginning of the full scale invasion was shown primarily with glamorous and entertaining content due to the need to create the

positive image of Ukrainian troops in order to get international support and boost morale among Ukrainians. However, this representation was usually detached from reality (Kysliuk, 2023).

Following the invasion, memes became a crucial form of visual communication, functioning as both a tool for humor and a way to process trauma. They created a new visual lexicon for the conflict, fundamentally redefining the relationship between Ukrainians and Russians. Memes depicted Russian soldiers as incompetent, corrupt, or as «orcs» – a direct reference to fantasy literature that dehumanized the enemy (Dedyulina 2022). This «low-brow» visual culture was highly effective at reaching a broad audience and solidifying the new antagonistic image. The visual representation was reinforced by the additional images of «Z» symbols, tanks, warships, prisoners of war, shown in opposition to the metaphors of brave Ukrainian people (Image 10). Mostly these symbols were used in order to exaggerate the negative qualities of Russians and to compromise the enemy.

Image 10. Kustovskyi, O. (2022) Parlamentska hazeta «Holos Ukrainy» proponuie doluchytysia do mizhnarodnoho fleshmobu karykatur «Viina v Ukraini» [Parliamentary newspaper «Holos Ukrainy» offers to join the international caricature flashmob «War in Ukraine»]
[Facebook Post]. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/oleksy.kustovsky/posts/4895901180478902 (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

In addition to the existing images of Russia and Russo-Ukrainian relation, the representation of Russia as the «Other» was also supplemented with the references to Russian culture: by showing Alexander Pushkin or Russian ballet in the visual narrative, another level of representation was created, focused on de-humanizing Russians. Mostly these visual images were shown together with blood, missiles or the stealing processes (such as the image of Alexander Pushkin stealing the washing machine - another visual image of Russians in addition to the toilet stealing that became extremely popular), which highlighted the historical continuity and regularity of Russian occupation politics and pointed out at the cultural assimilation issue in Ukraine (Kotubey-Herutska, 2022). Russian literature was also reinterpreted to show the meanness of fate of its characters that would have been avoided if the Armed Forces of Ukraine were nearby (Pecherskyi, 2022).

It needs to be stated that the memory war unified the top-down and bottom-up initiatives in Ukraine: in addition to official statements that Ukrainians and Russians were not fraternal nations (Ministry of Culture and Information Policy & Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, 2022), there were other visual

representations such as films (Chernov, 20230, stamps (Grokh, 2022) and even souvenirs (such as the candle in the form of Kremlin, maps without Russia and so on). Also, another method of fighting the Russian mythologemes became claiming the unique Ukrainian identity, which was represented in active use of traditional costumes with embroidery (vyshyvanka) and implementing them into modern fashion and art, active erection of the memorials of war, public exhibitions, memes about Unbroken Ukrainians (Konotop witch, brave farmer stealing the tank with a tractor, etc.).

The final victory of the national-patriotic discourse on the Ukrainian territories was enshrined in Ukrainian law. The 2025 redaction of law, «On the Principles of the State Policy of the National Memory of the Ukrainian People,» officially condemns Soviet and Russian imperial narratives (Zakon Ukraïny Pro zasudzhennya ta zaboronu propahandy rosiys'koyi impers'koyi polityky v Ukraïni i dekolonizatsiyu toponimiyi, 2025). This legislation mandated the final removal of symbols of Russian and Soviet totalitarianism from public spaces. It codified the re-evaluation of history and provided a legal basis for the demolition and reinterpretation of monuments that once symbolized «friendship» but were now seen as tools of occupation and historical oppression. This law legally sealed the visual break with Russia, transforming the debate over monuments from a public conflict into a state-sanctioned policy, marking the decisive end of the «brotherly» narrative in official Ukrainian visual culture.

Research conclusions. To summarize, the visual representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations from 1954 to the present indeed shifted from the narrative of «brothers» to «enemies». The Soviet-era myth of «eternal brotherhood», «friendship» and «unity» was shown in the forms of Ukrainian and Russian men and women in the traditional clothes, cossacks and boyars, handshakes, hugs, flags, etc. The beginning of the independence of Ukraine became the memory mask of this idea, by trying to preserve the narrative (mostly written) of «friendship», «brotherhood» and «neighborhood» in order to deescalate the ongoing conflicts with Russia, such as with Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet. Usually the visual images of the relations between two peoples remained the national flags, coats of arms, etc. The weakness of Ukrainian memory politics in the 1990s and 2000s, coupled with the absence of a visual template for an «enemy» Russia, created a vulnerable vacuum. Russia's modern, contradictory visual and written strategy – claiming Ukrainians are «one brotherly people» with Russians while simultaneously depicting them as an illegitimate «Other» and the «fascists» – exploited this vulnerability. 2014 became the catalyst for the Ukrainian side for creating Russia and Russians as the «Other» as well: the weak memory politics was boosted bottom-up due to the active society involvement. Now Russia was shown with the help of images of Crimea, Vladimir Putin, St. George's ribbon, weaponry and military equipment, etc. At the same time, the traditional images of Russia were also actively used: for instance, matryoshka or the Kremlin.

With the 2022 Russia's full scale invasion, Ukrainians also embedded some new images to show the distinctiveness of Russians from Ukrainians. The most symbolic metaphors related to the «Z» emblems, washing machines and toilets (as the ones actively being stolen by Russians from the occupied territories), and also to the prominent examples of Russian culture covered with blood (Alexander Pushkin, ballet dancers, characters from Russian literature) and so on. So, the full scale war triggered a powerful, and largely grassroots, visual counter-narrative of resistance, defiance, and national independence. The conflict over monuments and the passage of national memory laws officially sealed the victory of a Ukrainian-centric historical narrative, culminating in the complete visual «de-brotherization» and antagonization of Russia by showing it as an «enemy».

The most common instruments representing the discourse during the Soviet period were preferably monuments, posters, stamps, pins, and postcards, the majority of them were presented due to the specific anniversaries celebration. At the same time, Soviet propaganda complemented the grand-narrative with the gentle incorporation of the images into cinematography and photography. With the lack of strong memory politics in Ukraine at the beginning of its independence in 1990-s, only photos visualized the Russo-Ukrainian relations. The decades-long Soviet visual campaign successfully embedded the idea of a shared identity, complicating Ukraine's efforts to forge a distinct, post-independence visual narrative. After 2004, due to the activization of memory politics, specifically towards Holodomor, increasing national agenda after the Orange revolution, the beginning of civil society ascendance and because of the growing popularity of Internet the shared past slowly became reinterpreted and shown in the movies, photos, and memes, however, Ukraine was still losing the memory war against Russia, and even paused it during the Viktor Yanukovych's presidency. The Russian invasion in 2014 and especially 2022 created the strong occasion to activate the informational front, which led to the creation of enormous templates of cinematography, memes, posters, art and even souvenir production. Moreover, during these periods the reconstruction and deconstruction of already existing memory spaces and memory landscape from the Soviet period took place.

The mnemonic conflict is still not over. While Ukraine has won the visual «memory war» on its own territory, Russia's mythological narrative persists, particularly for international and its domestic audience. The future of this conflict will likely involve actively sustaining the Ukrainian narrative, opposing Russian mythologemes and fighting for international support, particularly by exploiting the large Ukrainian diaspora.

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Сабадаш В. АНАТОМІЯ КОНФЛІКТУ: ЗМІНА РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ВІДНОСИН У ВІЗУАЛЬНІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ(1954-2025)

Мета дослідження полягає в простеженні меморіальної трансформації образу українсько-російських відносин у візуальній культурі України: від радянського «братнього» наративу до сучасного антагоністичного дискурсу. ***Методологія.*** Дослідження ґрунтується на міждисциплінарному підході, що включає культурну антропологію, студії пам'яті та дискурс-аналіз. У роботі застосовується широкий корпус візуальних джерел (скульптура, фотографія, кінематограф, плакати, карикатури, меми, контент соціальних мереж) для аналізу семантичних зрушень у візуальній репрезентації Росії та України, а також специфіки їхніх відносин. ***Новизна*** полягає у комплексному та довготривалому аналізі візуальної культури як основного поля українсько-російської мнемонічної боротьби. ***Висновки.*** Дослідження підтверджує трансформацію від «братнього» образу до «сусідства» у 1990-х – 2000-х роках та, зрештою, до появи метафор «ворог» та «агресор» в Україні після 2014 та 2022 років. Українські медіа послідовно намагалися сформувати потужний візуальний контрнаратив, проте цей процес був ускладнений успадкованими концептуальними парадигмами та відсутністю візуального шаблону «ворога» з радянської епохи. Загалом, сучасна російська політика пам'яті, посилюючи радянський метанаратив «один народ», одночасно мала на меті конструювати українців як маргіналізованого «Іншого».

Ключові слова: політика пам'яті, антагоністична пам'ять, російсько-українські відносини, Україна, російська війна в Україні, історична пам'ять, війна пам'ятей

Sabadasz W. ANATOMIA KONFLIKTU: PRZEMIANA STOSUNKÓW ROSYJSKO-UKRAIŃSKICH W KULTURZE WIZUALNEJ (1954-2025)

Streszczenie

Celem badania jest prześledzenie trasformacji pamięciowej obrazu stosunków ukraińsko-rosyjskich w kulturze wizualnej Ukrainy: od sowieckiej narracji „braterskiej" do współczesnego dyskursu antagonistycznego. ***Metodologia.*** Badanie opiera się na podejściu interdyscyplinarnym, obejmującym antropologię kulturową, badania pamięci i analizę dyskursu. Praca wykorzystuje szeroki korpus źródeł wizualnych (rzeźbę, fotografię, kino, plakaty, karykatury, memy, treści z mediów społecznościowych) do analizy

*semantycznych przesunięć w wizualnej reprezentacji Rosji i Ukrainy, a także specyfiki ich relacji. **Nowością** jest kompleksowa i długofalowa analiza kultury wizualnej jako głównego pola ukraińsko-rosyjskiej walki mnemonicznej. **Wnioski.** Badanie potwierdza transformację wizerunku „braterskiego” w obraz „sąsiedztwa” w latach 90. XX wieku, a ostatecznie pojawienie się metafor „wroga” i „agresora” na Ukrainie po 2014 i 2022 roku. Ukraińskie media konsekwentnie starały się stworzyć silną wizualną kontrnarrację, ale proces ten utrudniały odziedziczone paradygmaty koncepcyjne i brak wizualnego szablonu „wroga” z czasów sowieckich. Mówiąc ogólnie, współczesna rosyjska polityka pamięci, wzmacniając sowiecką metanarrację „jednego narodu”, jednocześnie dążyła do konstruowania Ukraińców jako marginalizowanego „Innego”.*

*****Słowa kluczowe:** polityka pamięci, pamięć antagonistyczna, stosunki rosyjsko-ukraińskie, Ukraina, wojna rosyjska na Ukrainie, pamięć historyczna, wojna pamięci.*