

“It’s very hard to convey any arguments or facts to them”: Post-Soviet zombies and infectious information

Original research article

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Abstract

Tracking the career of the post-Soviet zombie from its emergence at the cusp of the Soviet collapse until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this essay analyses the zombie as a mythical figure mobilised for working through shifting social relationships and cultural anxieties. Post-Soviet discourse reveals a concern with the process of zombification, which is understood to take place through communication rather than physical contact. In the context of the Donbas war since 2014, the image of the living dead has been used as a rhetorical device to cast doubt on all communication, both mediated and personal, and to ethically relinquish loved ones from responsibility for their misguided understandings. Fear of malicious influence through information has also led to practices of media hygiene, which, in turn, imply a recognition that zombification could happen to anyone, even the speaking subject. As such, accusations of zombification form part of an emic vocabulary of diagnosing the operation of power in Ukraine.

1. Introduction

On a warm but windy day in August 2018, I visited the family home of a couple I call Katja and Vladyslav (both pseudonyms) in a suburb of Kyiv, Ukraine's capital. Hailing from Luhansk, they had agreed to give an interview for my doctoral thesis in social anthropology about the mass displacement caused by the war in the Donbas region that had been ongoing since spring 2014. Sitting in their spacious kitchen, drinking herbal tea and eating home-made sweets, we first charted the family's experiences of living through war and leaving their home behind. The couple's young children busied themselves with playing while we talked.

Eventually, the discussion turned to reasons behind the war itself. Katja offered to explain the background of the whole situation to me. According to her, throughout the country's independence, Ukraine was divided into two opposing halves in terms of political opinions and views of the past, and there was no unified public opinion. In all previous presidential elections, votes were distributed almost 50/50, the east of the country voting for one candidate and the west for another. Katja argued that the differing political orientations and views about the past were not *really* a problem, but that politicians used them cynically to manipulate people's consciousness to further their own interests. Vladyslav agreed with his wife's account and scoffed: "People are too emotional, and to put it crudely, it is easy to motivate people to some kind of acts through television. Russia zombified people, like 'let us be pro-Russian and everything will be fine.' And people voted for it."

"Zombifying" is not just a clever metaphor for brainwashing invented by Vladyslav on the spot, but a staple term in Russian-speaking media and public sphere since the 1990s (Berdy 2014; Borenstein 2019). His view that especially the television is used to zombify audiences is widely shared in Ukraine and Russia. For example, an unnamed author cited by the Moscow Times columnist Michele Berdy claimed that:

"The television is called the zombie-box [*zombojaščik*] for very good reason. (...) The reason is this: the stupefying effect of television programs used by the authorities to brainwash the population in order to create the specific public opinion that they need." (Berdy 2014)

Because of the potentially harmful influence of television, many of my interlocutors, whose lives had been fundamentally disrupted by the Donbas war, resorted to practices of media hygiene: avoiding consumption of news from certain outlets or channels, or disavowing media consumption altogether. Katja, too, told me that she chose not to follow the news anymore.

While mobilising accusations of zombification is thus not a particularly new phenomenon, or one restricted to the context of the Donbas war, this event gave it novel relevance as a rhetorical practice. Claims of zombification, such as the one Vladyslav articulated above, were often utilised by people I met during my fieldwork to make sense of other people's understandings about the Donbas war. Due to the chaotic course of events, Russia's hybrid warfare, and conscious efforts to cause confusion, the reasons behind the Donbas war were obscure to even native residents of the region. It was not clear who exactly was fighting and why. Highly diverse understandings about the reasons behind the war caused rifts between erstwhile friends and family members. The metaphor of zombification was mobilised to analyse these disagreements: people who found themselves supporting clashing interpretations habitually diagnosed each other as being zombified by malicious information influence. It is noteworthy that all sides to

the war in Donbas blamed each other for being zombified, so that one person accused of having fallen victim to malicious propaganda could fling the accusation right back and claim that it was the other side who had been brainwashed (see also Borenstein 2019; Uehling 2023). Even as time passed from the first military clashes in spring 2014, understandings about the Donbas war did not get any more congruent. As a result, some of my interlocutors cut ties with their family members or friends who disagreed about the true causes behind the war. Meanwhile, others who were still in touch with their families avoided talking about politics altogether to avoid interpersonal conflicts.

In this essay, I analyse how the figure of the zombie, originating in the Haitian plantation society, helped with working through such tensions. The empirical materials discussed here derive from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Ukraine and Russia between 2018–2019 among people displaced by the Donbas war.¹³⁸ During my time in the field, stories of families torn apart by disagreements about the war and of brothers fighting on opposing sides of the frontline were common in the media. For example, director Korniy Hrytsiuk interviews a young journalist working for a Ukrainian TV channel for his documentary film “Train: Kyiv-War” (2020). Sitting on a train on her way to Kostjantynivka, a town close to the frontline, the journalist describes how her boyfriend turned against her after his views shifted towards a more pro-Russian position in the aftermath of Euromaidan and flaring up of the war. Until the war, he had never been prone to radicalism. However, after seeing her deliver a television reportage about military operations near Donetsk, he accused her of distorting reality and working for the Kyiv “junta”. He began working as a military correspondent in Donetsk, then enlisted to fight on the side of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic and was eventually killed. An elderly woman from the embattled city of Debaltseve summarises the point aptly in the same documentary: “We are all the same, but for some reason we were divided and became enemies.”

These problems only intensified with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Several media reports have described how even close family members living in Russia would simply not believe their relatives in Ukraine about bombings the latter were witnessing with their own eyes (Korenuyk and Goodman 2022; Tondo and Rice-Oxley 2022). It seems that people living in Russia exist in a completely different reality to the one experienced by people in Ukraine. More globally, stark antagonisms about the proper interpretation of reality have become increasingly familiar in the past decade. In the United States, differing views about politics, the re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency, and accusations of conspiratorial thinking incite family feuds and severing of ties. The tagline for a recent National Public Radio (NPR) podcast series reads “Reporter Zach Mack thinks his dad has gone all in on conspiracy theories, while his father thinks that Zach is the one being brainwashed. (...) Can one family live in two realities?” (Mack 2025).

In hindsight, then, the war in the Donbas heralded not only a period of global instability, but also of anxieties about information that turns people into the living dead. I argue that unpacking concept of zombification can help analysing the uncanny functioning of power and knowledge in the current geopolitical moment. In this essay, I do not examine to the content of the claims, beliefs, or understandings that my

¹³⁸ Names of informants cited here are all pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in Russian or Ukrainian; all translations to English are by me.

interlocutors in the field analysed with the metaphor of zombification, nor will I attempt to debunk them. Conspiratorial beliefs are notoriously resistant to debunking efforts (Drażkiewicz Grodzicka and Harambam 2021; Drażkiewicz and Harambam 2024; Zembylas 2023). Rather, I will track the career of zombification as a concept and analyse what the fear of zombies might reveal about anxieties about knowledge and power (Barth 2002; Foucault 1978; Glaeser 2011).

Conspiracy theories, misinformation, and malicious influence have long been part of the research agenda about post-Soviet societies (Borenstein 2019; Roudakova 2017; Yablokov 2018), but a recent movement in analysing conspiracy theories argues for incorporating concerns with conspiratorial thinking into the field of inquiry (Drażkiewicz and Harambam 2024). This essay takes inspiration from that idea and considers what the concept and fear of zombification reveals about vernacular understanding of political subjectivity. The essay develops this line of thought in the following way. The next section traces the emergence of the concept of zombification in the 1990s and shows how it was linked to an explicit critique of Soviet subjectivity. After that, the figure of the zombie is examined together with other fantastical monsters that appeared in post-Soviet popular culture, followed by a discussion of the features of Soviet media and the role of television in particular. As already noted, zombification claims re-emerged in 2014 as a rhetorical device used to discredit other people's beliefs about the Donbas war. However, an alternative analysis of zombification claims views them as ethical diagnoses relieving loved ones from responsibility for their erroneous views (Uehling 2023). Finally, the essay analyses what the fear of informational zombification implies for understandings of the self and its vulnerability to malicious influence before discussing accusations of zombification as part of an emic way of diagnosing the operation of power in Ukraine.

2. Background: the living dead and post-Soviet critique

To fully appreciate the popular and literary career of the zombie, it is important to note that this mythical character originates in the plantation economy of colonial Haiti (McAlister 2012). The *zonbi*, as it is known there, arose to respond “to the nexus of capitalism, race, and religion” converging in slave labour used on the plantations of what was then French-controlled Saint Domingue (McAlister 2012:461). Elizabeth McAlister argues that “the zombie represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it” (ibid.). The Haitian *zonbi* could equally be the spirit (*zonbi astral*, “astral zombie”) or the body (*zonbi kò kadav*, “walking corpse”) of a dead person, but in both cases, the enslaved dead were made to work on behalf of someone else. Contrary to popular belief, Haitian zombies do not eat human flesh; rather, they represent the draining of a person's life force in a more indirect and insidious way. *Zonbis* are created by sorcerers in a process often involving secrecy, selling, capturing, and whipping, actions obviously reminiscent of the conditions of historical slavery (McAlister 2012).

When it comes to popular usage in the context of my field sites, what arguably matters more than the figure of the zombie itself is the process of its creation, that is, *zombification* (Borenstein 2019; Zibirko 2025). The term zombification as it is used in the post-Soviet context appears to originate in Russian novelist Viktor Pelevin's satirical

essay titled “Zombification of the Soviet Man: Experiences of Comparative Anthropology“ (“Zombifikatsija sovjetskogo čeloveka. Opyt sravnitel’noj antropologii”), published in 1990 (Borenstein 2019; Pelevin 1990; Zabirko 2025). In his mock-scientific treatise, Pelevin explores the cultural practice of voodoo in Haiti and makes explicit connections between zombies and slavery, loss of agency, manipulation, belief in magic, and war. He then claims that zombification was achieved in Soviet society by inculcating citizens to highly ideological and ritualistic forms of behaviour from an early age, essentially stripping Soviet citizens of their individuality, agency, and free will (Pelevin 1990; Zabirko 2025). He argues that a Soviet person was as much a slave to the party-state as a Haitian zombie is to their voodoo master. In Pelevin’s essay, the metaphor of the zombie is thus used in an overt way to critique Soviet subjectivity – defined by all-encompassing official ideology and ritualistic behaviour.¹³⁹

In addition to Pelevin’s zombies, literary scholars have observed that a host of fantastical creatures, such as vampires, werewolves, and witches appeared in literature and popular culture after the fall of the Soviet Union (Khapaeva 2009; Lipovetsky and Etkind 2010). After zombies, Pelevin himself wrote about powerful, elegant vampires feeding on humans in his 2006 novel *Empire V: Tale of a Real Uberman* (Ampir V. Povest o nastojaščem sverchčeloveke). Historian Dina Khapaeva argues that in post-Soviet literary culture, such mythical monsters represent suppressed collective memories about Stalinist repressions but also index the restructuring of social relationships after the collapse of state socialism (2009). According to her,

“the most unexpected result of the fall of the Soviet regime was a feeling of moral disorientation. The collapse of communism, whether praised or damned, left a sense of a moral vacuum, an absence of a coherent system of values to guide moral judgement.” (ibid.:374-75)

The aforementioned literary monsters stepped in to morally evaluate the rapidly changing relationships during deep societal crisis (Khapaeva 2009; Lipovetsky and Etkind 2010; see also McAlister 2012). Pelevin’s vampires act as a critique of the predatory capitalism of the 1990s, in a manner similar to how the figure of the vampire has been mobilised as a critique of landed gentry and class society in the “West.” Beyond the habits and desires of his vampires, Pelevin also describes the process of “vampirization,” which for the novel’s protagonist happens exactly at the time of the Soviet society’s unravelling, further underlining the role of this mythical monster in embodying social change (Lipovetsky and Etkind 2010).

What kind of undead are post-Soviet zombies and what changing relationships do they represent? It seems obvious to point out that whereas for example vampires are imagined as powerful and sometimes even desirable figures, zombies are characterized by exclusively negative traits, particularly their lack of agency and free will. Crucially, McAlister notes that zombies are the only recurrent horror character originating from a non-European context (2012). While vampires, ghosts, and werewolves are of European cultural stock, the zombie’s exotic origins have exposed it to multiple, iterative layers of mythologising as the character travelled from Haiti to the United States and onwards. The zombie began its path into the Hollywood roster of mythical monsters during the

¹³⁹ Pelevin rose to fame in the 1990s with his discerning literary critique of Soviet authoritarianism and, later, of the predatory capitalism of the first post-Soviet decade. In recent years, however, his reputation as an incisive critic of social ills has suffered due to his apparent failure to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine or to generally take any kind of principled political stance apart from espousing general cynicism (Pinkham 2025).

US military occupation of Haiti between 1915–1934, when it became entangled with myths of cannibalism and native superstition that the occupying forces employed to dehumanise inhabitants of the island and thus justify their occupation (Dendle 2007; McAlister 2012).

Taking inspiration from sensationalised travel writers' accounts, the first zombies appeared in American films already in the 1930s, most famously in the 1932 film *White Zombie* (McAlister 2012). Throughout the years, the characteristics and behaviours of Hollywood zombies have shifted together with the cultural anxieties they embody: from labour exploitation in the 1930s to fears of communist infiltration in the 1950s, and from a critique of consumerism in the 1960s to an uneasiness with commodification of the human body implied by advances in biomedical science since the 1980s (Dendle 2007). Some of the systematic differences between Haitian *zonbi* and American zombies are that while in Haiti, *zonbis* are brought into being through sorcery to serve powerful men in secret societies, in American films, zombies tend to have more diffuse origins like pathogens or radiation, sometimes even alien invasion. Also, as remarked earlier, cannibalism is an entirely American zombie tradition.

Although the features of both Hollywood zombies and post-Soviet zombies are borrowed from the same cultural source, they have their own histories and characteristics. If Hollywood zombies have been used variably to critique slavery, labour exploitation, and fears of invasion (Dendle 2007), Post-Soviet zombies reveal particular anxieties about infection and loss of agency through malicious influence. According to Oleksandr Zabirko,

“a zombified person as such is not necessarily a braindead, flesh-eating monster from a blockbuster but rather *any person whose state of mind is corrupt*.” (2025:165, emphasis added).

Because of this, post-Soviet zombies appear particularly uncanny: they tend to live amongst healthy people and may keep acting and looking like normal despite being infected. One of my interlocutors Daria, a young English teacher living in Lviv, felt this way about the first months of the Donbas war. She explained that she suddenly became aware that her family members and friends disagreed with her about the events unfolding in the Donbas in a fundamental way, and that she had been “living amongst these people all the time” without realising it. She posited that her nearest and dearest had been zombified for a long time, but she had not noticed because they looked the same as always. Suddenly realising that others around her were zombified gave rise to a feeling of uncanniness. In a similar vein, Dendle notes that zombies in American films from the 1950s are “frightening for the very reason that they do not look like enemies at all, from the outside: they look disturbingly like our co-workers, neighbours, friends, and families.” (2007:49–50).

However, while Hollywood zombies tend to suffer from some type of physical infection, post-Soviet zombies are more about mental pollution. According to Zabirko, “a post-Soviet zombie is less an imaginary creature than it is a state of mind” (2025:161). Furthermore, as already mentioned, both Eliot Borenstein and Zabirko note that post-Soviet zombies are defined first and foremost by the process through which they are created. According to Borenstein,

“as in the West, [post-Soviet] zombies are the product of contagion, but along a completely different disease vector. The post-Soviet discourse is less concerned with zombie as thing than it is with zombie as process: not zombies, but zombification.” (2019:184)

Rather than physical contact, the process of zombification in post-Soviet societies relies to a large extent on the media, especially television. Michele Berdy quotes another author in her aforementioned column: “Television as a brainwashing machine is also called зомбификатор (zombifier) or зомбивизор (zombivision). (...) Ninety five percent of the population is subject to collective zombification.” (Berdy 2014). The understanding about the power of the TV to zombify or brainwash audiences implies that the transmission of information has deep effects on the audiences’ psyche, and that the audiences always receive the messages exactly as intended by the propagandist.

To unpack this vernacular understanding, it is helpful to review how discourses about the harmful influence of television developed historically. Alexey Golubev traces how understandings about the television’s ability to deeply influence viewers emerged in the late Soviet period (2020). Golubev examines the Soviet TV set and its power to transform the domestic space and Soviet selves, focussing particularly on psychic séances broadcast on state TV channels in the late 1980s. Televised séances of competing psychics Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Alan Chumak, broadcast in 1989, showcased the affective potential of the TV set to arrange viewers’ bodies spatially and temporally (ibid.). Kashpirovsky and Chumak claimed to have healing powers that they could transmit via the television and help viewers remotely with their health problems. Chumak also claimed his powers could be stored in liquids and creams placed in front of the TV set during the séances. According to Golubev, because of these shows, the TV became an object of social conflicts between educated (male) urbanites who disparaged them as indicators of obscurantism on the one hand, and their mainly female audiences who believed in their healing power on the other (ibid.). Still, both groups took seriously the transformative power of television over Soviet people. Golubev notes how critics claimed that

“the television’s power is dangerous for the national body. If left unchecked, it would damage the physical and mental health of the nation, represented by a conventional reference to women and children as powerless subjects needing protection.” (ibid.:157)

Golubev points out that many explanations for the popularity of Kashpirovsky's and Chumak’s séances “refer pejoratively to obscurantism and the stupidity of Soviet television audiences” (ibid.:9).

The TV set remains a highly antagonistic object in contemporary Russian society due to the consolidation of media companies in the hands of the government under Putin’s rule and the instrumental use of the television to discredit the opposition. Golubev notes that “[a]s a result, in the critical public discourse of the 2000s and 2010s, regular viewing of television strongly associates with a lack of critical thinking” (ibid:160). I will return to the point about the potentially harmful effects of communication later, but first I will discuss whether everyday subjectivity and media consumption in the Soviet period (or after it) warrant the zombification diagnosis.

2.1 Media and Soviet society

A common view about media in the Soviet Union is that Soviet society was saturated with propaganda and ideological manipulation eliminating all free thinking. This view also seems to fit together with Pelevin's essay on the zombification of the Soviet subject (1990). In academic discourse, this understanding largely derives from the totalitarian school in historiography, which emphasised all-encompassing party control, censorship,

stark contrast between public and private life, and overall lack of freedom (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956). However, revisionist and post-revisionist historians have challenged this view by paying attention to the subjectivities created by Soviet ideology and discipline, and by interrogating to what extent the system relied on grassroots participation and internalisation of Soviet values (Fitzpatrick 1994, 2007; Kotkin 1997).

Meanwhile, anthropologists of the late Soviet society in Russia have examined practices that were enabled despite and because of the structuring of everyday life in the Soviet Union (Golubev 2020; Yurchak 2005). These studies have shown that everyday life in the late Soviet period should be analysed beyond a simple dichotomy between state power versus grassroots resistance, and with concepts derived from the lived experience of the Soviet localities themselves rather than the Western analytical toolkit. There were certainly committed members within the Communist Party and Komsomol who believed in the official ideological pronouncements, as well as political dissidents who denounced them equally ardently (Yurchak 2005). However, as Alexei Yurchak argues, most people were not particularly interested in politics, as the highly performative character of official discourse in late socialism was recognised by pretty much everyone (*ibid.*). Most ordinary folks disparaged both party activists and dissidents as overly zealous busybodies who took Soviet discourse entirely too seriously (Roudakova 2017:15; Yurchak 2005).

If not by official Party ideology, is it accurate to say that Soviet audiences were zombified by the media? According to Natalia Roudakova, while there was no “free marketplace of ideas,” the role of journalists in the Soviet period was not just parroting official pronouncements but also “speaking truth to power” (2017). Roudakova argues that “contrary to conventional narratives, Soviet-era journalists did share a truth- and justice-seeking ethic for which they were recognised by their audiences” (*ibid.*:7). Professional journalism existed alongside propaganda, and journalists were expected to participate in governance by relaying citizens’ grievances up the administrative chain (*ibid.*:29-30). This required actively cultivating trust between journalists and their audiences. Furthermore, Borenstein claims that Soviet citizens were highly discerning media consumers rather than brainwashed automatons (2019:229). Instead of universally and unquestioningly receptive attitudes to party propaganda, the late Soviet period was characterised by the population’s general distrust of official news and statements (*ibid.*). Everyone recognised that the connection between real events and their representation in official news was tenuous. Moreover, many citizens directly participated in creating these fantasy representations in their everyday roles as union and party representatives in workplaces and universities (Yurchak 2005). Roudakova argues that it was post-Soviet privatisation, not Soviet legacies, that led to the erosion of professional journalistic norms and citizens’ trust in the media. After 1992, journalism has widely become seen as “political prostitution” (Roudakova 2017).

Furthermore, the loss of “authoritative voice” of late socialism (Yurchak 2005), combined with the erosion of journalistic practices in the 1990s, bred mistrust in the media and general cynicism in Russia and other post-Soviet countries (Roudakova 2017). While seeking truth and speaking it to power were part and parcel of Soviet journalists’ work, Roudakova argues that the practices of hidden advertisements and owners’ demands for political and electoral promotion have brought about “a society-wide erosion of the value of seeking truth and of speaking it to power.” (Roudakova

2017:8). In light of these authors' work, then, Soviet citizens were not particularly zombified subjects: people participated in pro forma activities not due to ideological fervour but to promote their careers, both party activists and dissidents were seen as irritating busybodies, and official newspapers were not read as the only and ultimate truth. If anything, it appears that the conditions for zombification accusations arose after the Soviet collapse with increased mistrust in journalism and politics more generally. When it comes to the Ukrainian context, there are clear similarities with the Russian media landscape, but also idiosyncratic features. The media system in independent Ukraine is a product of both Soviet legacies and post-Soviet developments, especially the oligarchisation of the economy (Orlova 2016). Most mainstream media outlets up until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine were under oligarchic control, representing over three quarters of the national audience share (Fedirko 2022:77). Media holdings thus became extensions of oligarchic power and conduits for their influence in national politics. Concretely, this has meant that oligarchic owners often place limits on what journalists could report and how. The effects of these arrangements have been an overall mood of cynicism and mistrust in the media in Ukraine. After the Euromaidan revolution, there have been attempts to create independent outlets like Hromadske, but even their journalists have struggled to extract themselves from the atmosphere of mistrust with its concomitant accusations of bias and political involvement (Fedirko 2021, 2022).

3. The resurrection of zombies in 2014

It is poignant that the metaphor of Soviet power as zombification arose exactly at the time of state-socialism's demise and not any earlier. As already argued, the zombie metaphor can be understood as a tool for working through the societal upheaval and moral confusion of the early 1990s. However, rather than waning away in importance as the Soviet collapse receded further away in the rear-view mirror, the image of the zombie gained novel salience after the Euromaidan revolution and the beginning of the Donbas war in spring 2014. It is not possible in the scope of this essay to track how the idea of zombification travelled to – or independently appeared – in Ukraine. However, it has been used in the same sense as in Russia: as a critique of Soviet subjectivity or as a way to discount other people's beliefs, often both at the same time.

During my fieldwork, several of my informants in Ukraine claimed that people in the Donbas were particularly vulnerable to zombification because of their lastingly "Soviet mentality." For example, Andrii, a Luhansk-born real estate lawyer in his thirties living in Lviv, used the idea of Soviet brainwashing to explain why he found it impossible to agree about political questions with many of his compatriots:

"It's very hard to convey any arguments or facts to them. That is, they are very easy to manipulate. Because they were also brainwashed in the Soviet Union and now they again rush from one extreme to the other – someone over there in Donbas believes Russia, someone here believes politicians like Julia Tymošenko and so on."

In a later conversation about corruption in Ukraine, Andrii complained that Ukrainians generally lacked critical thinking and "sound perception" (in Russian: *ne chvataet adekvatnogo vosprijatija*). He was willing to put his hopes on the next generation of young people, who would be able to think freely without the damaging

influence of the Soviet Union. Such discourses blaming Soviet influence for a perceived lack of critical thinking are not unique to Ukraine, but are rather commonplace in the postsocialist sphere (Dzenovska 2018; Larson 2013; Reeves 2005). It is noteworthy that both Vladyslav and Andrii referred to the concept of zombification and lack of critical thinking, because their views about the Donbas war were mutually incompatible with each other. This again demonstrates how the concept was employed from many different subject positions to articulate mistrust in other people's beliefs, and not only from the liberal-nationalist position, which tends to be highly critical of the Soviet system. Indeed, several interlocutors whom I met in Russia also used the concept to criticise the credulity of Ukrainian publics.

"Soviet zombification" thus appears to have surprisingly long-lasting effects, if Soviet-era education and ideological inculcation impacted former subjects almost thirty years after the collapse of state socialism, despite the thorough delegitimation of the Soviet system in the decades after (Chelcea and Druță 2016). In Ukrainian political discourse, there has been a tendency to discount the views of people from the country's South-Eastern regions as misinformed or mystified by referring to the concept of zombification (Portnov 2017). This understanding came up during my fieldwork in Ukraine as well. While brainstorming ideas for improving the conditions of internally displaced people from the Donbas, one Ukrainian-speaking participant wrote "kill the slave within you" on a whiteboard, implying that it was a faulty consciousness that was the main problem, not displacement and war. In this, the idea of zombification eerily resembles the Marxist concept of false consciousness – an explanation for how workers (or voters) misrecognise the particular interests of the ruling classes as their own and identify with them politically. As a result, this critique of the Soviet subjectivity is, ironically, quite Soviet in form. I will return to arguments about vernacular or "everyday Marxism" (Kruglova 2017) and the paradox of thinking about Soviet subjectivity with understandings about personhood deriving from the Soviet period, but first, I will discuss an alternative reading about claims of zombification in the Ukrainian context. Analysts tend to observe that accusations of zombification are a way to articulate mistrust in other people's ideas without the need to engage with them critically (Borenstein 2019). Zombification always concerns others, never the speaker, because only by recognising the effects of zombification in others, the speaker can be sure that she has not been zombified. Seen in this light, the metaphor of zombification is simply a rhetorical tool used to discredit other people's beliefs and does not contain any deeper metaphors about changing social relationships. It could be claimed that since the outbreak of the Donbas war, the rhetorical power of zombification accusations has experienced inflation, as all sides to the Donbas war habitually blame each other for being zombified. Among my interlocutors, the only commonly shared understanding was that something was badly wrong with everyone else's reasoning capabilities, that is, that everyone else is zombified.

However, rather than a dismissal or an accusation, zombification claims can also be analysed as ethical diagnoses relinquishing loved ones from responsibility for their erroneous views (Uehling 2023). As discussed above, the Donbas war caused sudden rifts between family members and friends, when people found themselves disagreeing deeply about the reasons behind the war. According to Greta Uehling, personal relationships turned into sites for working out the tensions of the Donbas war:

“the geopolitical conflict erupted and overflowed into the interpersonal realm so that the conflict between the two countries was often expressed in the intersubjective connections between people” (ibid.:74).

According to Uehling, in the aftermath of the Donbas war, Ukrainians engaged in three strategies for maintaining “everyday peace” despite strong interpersonal disagreements: “avoiding the topic of politics, avoiding the people with whom one disagreed, and ascribing discord to the zombifying powers of the media.” (ibid.:73). In Uehling’s view, ascribing flawed beliefs to informational contagion implies that there is a possibility for recovery, that is, that people can be somehow de-zombified. Seen in this way, zombification is first and foremost an ethical diagnosis: the afflicted person is not to blame for their condition, and the task for unzombified people is tolerating them until they can be released from the voodoo master’s spell. In a similar vein, Zabirko argues that:

“An informationally ‘zombified’ person ceases to be a valid interlocutor and cannot engage in a meaningful discussion. Yet (...) they cannot be simply annihilated – thus, one needs to look for strategies for coming to terms with such ‘zombified’ compatriots.” (2025:163)

In this reading, the concept of zombification is utilised to work through the tensions of the Donbas war. The similarity between the post-2014 zombie and the Soviet zombie diagnosed by Pelevin is that both lack critical thinking and are easily manipulated by the media. Also, both appear as metaphorical means for working through social crisis. However, the threat posed by zombified people to the speaking subject appears to have shifted. In the context of the Donbas war, the view that zombified people are not solely to blame for their condition was accompanied by media consumption practices that questioned the idea that the speaking subject is immune to the effects of zombification.

Borenstein argues that the “brainwashing/zombification narrative works [as a rhetorical strategy] because it posits the vulnerability of others while reinforcing a sense of one’s own strong, inviolate self: I am not zombified, because I can see how zombification has worked on others” (2019:187). However, I argue that the concern with zombification may not signify a sense of a “strong, inviolate self” but rather of one’s vulnerability to informational corruption. As described above, I discerned in some of my informant’s responses a desire for what I call “news hygiene:” many had stopped, or at least claimed to have stopped, consuming news sometime after they left the Donbas. Many of my interviewees also refused to recommend me news sources, TV channels, or journalists to follow so that I could gain a better understanding of what was happening, citing their distaste for the media. There was widespread recognition that all sides were spinning facts about the Donbas war: there were regular mismatches between events and news stories about them, which increased my informants’ sense that no news outlet is to be fully trusted to tell the truth. For example, Daria lamented that it is hard to get objective information about events in the Donbas, which is why she completely ceased watching TV. Such media hygiene practices have been observed even in literature. Zabirko observes that in science fiction author Sergei Lukianenko’s novel *Kvazi* (2016),

“human society (...) seeks to preserve its identity by rejecting modern technologies such as radios and computers and reverting to an archaic lifestyle to protect itself from possible ‘zombification’” (2025:163).

Several of my interlocutors, such as Katja introduced at the beginning of this essay, told me that they had stopped watching or reading news or otherwise limited their exposure to media sometime between 2014 and 2016.

Cutting ties with erstwhile family members or friends espousing disagreeable views was another strategy employed to avoid negative influence through communication, as explored above. If, as Borenstein claims, zombification claims assert the speaker's "strong, inviolate self", there should be no need for such practices. However, because so many people ascribed to them in the aftermath of the Donbas war, encountering zombified friends or contradictory media accounts clearly provoked more than just irritation. Also, discourses around the idea that television is capable of zombifying people often contain an assertion that audiences must be protected from its malicious influence, as Golubev notes (2020). These observations seem to imply that no one is safe from the potentially harmful influence of communication, whether mediated or not. And, if zombification is an ethical diagnosis relinquishing the victims from responsibility for their erroneous views, as Uehling (2023) suggests, negative moral evaluations concern the zombifying information – or the secretive agent behind it – rather than the zombified person. Together, these observations point to the possibility of infection through communication: that by exchanging information, a person's bodily integrity may be unwittingly breached and they can lose their agency as a result.

Poignantly, similar anxieties about becoming zombified have been observed in Haiti, the zombie's birthplace. Davis Wade notes that

"the concept of slavery implies that the victim of zombification suffers a fate worse than death—the loss of individual freedom implied by enslavement, and the sacrifice of individual identity and autonomy (...) It must be emphasized that the fear in Haiti is not *of* zombies, but rather of *becoming* a zombie." (1988:ch.1).

A key difference is that while in the Haitian context, zombification happens through sorcery, in Ukraine and Russia it apparently takes place via communicative means. Being exposed to the wrong kind of information can fundamentally rob a person of their autonomy and free will. How can this happen? I argue that Anna Kruglova's analysis of the perceived vulnerability of the self to outside forces (2017) is helpful in attempting to pick apart the idea of infectious information. In what Kruglova calls "vernacular Marxism," the material impacts of communication and affect are explicitly acknowledged (ibid.:769). Vernacular Marxism is not the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism, but a type of common sense in Gramsci's terms (1999), one that metabolised the official ideology of state-socialism into a vernacular language over decades of Soviet rule and after. In post-Soviet Russia, vernacular Marxism features understandings about the material basis of personhood and exchange of information. According to Kruglova, in these everyday understandings,

"Affects are like particles in physics in that they become charged as either *pozitiv* or *negativ*. The essences of *pozitiv* and *negativ*—upbeat and optimistic, or depressed and gloomy—are applied often and to everything: people, places, emotions, thoughts, and words. *Negativ* is naturally a bigger concern." (2017:770)

That is, other people's moods, intentions, and thoughts can have an either negative or positive impact on the subject. Because of this, all communication is charged

"with a threat of affect dispossession—insidious agendas, unpleasant surprises, threats of 'brainwashing,' or 'loading'—*gruzit'*, unnecessarily straining one's affective structure with irrelevancies or abstractions" (ibid.:770).

To shield oneself from such affective dispossession, a person should communicate with caution and avoid revealing too much about themselves to outsiders. That is, a kind of energetic sorcery can be achieved through communication, which makes it important to treat all exchanges of information with suspicion.

Finally, an important feature uniting the Haitian and Post-Soviet zombie is that their existence always implies another character, at least implicitly: the zombie master. Zombified victims are always “subservient and beholden to the nefarious authority of some unknown master” (Wade 1988:ch.2). That is, zombies are not simply emptied of the capacity to act in a meaningful way, but their actions do not represent themselves – they represent the will of the zombie master. Indeed, Taras Fedirko argues that an idiom of invisible masters who are behind everything is mainstream in Ukraine.¹⁴⁰ This “paranoid vernacular,” as he calls it, is used to interrogate the true origins of power in a system where it is unclear what anyone stands for in politics. It seems that everyone speaks on behalf of someone else. That is, the owner of power is displaced behind chains of representative labour: politicians, journalists, and others (see also Fedirko 2022).

In Fedirko’s analysis, the paranoid vernacular is an emic representation of the patronal form of rule that emerged in post-Soviet Ukraine. In this system, learning to see behind the surface of appearances is a crucial virtue, one that clearly echoes Marxist and psychoanalytical diagnoses of power. I argue that the concern with zombification should be seen as a part of this “paranoid vernacular:” the character of the zombie attempts to diagnose the displacement of agency. However, much like in Haitian secret societies, the ultimate slave master who is responsible for zombifying their victims remains unknown and unknowable. Usually, the only reference to the true owner of the zombified people’s agency is via the rhetorical question “who benefits?” (Fedirko 2022:73). The success of the zombie as a character for working through societal anxieties in post-Soviet Ukraine thus appears to derive from its ability to diagnose and represent a social system based on secrecy and the suppression of some people’s will to that of another.

4. Conclusion

Throughout its career in literature and popular discourse, the post-Soviet zombie has evolved. Arising in the early 1990s from Viktor Pelevin’s essay as an explicit critique of the collapsing Soviet order, the post-Soviet zombie came to embody the capacity of media, especially the television, to brainwash audiences. In this usage, perceived Soviet legacies leading to an erosion in critical thinking skills are evoked to explain the vulnerability of audiences to the effects of the “zombie box” (*zombojaščik*). In the context of the Donbas war since 2014, the image of the living dead was used again in a slightly different guise: as a rhetorical device to cast doubt on *all* communication, both mediated and personal, and to ethically relinquish loved ones from responsibility for their misguided understandings (Borenstein 2019; Uehling 2023; Zabirko 2025). Fear of malicious influence through information led to widely accepted practices of “news hygiene,” that is, avoiding all media consumption. These practices, in turn, imply a

¹⁴⁰ Seminar talk titled “Anxieties of influence: manipulated speech and oligarchic publicity in pre-invasion Ukraine,” given by Fedirko on the 5th of November 2025 at the Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University.

recognition that zombification could happen to anyone, even the speaking subject, highlighting an understanding of the material effects of communication on personhood (Kruglova 2017).

The most recent shift in the meaning of the zombie came with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While in the Donbas war, the zombie metaphor was often used as an ethical diagnosis (Uehling 2023), after 2022 the meaning of the zombie has drifted towards dehumanisation of enemy soldiers by both sides of the war (Zabirko 2025). This reflects the trashing of hopes that zombified people could be cured of their ailment, as the intensification of the war only entrenched irreconcilable viewpoints. Another mythical figure, the orc, has joined the zombie in Ukrainian war-time discourse, painting the enemy as fundamentally different and incompatible with those fighting on the side of good (ibid.). Nevertheless, even in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion, the concept of zombification is still widely used in popular discourse as a commentary on the corrupting effects of television in both Ukraine and Russia (see figure 1).

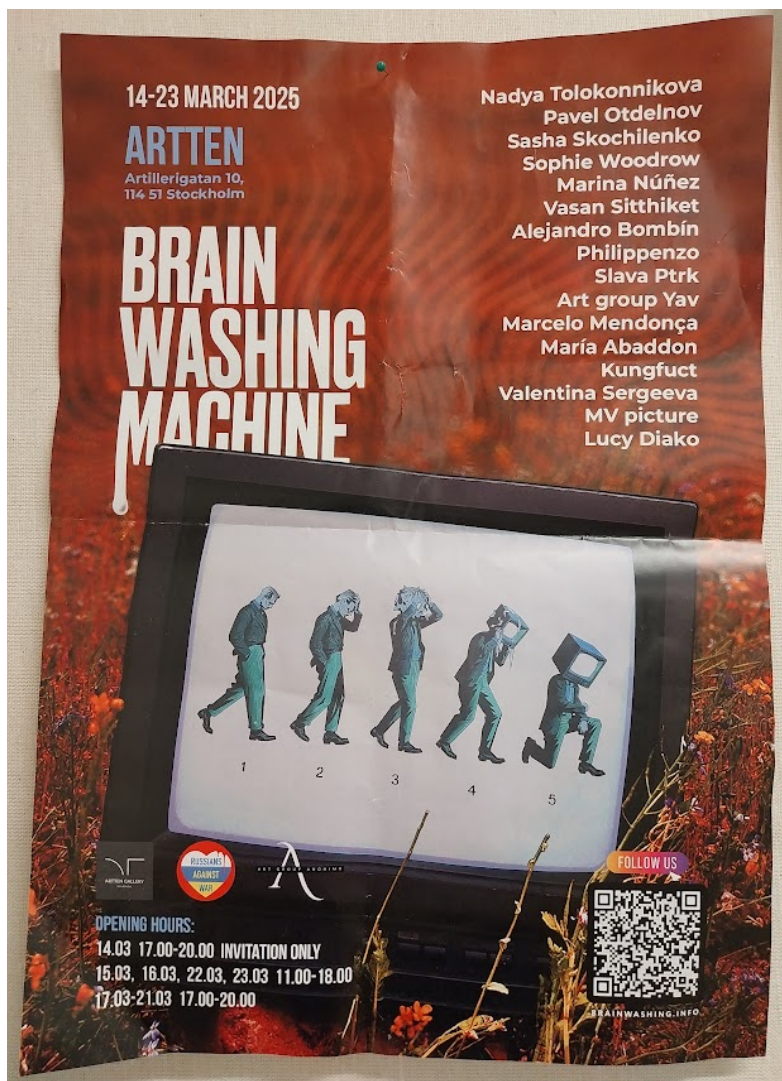


Figure 1. A poster for an anti-war exhibition in Stockholm, spring 2025. Photograph by the author.

Zombification as a problematic is intimately connected to the globally rising concerns with hybrid warfare, mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories, and “fake news” in the past decade. In this essay, I have argued that anxieties about zombification in post-

Soviet Ukraine and Russia rely on a specific understanding of personhood, one derived from “vernacular Marxism” in Anna Kruglova’s terms (2017). In the Ukrainian context, it is also part and parcel of what Taras Fedirko calls the “paranoid vernacular,” an emic way of analysing patronal form of power. As such, the concept of zombification acts as a diagnosis of the uncanny operation of power in a society where agency appears constantly deferred: everyone acts on behalf of someone else, with the ultimate owner of power, or slave master, remaining secret. However, a tragic paradox is that accusing someone of having been zombified essentially robs them of the capacity to be the author of their own actions and opinions, a rhetorical move that can only cause further alienation and discord. Whether and how accusations of zombification contribute to an atmosphere of bitterness and mistrust and how the character of the zombie has evolved further since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could be questions for further research.

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