HEROES AND VILLAINS IN MEMES ON THE 2022 RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract: Wars and other acute social conflicts are a fruitful ground for the emergence of heroes and villains. This is true for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine: both the news media and ordinary people have found targets for villainisation (Russian president Vladimir Putin) and heroisation (Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy) since the outbreak of war. The article discusses how the public images of the two leaders appeared in internet memes collected in Estonian and Belarusian social media between February 24 and April 8, 2022. Analysing them against the backdrop of the (stereo)typical traits of heroes and villains in folklore, we outline how the new media format affects the way these two juxtaposed images are portrayed in memes. We also focus on the juxtaposition as one of the key strategies both in the processes of villainisation/heroisation and of humour production. The clear juxtaposition between good and evil in war humour distinguishes it from disaster jokes, which do not usually take a definite stance towards their targets.

Keywords: internet memes, juxtaposition, Putin, Zelenskyy, war humour

INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has split the world: on the one side, Russia has been trying to occupy Ukraine with the indirect help of its few allies, and on the other side, most European, North American and other

democratic countries stand united in their support for Ukraine. As often happens in armed conflicts, both sides created their own heroes and villains during the first days of the war. The selection of targets for heroisation and villainisation is based on the convictions of the people who create the oppositions, i.e. whether they support the war or are against it, which belligerent side they empathise with, and what information space they follow. Whereas the heroes and villains of the Russian side are largely confined to the Russian pro-Kremlin propaganda media, the heroes and villains representing the Ukrainian side of the war became prominent in different parts of the world. In this article, we will take a look at the Ukraine-centred heroisation and villainisation patterns displayed in internet visual and audiovisual memes immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The (sometimes humorous) strategies for creating a hero or a villain are listed as a result of qualitative analysis, with special focus on juxtaposition as a typical strategy in the context of social media, the environment for meme dissemination.

The heroisation and villanisation of prominent personalities was often contested in Ukraine during the pre-2022 war period, with Stepan Bandera being a case in point (see Marples 2007: 96–100). After the outbreak of the war, these opposite categories were legitimised and became clearly outlined. The majority's acceptance was backed up by the globally emerging narratives of good and evil, of us and them (Sukhorolskyi 2022): the democratic world versus the autocratic regimes. In the public sphere – official media outlets as well as social media – Russian president Vladimir Putin became the most visible villain, while Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy was glorified as a hero.

During the first months of the war, Zelenskyy's popularity skyrocketed in Ukraine; this is especially striking given the criticism and the loss of public support he was facing before the war (Armstead 2022). He also experienced a rise in international popularity. Though some of the United States mainstream media have not introduced significant changes to the portrayal of Zelenskyy after Ukraine was attacked by Russia (Vrba 2022: 94), for many people he has revived the idea of hero and heroism. His courage and commitment, and the fact that he neglected his personal safety for the sake of the nation, inspired many people who are not directly involved in the war – and living far away from it, for example, in the USA – to believe that heroes also exist outside of popular culture (see, e.g. Sarat & Aftergut 2022).

While Zelenskyy's heroisation is a fairly recent phenomenon, Putin was villainised before the 2022 war, especially in the US media, as part of the process of personification of the Russian nation state (Hartblay 2020: 141). His image has been given with "vampiric" traits by cartoonists and online commentators (Lucey & Miller 2018), and even religious artwork such as a contemporary Ukrainian icon – The Last Judgement – represent Putin as a symbol of evil (Lesiv 2022).

The war in Ukraine, which Putin initiated, exacerbated this trend (Vrba 2022) and made Putin's image the epitome of aggression (the "war criminal", ibid.: 91) both in mainstream media and in vernacular expressions triggered by the war.

The typology of heroes and villains

The roles of the hero and villain are widely recognised around the world (Hanke et al. 2015). Any societal crisis or conflict is likely to give rise to opposition between villains and heroes (Klapp 1954). For example, the rhetoric of Swedish COVID-19 news coverage in spring 2020 clearly constructed groups of villains (virus-spreading tourists and unnecessary healthcare claimants) and heroes (healthcare staff) (Skog & Lundström 2020); the hero–villain opposition has also been noted in earlier conflicts, for example WWII narratives and comic books (see Murray 2011). This fundamental dichotomy, however, leaves ample room for nuanced and different representations of the groups, which vary depending on the nature of a crisis, as well as group dynamics and the rhetorical strategies used by the people who are directly or indirectly affected by the conflict.

The term 'villain' is usually employed in instances where there is an individual character who is directly opposed to an individual hero (cf. while 'enemy' is used when the adversary is collective; see Kerr 2016: 52). Villain derives from the Medieval Latin word for a farm worker (vīllānus), denoting a lower-class person (ibid.: 52). The opposite term, 'hero', derives from Greek ἥρως (hērōs), the possible original meaning of which is 'protector' or 'defender' of superhuman strength or physical courage (though its origin is uncertain), demi-god who is endowed with the attributes of patriotism, bravery and loyalty, which are essential during warfare and particularly during periods of total war (Schwartz 1969). We will use the terms 'villain' to refer to Putin versus 'hero', applied to Zelenskyy, to mark the individual-bound personifications of the two fighting sides in the war in Ukraine. These depictions dramatise the war as a mythic narrative of the struggle between (personalised) good and evil.

In the Ukrainian context, the Russian side seems to have accepted the label of the evil villain to some extent, as it supports their rhetoric of a powerful state and underlines their strength, visualised for example in tropes like the Russian army being called "orcs" (J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy villains that are a parodic version of elves, see Poveda 2005). Putin's propagandists sometimes call themselves, jokingly or seriously, the "horde of Mordor" (Sukhorolskyi 2022). The Ukrainian side, on the other hand, has welcomed the label of defenders of democracy, or in biblical allegory, the David who fights the much bigger and more powerful Goliath for the good of others (ibid.: 9).

Heroes and villains in folklore and fiction

Heroes and villains are important characters in folktales. They set the story in motion and the conflict between them is often the focal point of folk narratives, creating the suspense and climax of a story. Their function is to provide prosaic routines that deliver hope to the audience (Klapp 1954). In folklore, as well as in works of fiction, heroes and villains become clear-cut categories through juxtaposition: one needs the other to function properly. The depiction of heroes and villains follows certain conventions and key characteristics outlined below.

In folk imagination heroes are exceptionally gifted (Campbell 2004: 35). They symbolise success, perfection and conquest of evil, they function as a "better self" of the group and are depicted as powerful and charismatic leaders who are widely imitated and followed (Klapp 1954). In folk narratives heroes usually embark on a journey or a quest for some higher aim; the journey consists of "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (Campbell 2004: 33). This return must be triumphant: either on a domestic level (for fairy tale heroes) or on a macro-cosmic level (for mythical heroes) (Campbell 2004: 35). Sometimes heroes are demi-gods by birth, but there are occasions when an everyman can become a superman (Bal 1997), represented by folk characters such as Ivan the Fool. Even though they initially might not be recognised as heroes in their own community, they are eventually glorified and empowered (for example male heroes are often depicted as symbols of masculinity). They are often physically attractive, representing the desired state of humanity. They have the (moral) power and authority to defeat the villains, and the audience has no reason to doubt them (Alsford 2006: 93). The primary aim of the hero is to disempower and degrade the villain (for example sexually), make them seem smaller in size and thus less threatening and dangerous.

Villains, on the other hand, are often repulsive and unpleasant, both in their appearance and in their actions. They tend to counter moral actions because of their inherently malicious will (Klapp 1954) and easily transgress social norms (Poveda 2005: 156). Despite generally taking human form such as robbers, merchants, etc. (Propp 1968: 91), they are at heart monsters, hated as enemies of the weak and the good – like the witches and ogres of folktales. Although they can have physical (super)power, in all other ways they are the opposite of the hero. Their physical appearance is usually straightforwardly unattractive, even repulsive, or, if the vile features are hidden, they are revealed after close contact. Villains are cursed and their death is sought for. These monster-like creatures are incompatible with social organisation and must be expelled for the society to be safe (Klapp 1954).

The juxtaposition of heroes and villains across different media and its humorous potential

The juxtaposition of heroes and villains is a strategy that has been used since the beginning of narration in myths, fairy tales, legends, etc., although these genres carry a specific twist typical to each (cf. McLuhan & Fiore's [1967] assertion that "the medium is the message"). For example, humour-related genres such as jokes or internet memes use juxtapositions to create humour, while in fairy tales juxtapositioning adds drama with the aim of creating tension and building legitimacy. The contrast between the mythical hero and the villain in a legend is usually clear-cut and lies at the basis of their confrontation. At the same time, juxtapositions that are used to create humour are more controversial and ambivalent. Furthermore, heroes and villains are represented differently in serious and humorous media: while serious narratives underscore the traits that evoke empathy towards heroes and aversion towards villains, humorous genres focus on more ambiguous features that can be viewed as incongruous, unexpected and thus funny.

In 'serious' genres such as folk tales, heroes do not usually display comic traits, even if their features are presented in an exaggerated manner. Propp (2009: 65) describes non-humorous exaggeration as a way to create heroes, be it appearance (as in the case of a Yakut) or strength (in the case of a Russian): "There is a shade of humour … but it is not comical". In order to pursue the unambiguously morally and socially acceptable agenda, heroes act seriously and inspire feelings of compassion and admiration, but not laughter.

Villains, however, evoke not only hatred or contempt, but also become objects of ridicule even in more serious folklore genres. The representatives of evil in myths (for example, devils) are often reduced to the status of clowns, even if they employ clever deception strategies (Campbell 2004: 273; see also the category of the trickster, Klapp 1954). Moreover, some of heroes' antagonists are labelled *comic villains* who are defined as "really bad guys—assassins, rapists, traitors, false friends and the like—who are nevertheless portrayed as absurd, contemptible, or inept, and are ultimately unsuccessful in carrying out their intended villainy, exiting the play world, mocked, abashed and shamed" (Whitworth 2011: 219).

Genres that typically embed humour as technique or, even, as an outlook on life, depict villains as inadequate, laughable targets. Humour can be used as a weapon against villains. Even though villains possess a certain power, they can be "dethroned" with the help of humour (cf. 'cult' figures in the Soviet period, see Adams 2005: 5). A reliable method of humorous dethronement is mock aggression, or alternatively the introduction of homosexual, scatological, and

zoophilic references (cf. Frank 2011: 82–95, who describes vengeance narratives related to Bin Laden that were ripe with scatological and sexual humiliation). For a villain to become the target of a joke, he must have some clearly flawed features; to induce not just fear but also laughter and contempt. Humour deprives a villain of his humanity (and masculinity), and gives the humour producers and recipients a chance to look down on him (cf. superiority theory, Martin 2007: 5–6). In some cases, villain's features are deliberately recontextualised to make them look ridiculous and therefore less threatening (a possible origin of clowns' baggy pants and hats is the mockery of Ottoman Turkish clothing, see Nicolle 1995: 3). They are also ridiculed because they display exaggerated propensities or tend towards extremes that do not fit into socially acceptable conventions (see Davies 1990).

However, villains are accused and heroes are glorified in a non-humorous way (cf. pro-Trump memes, alt-right memes and others that try to forward a particular agenda through memes employing the concept of meme magic[1], see Prisk 2017; Asprem 2020). This becomes particularly obvious during wars and other acute social conflicts. The difference lies in the context: wars change established power relations, making humour thus sometimes serve non-humorous or even propagandistic purposes instead. It is necessary to pick a side in the conflict and there is thus not much flexibility left to look at the goings-on from various, colliding and controversial angles at once.

War humour can also be compared to another type of black humour, namely, disaster jokes. Both frame unpleasant events in a humorous way, and both can be regarded as coping mechanisms (Dundes 1987: 73; Cook 2013). However, war humour is different from disaster humour in that it contains more aggression and displays solidarity by targeting someone outside the group. This is in turn conditioned by media coverage of the conflict – sides are already created and taken there. In some cases, however, disaster jokes and war humour can interweave. For example, analysing 9/11 disaster jokes, Kuipers notes that Bin Laden is portrayed as the ultimate villain, as the "enemy who has to be crushed and degraded" (for example Bin Laden being hanged, gutted, raped, or beheaded; 2005 [2011]: 35). She admits, however, that "the humorous clash jokes … do not really take a stand against the villain or in favour of the hero" (ibid.: 31), stressing the playfulness of the images that appeared right after the Twin Towers attack in the USA. The early disaster memes from 2001, when the genre was only gathering popularity, comment first and foremost on the way the attack was covered in the media. War humour, which becomes an important mechanism that reaffirms one's belonging to the group (Holman & Kelly 2001), displays, on the other hand, again a clear stance in relation to the belligerent parties.

In terms of their generic particularities, disaster jokes focus on topics rather less common in other types of joke (for example, sex, religion, ethnicity) – specifically, on innocent or innocuous themes such as advertising, games, fairy tales. A mixture of an extremely serious topic and such unserious themes may cause amusement because they are odd (Kuipers 2002: 21), but also because the connections are unexpected, easily graspable for large audiences, bringing them to the genre of fiction where they belong. This is also true to some extent of war humour which makes ample use of popular cultural references and fictional characters' images to frame the conflict in a playful, less threatening way. Both war and disaster humour draw on the genres of press images, but approach them in a different manner. While war humour often focuses on the less important but incongruous details of the official press images, disaster jokes generally aim to reach beyond the "speakable media images" and revolve around the (bodily) horrors that are extensively shown in press coverage (Oring 1987: 282–283).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Estonian and Belarusian data

The data was collected during the first months of the war (February 24 – April 8 2022) mainly from social media. The source of Estonian data is the Facebook group *Ukraina meemid* created by the Estonian Folklore Archive during the first days of the war to collect the memes circulating in the Estonian mediasphere that revolved around the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Out of 712 images posted there by April 8, 365 involved personification strategy – referring to the war by depicting a person or a group of people. Belarusian data derives from 4 humorous groups on Telegram, 2 humorous Facebook groups and 1 humorous group on Vk, as well as data collected from personal Twitter accounts that have a long-standing history of posting humorous content reflecting on current news, and finally the mainstream Belarusian media. Altogether, the Belarusian data consisted of 800 items, with personification appearing in 227 of the total number of memes. In our analysis, we focused on images of the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This resulted in 264 memes from the two data subsets, Estonian and Belarusian. All the memes have visual elements, and most of them are accompanied with verbal textual captions.

Method

The data was collected and systematised in AirTable, a spreadsheet-database hybrid cloud collaboration tool. First, all memes were inserted into AirTable and coded for their format (image, text and image, audiovisual) as well as country of dissemination (Belarus, Estonia) and personification (Putin, Zelenskyy, other actors). Even though Estonia and Belarus differ in their officially expressed attitudes towards the war, the memes in both datasets put forth a similar stance, and also used many of the same visual and verbal elements and humorous mechanisms. Therefore, we are not aiming to contrast the national datasets, but rather use them in a complimentary way to clarify how juxtaposing heroes and villains functions in the context of war memes. A pilot sample of 100 first memes was co-coded; as there was a significant agreement between the coders, the authors coded their respective samples independently, also noting, in addition to the initial categories, the intertextual references and the primary attributes of the hero/villain referred to in the image or video. We then performed a qualitative analysis of the data, with the aim of revealing the main heroisation and villainisation strategies and motifs in the memes. The research questions guiding our work were the following:

- how is Putin represented in the memes: what are the attributes and intertextual references, and what are the primary villainisation strategies;
- how is Zelenskyy represented in the memes: what are the attributes and intertextual references, and what are the primary heroisation strategies;
- what are the features and logic of one particular strategy – juxtaposition of the hero and the villain (especially in memes that show Zelenskyy versus Putin in one image) – and in what way this related to juxtaposition in humour;
- how the social media format affects the way heroes and villains are represented in memes.

ANALYSIS

The memes chosen for this analysis depict the two conflict sides of the war in Ukraine, adopting the strategy of personification (i.e. showing Putin and Zelenskyy as the symbols or 'faces' of the war). Other possible personification strategies, including depicting the war through armies, civilians or characters from popular culture (see Laineste et al. forthcoming), are not included in this study.

Putin memes

There are 236 memes featuring Putin (either alone or with someone else) in our dataset. Putin's rhetoric and self-positioning have long aimed at constructing a (hyper)masculine, rough image (for example using criminal slang in speeches, see Weiser 2018). At the same time, it has also displayed the features of "masculinity in crisis" or "male hysteria" (Novitskaya 2017). For example, the memes of Putin the gay clown (Cooper-Cunningham 2022) give evidence of that. Putin as a meme character is a combination of these features, using unflattering memetic imagery from earlier years (Putin riding horses, bears or other objects like biscuits etc., the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse meme[2]) and the press images (for example Putin at the long table). The logic of these depictions is twofold (though not always overlapping in memes): constructing Putin as a threatening, callous villain who should be feared, versus the idea that he is a ridiculous and stupid coward who should not be taken seriously. The two directions are outlined below.

In his threatening and fear-inducing memetic image, Putin is portrayed as a terrorist and a blood-thirsty warmonger, with blood being one of the key visual elements to signal his evilness. His sole aim is to kill people and make them suffer, and he has no remorse or mercy (Figure 1).

Figure 1. I will enjoy watching you die. https://www. facebook.com/photo/?fbid=7239197469484614&set =g.534314991238265.

There are also references to him as an anti-social person. He is portrayed as a liar or a thief; in the latter case the image of Putin is likely to personify the marauding Russian army as per extensive reports in news media during the first months of the war. Another way to show Putin's deficiency is to depict him as a mentally ill person or one with very negative personality traits. This depiction strategy stems from the long-standing tradition of stigmatising mental disorders in popular culture (Figure 2; see, for example, Eisenhauer 2008). A closely connected topic are the memes that allude to one of the most recurrent Putin's nicknames, *huilo* (deriving from an obscene Russian word for male genitalia). It is evoked both visually and verbally. This in turn relates to a number of scatological, sexual and other straightforwardly degrading motifs that are often found in the way Putin is portrayed.

Figure 2. *Is this military superpower in the room with us now? https://www. facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1016130668 3062439&set=g.534314991238265.*

Another serious topic prominent in the memes is that of Putin's death, which is defaming and unflattering in the memes (putting "putin" into the waste bin, for example with the label "Poo tin"; cf. dead baby joke cycle, see Dundes 1979). Memes contain allusions to a lot of variants and aspects of Putin's death, employing such symbols as rope, coffins, axes, etc. In one meme, the Pope hints that Putin's suicide would not be a sin. Putin's villainsation is intertextual, referring to other widely recognised symbols of evil, such as Nazi symbolics (combined with motifs like blood mentioned above). Putin is sometimes portrayed in a Nazi uniform, adorned with Nazi symbols or in other ways visually compared to Adolf Hitler. Memes also establish connections between Putin and Stalin, but such memes are much scarcer in our datasets. There is a shift of attitude towards this historical figure that has often been taken to stand for the epitome of evil (within the WWII context, see Laineste & Lääne 2015; Pidkuimukha 2021), even though not as frequently as Hitler. Sometimes the

motifs of Putin's desired death and his similarity to other (historical) dictators are combined (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The negotiations that everyone is dreaming of now. Putin and Lukashenko are depicted among the dead dictators – the meme makes allusions both to their desired death and to the fact that they belong among the dictators. https://vk.com/belmems?z=photo-83285883_457240097%2Falbum-83285883_00%2Frev.

In some memes Putin is depicted with his subordinates and allies (Russian politicians, Russian people, Lukashenko, see Figures 4 and 5), where Putin takes a position of authority (gives out orders), but (especially in the Belarusian dataset) the allies can also be depicted as equally dangerous villains who verge on the margin of being ridiculous fools (for example in the meme where Putin and Lukashenko are photoshopped as the two thieves from *Home Alone*, or the two of them performing ballet on the stage, dressed as swans, or disguised as old ladies trying to escape the war, Figure 4). Against the backdrop of a prolonged war with little progress, Putin looks worried, ill, and powerless in these memes.

Figure 4. Putin and Lukashenko as old ladies. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10161340795757439&set=g.534314991238265.

Figure 5. *Putin and Shoigu riding a wooden cart pulled by a Russian soldier. https:// www.facebook.com/Viejsnoryja/photos /a.128705417756206/994283254531747/.*

These memes portray Putin as not so much a threatening but rather ridiculous and foolish character. Though Klapp (1954) regards the categories of the hero, villain and fool as separate, Ukraine war memes tend to combine the two latter. They become a means to transform and degrade the villain into a less threatening, weak and sub-human character. Memes thus display Putin as a man of flawed masculinity, problematising his manhood and showing him in mash-ups that are generally unflattering, or, more specifically, degrading (see a parallel with Bin Laden memes, Kuipers 2005 [2011]: 32). This not only follows on a dichotomous good/evil narrative of geopolitics but also feeds into the trope of Western / Euro-American hegemonic masculinity being the key status marker of a capable politician. Straightforward effeminisation of Putin's image in the 2022 memes is, however, only occasional (Figure 4), as are the references to his use of Botox injections (as opposed to earlier demasculinisation strategies described in Riabov & Riabova 2014; see also Laineste & Kalmre 2017). Putin is also the object of more amusing attacks than the straightforward killing, death or defamation described earlier. A prominent visual symbol of Putin's bodily disempowerment that can be found both in Estonian and Belarusian datasets is an image of a trident (the central element of the Ukrainian coat of arms) stuck into Putin's backside (Figure 6). In an attempt to make the symbolic representation more symmetrical, Putin's body is substituted with that of a chicken in some of the memes (alluding to the eagle on the Russian coat of arms). In some memes, he is dwarfed in size and represented visually as a Lilliputian (Figure 7) thus creating a morally and physically weakened image of the enemy – a recurrent strategy in dealing with enemies in caricatures (Laineste & Lääne 2015).

Figure 6. *Mõkolajev's governor: A country with a chicken in its coat of arms can never defeat a country with a fork in its coat of arms. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10159769746628864&set =g.534314991238265.*

Figure 7. *Belarus has two allies: leprechauns and dwarves. The meme was posted on March 17, when Lukashenko congratulated the Irish people on St. Patrick's day. https://t.me/belteanews/22268.*

Putin's personality becomes a target of ridicule when his anti-social character is distilled into a shameful trait like cowardice (Figure 8). In the war context, this is highlighted as one of the key negative features (cf. jokes about cowardly Italians, Davies 1990: 173–202), hence the frequent references in the memes to the bunker where Putin is presumably hiding. Several nicknames derive from this motif: 'Bunker king' (a pun referring to the fast-food chain Burger King, which is an allusion to the economic sanctions placed on Russia), and 'old man in a bunker' (used by Belarusian humorous social media groups).

At the same time, Putin is depicted as an inept leader whose army's achievements are not just unprofessional but first and foremost laughable, especially when contrasted with the efforts of Ukrainian farmers who tow away Russian tanks with tractors, managing to defeat the Russians without really having proper equipment for modern warfare. He has to sit helplessly behind his desk and observe his similarly inept army marauding the Ukrainian homes and making tactical errors on the front. Putin's internal politics are also ridiculed, as is his perspective on the world (Nazis are everywhere except in Russia). He is portrayed as backward character dreaming of a USSR-like empire, unable to plan for or think of the future (Figure 9; cf. stupidity jokes on backwardness, Laineste 2008).

Figure 8. Medvedev and Putin posing as White Sun of the Desert film characters. Putin's speech bubble: "Now we have two options: either we attack and get f*cked, or we retreat and crap our pants". https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2284259381712348&set=g.1716227065346657.

Figure 9. Putin degenerating. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=7207713669299661&set=g.534314991238265.

Zelenskyy memes

Memes depicting Zelenskyy are much scarcer than those depicting Putin; 43 in total (either Zelenskyy alone or with some other character). The reasons for this are twofold: first, he does not have a long-standing history as a memetic character, and secondly, his heroised image does not leave much room for playfulness, compared to the foolish villain Putin. The memes project a heroisation of Zelenskyy, underlying his masculinity, often connected to courage (for example by claiming that his "balls can be seen from space") and leadership qualities. He is shown as a hero who almost single-handedly protects the entire world from the threat that Putin poses not just for Ukraine, but for democracy, freedom and other Western values.

Some of the memes attribute supernatural powers to him (for example, he and his officials are compared to cats who have 9 lives, or he is depicted as a superman, or the Earth is said to be spinning because Zelenskyy has kicked it into motion). In memes, Zelenskyy's speeches are allegedly more appealing than sex (a frequent topic in Belarusian memes, see Figure 10), and his image can be used for the best protection magic (including protection against pregnancy).

Figure 10. *"Where are you, darling?" – "I'm coming…" https://vk.com/belmems?z=photo-83285883_457240112%2Falbum-83285883_00%2Frev.*

He also appears alongside other prominent heroes from popular media or history, for example Chuck Norris or Winston Churchill. In a humorous meme (Figure 11), Zelenskyy, in full battle attire and standing in a trench, quips that he has never heard of the woman called Chuck Norris, again playing on the masculine image of the Ukrainian leader who is even manlier than the (comic) action hero.

Figure 11. Chuck Norris? Never heard of her. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10161757182438345&set=g.534314991238265.

Figure 12. Lavrov: "Zelenskyy is hiding in Kyiv like a coward instead of coming to Minsk for the negotiations like a man". The meme was posted on February 27 when Zelenskyy was constantly rejecting the US offer to evacuate him. https://t.me/Sn_and_Cu/908.

There are also occasional jokes referring to Zelenskyy's career as a comedian: in these cases there is a juxtaposition between the comedian (Zelenskyy) and the clown/clowns (Putin; other political leaders).

The memes depicting Zelenskyy do not straightforwardly target him (as they do in the case of Putin, where the target is set to be denigrated and ridiculed in a variety of ways), but rather use his image to ridicule his enemies through the mechanism of juxtaposition, mainly targeting Russian politicians and propaganda (Figure 12).

In these cases Zelenskyy's courage is juxtaposed to Russian politicians' cowardice and mendacity. Sometimes European and American politicians are also ridiculed in these memes for not helping Zelenskyy enough or standing aside to see how Ukraine and Zelenskyy do the dirty work (for example visualised as digging a hole, with Ukraine working and the others standing by the hole and giving instructions or simply observing).

Putin *versus* Zelenskyy memes

The age-old trope of the juxtaposition of good and evil is revived in the memetic portrayal of the war in Ukraine. In our sample, the juxtaposition memes – those where Putin and Zelenskyy appear in one and the same meme as two sides, two panes or pictures (left/right, up/down) – aim to express how Zelenskyy is everything that Putin is not (Figures 13 and 14). Zelenskyy is portrayed as a good leader who listens to his advisors and people, courageously taking part in the conflict, while Putin submits others to his will like a dictator and keeps a safe distance from the war. This juxtaposition strategy was especially relevant at the beginning of the conflict. That said, straightforward juxtaposition is not very frequent in the memes: 11 instances of such memes cropped up in our dataset.

Figure 13. Hero versus zero (reference to Z, the symbol of Russian warfare against Ukraine) *https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10158 750164330496&set=g.534314991238265.*

Figure 14. In a world full of Putins and Trumps, be a Zelensky. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10224481075908223&set=g.534314991238265.

The central focus of Putin versus Zelenskyy memes plays out on the idea of distance between the leader and the people. A hero steps in to protect the people whereas the villain retorts to scheming while his officers fulfil his orders on the front. This is why a popular juxtaposition between Putin and Zelenskyy lies on the axis of courage vs cowardice. Another tightly connected contradiction is Zelenskyy's closeness to the people as opposed to Putin's distance from even his own ministers, especially visualised through the image of the long table that Putin has used for international meetings and that has stimulated the creation of innumerable memes (see Laineste et al. forthcoming).

Visually, the Putin–Zelenskyy memes display a formal, grim-looking image of Putin taken from press photos, sometimes wearing sunglasses (conveying a more unfathomable, distanced look). The pre-2022 memetic images of Putin, for example, riding bears or storks are not common in the juxtapositioning memes. It is worth noting that Zelenskyy does not have a grounded memetic representation in the way that Putin does and which could be used as a template, apart from photos from his earlier career as an entertainer and actor. In his case, when juxtaposing his image to that of Putin, press photos are often used, in which he usually wears khaki army clothes and is at times surrounded by soldiers of the Ukraine army.

One of the ways to underscore the hero/villain opposition in the memes is to compare Zelenskyy and Putin to well-known comic villains and heroes, for example, characters in the Harry Potter series, or *Home Alone* characters.

Photoshopped images of Zelenskyy celebrating victory over Russia have become memetic as well, such as in the Estonian dataset where we can find an image of Zelenskyy taking a selfie with Putin in his coffin (see Figure 15). This, in fact, is an unusual portrayal of their relationship, as usually there is a separating line or two different frames (cf. Figures 13 and 14 above) that juxtapose the two opposite worlds of Putin and Zlenskyy, while here they are edited into the same picture:

Figure 15. *Zelenskyy taking a selfie with Putin in his coffin. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=5311734798857912&set=g.534314991238265.*

Juxtaposition works as a (not so frequent) visual and conceptual strategy in Ukraine war memes, but it is not always accompanied with humour. Humour is more recurrent when the juxtaposition is merged with pop cultural references, whereas in other cases the juxtaposition non-humorously aims to highlight the superhuman qualities of the Ukrainian leader and degrade the Russian leader, accusing him of cowardice or other vices. The (press) images are taken to "speak louder than a thousand words" without much photoshopping (thus, Putin or Zelenskyy appear in their normal surroundings; there are no images that merge them, and no animals or other creatures).

It is interesting to note that Putin is contrasted not just to Zelenskyy, but also to other Ukrainian politicians (cf. the meme of Vitaly Kim and Putin conversing at Putin's long table[3]) and to Ukraine as an entity (present in the

internationally spread meme of bursting a balloon in the colours of Ukrainian flag, represented both in the Belarusian and the Estonian datasets, Figure 16).

Figure 16. *Putin being burst while attacking a Ukrainian flag-coloured balloon. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=102244 76362070380&set=g.534314991238265.*

Thus, we can adopt a broader perspective on the personified juxtaposition and conclude that Zelenskyy's (and his allies') presence in the memes might stand not just for himself, but for a larger entity (Ukraine, the democratic world) that he represents. This tendency also underlines the fact that the ongoing conflict is framed as Putin's war and he is the villain to be blamed for all the war atrocities: he is in opposition to the entire world, both in the actual conflict as well as in the memes. The depiction of Zelenskyy is more straightforward and not so nuanced nor multifaceted.

DISCUSSION

The popular press has been shown to project a masculine, heroised image of Zelenskyy, opposed to a cowardly Putin (Sarat & Aftergut 2022; Vrba 2022) who plays the part of the global villain in this conflict. The same appears to be true for social media, and more particularly, Ukraine war memes. Both of these roles have emerged naturally from the well-established folkloric narrative tradition, and both of them need each other to function properly. The role of the hero needs a villain (and, as we see in our data, a fool) against whom to draw his sword (Klapp 1954; cf. heroes and villains in Nazi propaganda, see Chalmers 2011: 49; for a longer discussion, see Kerr 2016: 78–79). Juxtaposed types have a central role in tale plots, supporting them with a solid, predictable structure, and having such a structure to rely on is particularly crucial at times of uncertainty. Amidst the precariousness of the ongoing war in Ukraine when every day – if not every hour – can bring dramatic and unpredictable changes to the world as we know it, the familiar images of a hero and a villain act as anchors that stabilise our perceptions of reality and provide ready-made patterns and symbols to talk about the conflict.

Putin's representation as a villain and Zelenskyy's representation as a hero thus follows a tested folkloric strategy. As mentioned above, heroes are the demi-gods or superhumans who rise above regular people, setting an example in difficult times. Zelenskyy shows solidarity with and inspiration for his countrymen through press images that sometimes seem to have been taken "straight out of an action movie" (Susarla 2022), and which are later used as memes. This highlights the strategic use of social media as an effective way of conveying heroism on the screen (Comerford 2022), and also the close interconnection between the fictional images of heroes and the ways real heroic people are depicted in the vernacular digital realm. Not only is the static image of Zelenskyy tailored to fit the well-known representations of fictional heroes (for example being dressed in a Superman outfit), but the dynamics of his political career also resemble the hero's journey (Bal 1997). By starting as a common person – and moreover a comedian, a job that is often compared to the mediaeval jester and is usually not perceived seriously – and going through some turbulent moments as head of state, Zelenskyy emerges as a true leader (cf. Soviet cultural archetypes of a jokester "becoming a 'real man' through military service" in Fraser 2022). He displays the character features that are sought in Ukraine during the war (primarily courage and the willingness to sacrifice himself for a better future), features that also appear in memes (sometimes in an exaggerated manner to produce a humorous effect). One of the best delineated features that we observed in the analysed memes was the display of a masculine

Ukrainian leader, which combines all of the aforementioned character traits and makes him a good choice for a hero (Wojnicka et al. 2022; Pfleger 2022).

Villains, on the other hand, do not respect social norms and are unfit for a life within a society. In our data, Putin is marginalised and depicted as the enemy of the world; a mentally ill person, a thief or a liar. The strategies to represent him in this way are twofold: first, the serious, more straightforward degradations, and secondly the humorous, playful and ambivalent depictions. Putin's image in Ukraine war memes is thus that of the blood-thirsty villain, but also the inept and foolish coward, with the latter displaying more variations and shades of expression. Memes ostracise Putin who, as a villain, has to be defeated and eliminated. Putin's death is portrayed as a plausible, wishful scenario in memes – hence the references to him being hung, put into a coffin or killed in some other way (cf Kuipers 2002 on Bin Laden). The visual representations of Putin often include scatological references that add to his image as a non-human and disgusting villain. Despite the fact that Putin is not turned into a fictional monstrous creature but rather is usually depicted in an anthropomorphous form, meme-makers often add visual markers to underscore his monstrosity: stains of blood, weapons, etc. The memes do not deny Putin's power entirely, but they clearly demonstrate that he can only exercise his power over completely helpless and amorphous masses of people, whereas when he faces a real opponent – be it Zelenskyy, Ukrainian farmers or a generalised image of Ukraine – his power does not match theirs. While the Russian president was already a popular memetic character before 2022 (Laineste & Kalmre 2017), his depiction acquired new traits after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Earlier memes that mocked his "hypermasculinity" were more detached from Putin's persona – the humour of these memes did not entirely depend on his personal features but followed a more universal strategy of ridicule (Davies 1990). War-related memes, on the other hand, are not only more serious and display a more pronounced stance, but they are also tailored specifically to depict Putin and his role in the war, and can only be applied to him. He is *the* villain of the war in Ukraine at this particular time and space, not just *a* villain who can easily be replaced by another similar character. On the other side of the spectrum, Zelenskyy, Ukrainian soldiers and farmers, and Ukraine as an entity are all equally heroic.

While a hero and a villain are necessary for the advancement of the plot, the juxtaposition serves the purpose of keeping the proportions of the villain 'manageable', not too scary or invincible. It is important not to portray the enemy as an absolute evil because this disseminates fear and gives the enemy excessive power. In the memes analysed in our study, it is not surprising that Putin is symbolically defeated and dwarfed by Zelenskyy, either militarily or

morally. By 'othering' Putin and presenting him as a weak character meme makers deprive him – at least partly – of his subjectivity (cf. Kinnvall 2004: 762) and therefore depict Zelenskyy as the one in control. Like many of the Putin/ Zelenskyy memes topics, this also draws upon the real-life events covered in the news media. For example, right before the outbreak of the war Zelenskyy addressed Russian citizens and urged them to prevent the then-impending invasion of Russia into Ukraine (Sonne 2022). Sarat and Aftergut (2022) note that by delivering this address and talking to Russian people over the Russian president's head Zelenskyy treated Putin "like a Lilliputian". By metaphorically making Putin smaller in size, it becomes much easier to switch from fearing him to ridiculing him; from the villain to the fool.

The analysis of the memes revolving around the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine also calls for further reflections on the similarities and differences between war and disaster humour. Our dataset demonstrates that the war memes display a clear stance on the issue and maintain the dichotomy between heroes and villains very explicitly. Unlike disaster humour, which constitutes an ironic perspective on a catastrophic event and does not usually contain any positive characters, war humour relies not only on ridiculing evil but also – although to a lesser extent – on glorifying the hero. Disaster humour is more playful, while in the context of the war meme makers need to take a stance, pick a side; this often leads to less ambiguous representations of memetic topics and characters. Looking at the form of humour, however, we can see that the intertextual aspects of war and disaster humour remain similar as both of these types of humour employ a lot of references to popular culture, advertising, etc. The difference transpires in the recurrent use of institutional symbols (such as coats of arms, flags, etc.) in war humour, symbols that mark the presence of the opposing sides of the conflict in the memes. This clearly delineated aspect of humorous war memes – their explicit stance – makes them a part of global hybrid confrontation, a way to mark one's position for those people who live outside the war zone and are not taking part in the military activities them-selves (Laineste et al. forthcoming).

At the same time, memes often spread within echo chambers of like-minded individuals with similar political stances, therefore their (potential) effect on the minds of the other side of the conflict is limited (Young 2018); memes are rather used to enforce group solidarity between people supporting the same side of the conflict and promote shared identity within a community (Newton et al. 2022). Spreading war-related messages via internet memes also implies taking into account the peculiarities of digital social media and the very genre of internet memes. Among these peculiarities are (audio)-visuality and frequent references to popular culture (which has shaped our perceptions of the concepts of hero

and villain through characters like Batman, Superman, Harry Potter, etc.). On the one hand, these aspects simplify the message, while on the other hand they open up its metaphorical dimension and allow its producers and audiences to make versatile conclusions using the allegories embedded in internet memes.

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NOTES

[1] The term "meme magic" has been used on image boards (such as 4chan and 8chan) to refer to the alleged possibility to influence current events by posting internet memes on social media.

[2] Https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/four-horsemen-of-the-apocalypse.

[3] Https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=286589&mo=b3627a83f78ec849ab8c03f97d5f0eeb74 600e77.

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