



Postcolonial Struggles and Symbolic Capital: Ukrainian Political Elites' Perceptions of Russia

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Abstract

This article explores how symbolic and cultural capitals shape the perceptions of Ukrainian political elites regarding Russia as a geopolitical threat, focusing on the transformations since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, the paper argues that elite perceptions are not only reactions to external events but also products of internal struggles within the political field, influenced by elites' positions, accumulated capitals, and embodied experiences. The article also integrates a postcolonial perspective to examine how the legacy of Russian imperialism continues to affect Ukraine's political elites, shaping their identity, legitimacy, and responses to the evolving threat. This relational analysis provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics of national identity, memory politics, and power struggles in postcolonial and post-Soviet contexts, highlighting the role of symbolic hierarchies in the construction of political authority and threat narratives.

Keywords: postcolonialism; symbolic capital; cultural capital; Ukrainian political elites; political field

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Introduction

In November 2023, Ukraine's second president, Leonid Kuchma, republished his landmark book *Ukraïna – ne Rosiia: Dvadtsiat' rokiv potomu* [Ukraine Is Not Russia: Twenty Years Later]. This updated edition revisits the original 2003 volume, in which Kuchma sought to explain to a Russian audience why Ukraine constituted a distinct political and cultural entity – and why Russian interference in Ukrainian affairs was both inappropriate and unwelcome. At the 2023 presentation, Kuchma remarked: “I wrote that book for the Russians, when I still believed that it was possible to talk to them normally, to explain something to them. And now it's over. Now I do not try to explain anything to strangers. This book is for the Ukrainian reader, for our domestic use” (as cited in Kuz'menko, 2023). This statement reflects a broader transformation in elite discourse: from seeking recognition within a shared post-Soviet space to affirming a distinct Ukrainian subjectivity grounded in national sovereignty.

Since 2014, Ukraine has undergone a far-reaching geopolitical and sociopolitical reconfiguration, initially triggered by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the onset of war in the Donbas, and subsequently intensified by the full-scale invasion launched on February 24, 2022. These developments have not only reshaped Ukraine's foreign policy orientation and security architecture, but have also precipitated fundamental shifts in how Ukrainian political elites interpret and position their country in relation to Russia. While existing scholarship has predominantly focused on institutional responses and international security dimensions, the internal dynamics of elite perceptions – particularly the symbolic and cultural mechanisms informing these perceptions – have received comparatively less scholarly attention.

This article investigates how Ukrainian political elites' perceptions of Russia are shaped by their symbolic and cultural capitals. It argues that elites' interpretations of Russia's intentions and Ukraine's appropriate response are not merely strategic or ideological but are also shaped by embodied dispositions, biographical trajectories, and struggles for legitimacy within the domestic political field. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, this study analyzes how different forms of symbolic and cultural capital – such as education, language, religion, and symbolic acts like military service – influence how elites articulate threat, define national identity, and position themselves in relation to Russia.

This article advances a dual argument. First, since 2014 – and decisively after 2022 – language use, religious affiliation, and memory politics in Ukraine have undergone accelerated transformation, reconfiguring the symbolic order of the field. Second, elements of entrenched “epistemic habits” within segments of the political elite persist – visible in lifestyle patterns, networked sociability, and recurring conspiratorial frames – and continue to structure practice despite institutional and discursive shifts. Taken together, these claims describe a field in motion: rapid symbolic realignment coexists with durable dispositions, producing a layered and sometimes

contradictory trajectory of de-Russification and elite reproduction. By “transformation” I refer to measurable policy/institutional and boundary-setting change in language, religion, and memory; by “epistemic habits” I mean durable, routinised cognitive-normative schemas in Bourdieu’s sense of habitus. Analytically, I treat “transformation vs. persistence” as a tension between field change and habitus durability and trace both dynamics across the empirical sections.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How have symbolic and cultural capitals shaped Ukrainian political elites’ perceptions of Russia since 2014/2022, and how do they account for the coexistence of accelerated symbolic reforms with the persistence of elites’ epistemic habits?

The article is structured as follows: The first section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital, and field, and explains their applicability to elite perception in international relations. The second section reviews the relevant literature on Ukrainian political elites and their post-2014 transformations. The third section presents the methodology and data sources, focusing on qualitative analysis of elite discourses and practices. The empirical section then traces how symbolic and cultural capitals have informed elite representations of Russia between 2014 and the present. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these findings for understanding elite behavior in contexts of geopolitical rupture and symbolic realignment.

Theoretical Framework:

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice and Elite Perceptions of Russia

This article employs Bourdieu’s theory of practice to analyze how symbolic and cultural capitals have shaped Ukrainian political elites’ perceptions of Russia since 2014, with particular attention to the transformations following the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022. Bourdieu’s sociological framework offers a powerful set of tools for understanding how individual and collective perceptions are not only socially constructed but also embedded within structured fields of power, shaped by agents’ positions and trajectories.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus refers to the system of dispositions – internalized through socialization – that guide individuals’ perceptions, judgments, and actions. Habitus is both structured by past conditions and structuring in its effects, giving coherence to how political elites perceive and respond to geopolitical events. Ukrainian MPs’ perceptions of Russia cannot be reduced to rational calculations or ideological doctrines alone; rather, they are informed by embodied experiences, class origins, education, linguistic practices, and historical memory, all of which shape their habitual ways of interpreting geopolitical threats.

The field – another core concept in Bourdieu’s theory – denotes a relatively autonomous social space in which actors compete over specific forms of capital and legitimacy. The Ukrainian political field is not a monolithic arena but a differentiated space structured by power struggles among actors with varying forms of authority. Since 2014, and especially

after 2022, the stakes of the political field have shifted: legitimacy is increasingly associated with patriotic credentials, alignment with national language policies, and symbolic distancing from Russia and Russian-affiliated institutions, including the Moscow Patriarchate.

Within this field, capital – understood in its economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms – determines an actor's capacity to influence others and shape the dominant narrative. For instance, cultural capital (such as Western education or proficiency in Ukrainian) and symbolic capital (such as being a war veteran or championing de-Sovietization) have become increasingly salient in legitimizing political authority. These forms of capital not only influence MPs' political behavior but also shape their perceptions of Russia and their interpretations of its actions.

By focusing on symbolic struggles within the field, Bourdieu's framework enables us to see how perceptions are not merely reflections of external events, but outcomes of internal contests over meaning and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). In the case of Ukraine, the transformation of Russia from "a difficult neighbor" to "an existential enemy" is not only a matter of strategic interest but also a product of the reconfiguration of symbolic hierarchies within the domestic political field.

Additionally, a postcolonial lens, particularly as articulated by scholars such as Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (Epstein et al., 1999), as well as Madina Tlostanova (2015), further enriches this framework. Epstein et al. (1999) emphasize the paradoxical condition of *post-*, in which post-Soviet societies simultaneously seek emancipation from imperial legacies while remaining intellectually and institutionally bound to them. They highlight how cultural dependence and the drive to "overcome" Russia's symbolic dominance often coexist with mimicry and repetition, shaping the discursive practices of elites. Tlostanova (2015), in turn, develops the notion of "coloniality of knowledge" in the post-Soviet space, stressing how hierarchies of epistemic authority – rooted in Russian imperial and Soviet traditions – continue to structure political and cultural fields. Her analysis foregrounds how elites internalize these asymmetries, reproducing them in both domestic politics and international positioning.

Together, Epstein et al. (1999) and Tlostanova (2015) underscore how postcoloniality in the Ukrainian case must be understood not only as geopolitical dependency but also as a deeper symbolic and epistemic subordination, which elites negotiate and sometimes strategically deploy. In Bourdieusian terms, these asymmetries function as forms of symbolic capital, unevenly distributed and convertible into political influence within both domestic and international fields. While Ukraine's formal independence in 1991 marked a shift in geopolitical sovereignty, the persistence of Russian cultural, political, and economic dominance still influences elite behavior. The concept of postcoloniality in East European thought underscores the ways in which former Soviet elites, including those in Ukraine, were shaped by structures of dominance that they internalized and reproduced, both as a means of coping with their own subjugation and as a way of affirming their positions within the global power hierarchy.

Thus, the Ukrainian political field is not only a site of competition for capital but also one where the imprints of Russian imperialism continue to be felt, shaping the perceptions

of threat among elites. This postcolonial dynamic complicates elite relations with Russia, as some elites seek to redefine themselves symbolically by distancing from Russian influence, while others continue to cling to past practices, struggling with a dual identity formed by the residue of their Soviet and post-Soviet habitus.

This approach also allows for a relational analysis: rather than treating each MP or elite actor as an isolated unit, it situates them in relation to others, tracing how their positions in the field and accumulated capitals influence their stance toward Russia. In particular, it allows us to examine why certain elites may have continued to downplay the Russian threat post-2014, while others adopted more hawkish positions earlier – often in line with their symbolic capital and position within nationalist or reformist blocs.

In sum, Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a robust framework for analyzing elite perceptions as structured by both social history and position-taking within a competitive political field. The integration of postcolonial theory into this framework further enhances our understanding of how Ukraine's political elites have navigated their legacy of symbolic subordination and the changing geopolitical realities in their response to Russia. This theoretical lens not only enriches the analysis of Ukrainian elites but also contributes to the broader literature on threat construction and elite agency in times of geopolitical rupture.

Literature Review

Research on Ukraine's post-2014 political transformation has focused extensively on state responses to Russian aggression, the reconfiguration of foreign policy, and shifts in national identity. Much of this literature emphasizes Ukraine's geopolitical turn toward Europe and NATO, the securitization of the Russian threat, and elite discourses of sovereignty and resistance (D'Anieri, 2019; Kudelia, 2018; Onuch & Hale, 2022). While valuable, these works often treat political elites as relatively cohesive actors and underexplore the internal differentiation within elite circles – particularly in terms of how their social and cultural trajectories inform their geopolitical perspectives.

A growing body of scholarship has begun to interrogate how the war has restructured the Ukrainian political field itself (Minakov, 2022; Yekelchuk, 2023), with some studies touching on elites' symbolic gestures – such as shifts in language use, patriotic performativity, or religious alignment. However, these symbolic acts are rarely analyzed through a systematic sociological framework that explains how such practices relate to deeper structures of meaning, legitimacy, and power. The result is a limited understanding of how threat perceptions – typically theorized in International Relations (IR) as rational or strategic – may also emerge from symbolic struggles within the domestic field of power.

In IR theory, constructivist approaches have challenged realist notions of fixed national interests, instead emphasizing how threat is socially constructed (Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1999). Yet even constructivist IR often neglects the sociological micro-foundations

of elite knowledge production. Bourdieu's theory of practice offers tools for filling this gap. Concepts such as habitus, field, and various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) allow for an analysis of how elites' perceptions are shaped not only by formal political institutions, but also by their embodied histories, status struggles, and claims to legitimacy within a structured social space (Bigo, 2011; Bourdieu, 1991).

While Bourdieu has been applied in the study of diplomacy and international bureaucracies (Adler-Nissen, 2013; Neumann, 2002), few studies have employed his theory to analyze political elites in post-Soviet or wartime contexts. This is particularly true for Ukraine, where sociological accounts of the political elite often focus on oligarchic networks or party politics, rather than symbolic and cultural capital. As such, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how social origins, linguistic practices, religious affiliations, or forms of public performance shape elite-level geopolitical judgment.

Recent studies by Taras Kuzio (2022, 2024) directly address the identity-based dimensions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, arguing that the war stems not only from geopolitical competition but also from Russia's refusal to recognize Ukrainian national identity. Kuzio shows that Russian nationalism, particularly in its imperial and pan-Russian variants, underpins the Kremlin's efforts to delegitimize Ukraine's sovereignty and justify aggression. His analysis illuminates how elite perceptions of threat are bound up with broader symbolic struggles over language, religion, and historical narrative, lending empirical support to a Bourdieu-inspired framework.

Furthermore, Kuzio (2018) contrasts Russian and Ukrainian elites, showing how divergent historical legacies, nation-building projects, and political cultures produced fundamentally different trajectories of post-communist transformation. While Russian elites pursued an authoritarian and imperial path that reinforced centralized control, Ukrainian elites – fragmented and regionally diverse – navigated pluralism, contested identities, and recurring struggles over democratization. Kuzio highlights that elite behavior and identity formation in Ukraine cannot be understood without considering the persistent influence of competing geopolitical orientations and regional cleavages.

Yuriy Matsiyevsky (Matsiievs'kyi, 2016; Matsiyevsky, 2018) adds an important corrective to overly optimistic narratives of post-Euromaidan transformation. While the revolution produced significant elite turnover, Matsiyevsky argues that informal practices, patronage networks, and symbolic power structures remained resilient, resulting in a "revolution without regime change." This persistence of informal norms is central to understanding how symbolic capital operates in Ukraine: rather than being replaced, old modes of legitimation are often reconfigured to serve new nationalist or reformist agendas. Matsiyevsky's findings highlight the embeddedness of elite perceptions in long-standing structures of symbolic domination, even amid formal institutional change.

Building on my earlier work (Iwaniuk, 2020), which analyzed how Ukrainian elites navigate inherited symbolic hierarchies through embodied practices and performative codes of legitimacy, this article further explores how these dynamics have intensified in the post-2014 context.

Taken together, these contributions emphasize that Ukrainian political elites' perceptions of Russia as a threat are not solely shaped by external aggression or strategic calculations, but also emerge from complex symbolic struggles within the domestic political field. These struggles are shaped by historical legacies, postcolonial dynamics, informal institutions, and embodied forms of capital that influence how legitimacy is performed, contested, and reproduced. This article seeks to build on this interdisciplinary foundation to offer a more relational and sociologically grounded account of elite perceptions of threat in post-Maidan Ukraine. It explores how symbolic capital – such as speaking Ukrainian, distancing oneself from the Moscow Patriarchate, or promoting decommunization – functions within the domestic field of power, where political legitimacy is increasingly tied to national resilience and identity. In doing so, the article bridges IR and political sociology, offering a nuanced understanding of elite subjectivity in wartime Ukraine.

Methodology and Data

In terms of methodology, this study employs a mixed-methods approach. The paper analyzes semi-structured interviews conducted by the author both before and after the full-scale Russian invasion of February 24, 2022. These interviews provide direct insight into the perspectives of Ukrainian Members of Parliament (MPs) regarding their perceptions of Russia and national identity. Additionally, the study draws on institutional ethnographic research I previously conducted for my doctoral dissertation, offering a deeper, contextual understanding of the political field and elite behavior. Public profiles of MPs serving in the 7th, 8th, and 9th convocations were also examined, focusing on how their educational background, linguistic preferences, religious affiliations, and military service influence their geopolitical views.

This methodological approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how the elites' backgrounds, values, and cultural resources shape their political stances and their interpretations of geopolitical threats. By integrating qualitative interviews with ethnographic research and public profile analysis, the study sheds light on the role of social structures and symbolic struggles in shaping elite-level perceptions of threat in times of war.

Case Selection and Timeframe

The focus is on members of the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) of the 7th, 8th, and 9th convocations – spanning the period from 2012 to the present. This timeframe allows us to capture elite discourses before and after the pivotal rupture of 2014 (the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas) as well as the radical transformation of Ukraine's political field following February 24, 2022, the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion.

The focus on this period enables an analysis of how different elite cohorts – shaped by varying symbolic and cultural capitals – reconstructed the image of Russia within the evolving field of political legitimacy and national identity, which is understood as a relational arena of power in which political actors compete over recognition, authority, and the definition of legitimate narratives.

Data Collection

The empirical material consists of:

- **6 semi-structured interviews** conducted with MPs between 2018 and 2021, representing a broad spectrum of political affiliations, regional backgrounds, linguistic preferences, and ideological orientations. These interviews explored the MPs' self-perceptions, worldview, and views on Russia, national identity, and religion.
- **5 additional in-depth interviews** conducted between 2022 and 2024 with members of the current 9th convocation, focusing specifically on how the full-scale invasion influenced their perceptions of Russia and their political narratives.
- **2 semi-structured interviews** with elite-adjacent actors closely connected to the parliamentary field: a parliamentary correspondent (Kyiv, August 2021); a businesswoman and spouse of an MP (Kyiv, August 2021).
- **Supplementary materials**, including public speeches, autobiographies, party manifestos, stenographic records of parliamentary debates, and media interviews, were also analyzed to triangulate findings and trace discursive patterns over time.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis followed a two-level interpretive strategy:

1. **Field mapping:** Based on Bourdieu's relational method, the MPs were situated within the Ukrainian political field according to their party affiliation, educational background, regional origin, religious orientation, and cultural capital (e.g. linguistic habitus, international experience, civic activism). This helped identify how their positions within the field structured their perceptions of Russia and the kinds of symbolic capital they mobilized.
2. **Narrative and discursive analysis:** Interview transcripts and documents were coded thematically using categories derived from the theoretical framework: perception of threat, symbolic boundaries (e.g. "Europeanness" vs. "Russianness"), legitimacy markers (e.g. language use, stance on the Moscow Patriarchate), and personal trajectories. Attention was paid to how the MPs' narratives reflected broader struggles over meaning and legitimacy within the field.

Civilizational Capital and the Symbolic Othering of Russia

The ongoing war, precipitated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has not only reshaped geopolitical alignments but also profoundly transformed the symbolic order of Ukrainian politics. Political elites have been compelled to navigate the collapse of previously dominant modes of legitimation, while actively participating in the construction of new, postcolonial forms of authority.

Within this reconfigured landscape, the symbolic disavowal of Russia has emerged as a central mechanism through which political actors assert legitimacy, reposition themselves within the elite field, and lay claim to representational authenticity. This transformation extends beyond formal policy shifts; it involves a far-reaching rearticulation of civilizational identity, historical memory, and the normative expectations governing elite behavior. The contest over who may legitimately represent the Ukrainian nation increasingly unfolds through symbolic gestures, rhetorical realignments, and performative acts of rupture with the Russian imperial legacy.

These developments are not without precedent. They must be situated within a longer genealogy of symbolic entanglement and strategic distancing between Ukrainian and Russian elites. The evolving dynamics of this relationship are shaped by the uneven distribution of cultural, social, and political capital, which structures access to authority within the political field. The current symbolic realignments are thus not merely reactive responses to external threats, but are mediated by deeper habitus formations and field logics that shape how political actors interpret geopolitical developments, define national belonging, and compete for symbolic and institutional power in an increasingly volatile environment.

This reconfiguration of symbolic boundaries was further institutionalized through the delegitimation and eventual dismantling of pro-Russian representation within Ukraine's political elite. Prior to the full-scale invasion, the main political vehicle of pro-Russian sentiment in parliament was the Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL), which held 49 seats in the 450-seat parliament. Following the invasion, the party's activities were suspended and later banned, and its parliamentary faction was formally dissolved. While a number of former OPFL deputies rebranded themselves within new parliamentary groups, including the Platform for Life and Peace, many either resigned their mandates or were stripped of Ukrainian citizenship by presidential decree (*Deputatopad u chas viiny*, 2023). As of early 2023, over 20 OPFL deputies had lost their parliamentary status, reflecting not only legal and administrative sanctions but also a broader symbolic purge of figures associated with the Russian sphere of influence. This process illustrates how civilizational realignment operated not merely through foreign policy or discourse, but through the reorganization of elite structures and the redefinition of legitimate political belonging within the Ukrainian state.

The conduct of numerous Ukrainian politicians, especially considering their orientation toward Russia, frequently revealed a lack of consistent ideological conviction, instead reflecting strategic adaptations to the evolving symbolic landscape of Ukrainian politics. As one political spin doctor observed before the full-scale invasion:

In Ukrainian politics, the values you promote are often not based on your personal convictions, but on whether there's an ideological niche available. Many people advocate for things they don't actually believe in – simply because the space is empty and politically useful. (Interview 6)

This interpretation sheds light on the rapid discursive and political repositioning of figures such as Yuri Boiko in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion. Leader of the Opposition Platform – For Life, he was long associated with the Party of Regions and held ministerial posts under Viktor Yanukovich; he was a figure of public controversy due to alleged embezzlement in the Black Sea oil rig scandal; he positioned himself as a representative of Ukraine's eastern, industrial, and Russophone electorate. Despite the party's consistent agenda of encouraging closer ties with Moscow, Boiko, in a post-invasion interview for *Deutsche Welle*, distanced himself from his previous affiliations, admitting to having held “illusions” about cooperation with Russia, and referred to his former party allies as “traitors” (Boiko, 2024). Such rhetorical shifts exemplify how political actors may abandon pro-Russian narratives when these positions cease to confer symbolic legitimacy or electoral utility.

The post-invasion context has undermined the symbolic capital historically associated with pro-Russian affiliations, though it has not dismantled the underlying elite networks or durable dispositions (*habitus*) that previously sustained such alignments. This dynamic underscores the continued operation of postcolonial logics within the Ukrainian political field, wherein reputational adaptability and the capacity to reframe past complicities serve as mechanisms for elite reproduction amid systemic upheaval.

Among deputies possessing substantial cultural capital – characterized by Western academic credentials, fluency in European languages, and international professional networks – a discernible pattern of symbolic opposition to Russia has emerged. These elites tend to frame Russia not solely as a geopolitical adversary, but as a civilizational counterpoint incompatible with the normative values underpinning Ukraine's European trajectory.

An MP from the Samopomich (Self-Reliance) party (pro-European, reformist, urban middle-class background, with professional experience in local self-government; positioned himself as an anti-oligarchic, pro-transparency advocate for decentralization, rule of law, and integration with the EU) noted as follows (2018):

Russia is not only violating our borders; it represents a mental model that is incompatible with freedom, with dignity. Europe is not a direction – it is who we are; and Russia is the past we must finally leave behind. (Interview 2)

Such narratives strategically deploy cultural capital – including linguistic proficiency, academic credentials, and histories of civic engagement – as a tool for asserting legitimacy in debates over Ukraine's geopolitical alignment.

Since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity – and with greater intensity following the 2022 invasion – Ukraine has undergone a significant acceleration of memory politics, encompassing legislative initiatives such as decommunization laws, as well as street renamings, monument removals, and the institutionalization of new commemorative practices. These reforms are not exclusively state-driven but are co-constructed through parliamentary action, public discourse, and performative gestures by political elites.

Political elites increasingly articulate the Russian threat within a broader historical framework of injustice, referencing legacies of Soviet repression, the Holodomor, and tsarist imperialism to legitimize contemporary ruptures. This elite-driven symbolic reframing aligns with observable shifts in public sentiment, particularly in relation to Russia's moral and political legitimacy.

This symbolic reframing corresponds to a profound shift in broader public attitudes. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the onset of war in the Donbas, reactions among the Ukrainian population were regionally differentiated and often ambivalent, particularly in the south and east. However, the full-scale invasion in 2022 catalyzed a decisive break. Data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) illustrates this transformation: in 2013, 78% of Ukrainians expressed a positive view of Russia, a figure that plummeted to 2% by mid-2022. Similarly, favorable attitudes toward ordinary Russians dropped from 75% in 2021 to just 2% in May 2022, while 82% reported negative attitudes (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2021, 2024). These attitudinal shifts suggest not merely political disenchantment but a profound rearticulation of symbolic boundaries, wherein Russian culture, language, and identity are increasingly framed as embodiments of colonial domination and existential threat.

Within the elite field, Members of Parliament draw upon distinct configurations of symbolic capital to engage with memory politics, often tailoring narratives to resonate with their electoral bases and personal trajectories. Those with nationalist or activist backgrounds emphasize trauma and resistance; others, especially from southern or eastern constituencies, may adopt more cautious narratives, focusing on the future rather than the past. However, after 2022, even previously ambivalent MPs have increasingly engaged in symbolic acts of memory rupture – visiting sites of Russian war crimes, referencing historical parallels with Nazi Germany, or advocating for museums of occupation.

The politicization of historical memory functions as a mechanism of symbolic distinction within the political field: those adept at invoking resonant historical analogies accumulate symbolic authority, while disengagement can lead to marginalization.

One independent MP (first-time deputy elected on Zelensky's wave in 2019, with background in media, presenting herself as part of an anti-establishment renewal of politics, but by 2023 navigating the realities of wartime governance, centralization of power, and the tension between reformist promises and loyalty to the presidential team) noted as follows:

Before, you could be neutral about history. Now it's part of your political identity – how you speak about 1933 or 1943 says a lot about where you stand in 2023. (Interview 9)

Through a Bourdieusian lens, the contestation over historical memory constitutes a struggle for symbolic capital, wherein the ability to impose legitimate narratives of the past translates into enhanced political authority.

Within this dynamic, it is worth emphasizing the broad symbolic continuity among Ukrainian presidents since independence – with the notable exception of Viktor Yanukovich. Despite differences in political style and constituency, presidents from Leonid Kravchuk to Volodymyr Zelensky have, to varying degrees, supported the strengthening of the Ukrainian language, national education, independent religious institutions, and distinct cultural narratives. These efforts have often aligned with a gradual turn toward European integration and a distancing from Soviet and Russian models of identity. Yanukovich, by contrast, pursued policies more explicitly aligned with the Russian political and symbolic order, including resistance to Ukrainianization efforts, support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and repression of national memory initiatives – culminating in the Revolution of Dignity, which delegitimized his symbolic authority and reshaped the field of political legitimacy in Ukraine.

Religious Capital and the Moscow Patriarchate as a Symbolic Threat

Religious affiliation constitutes another key dimension in the symbolic reconfiguration of post-2014 Ukraine, particularly concerning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). Parliamentary actors with accumulated symbolic capital in patriotic or ecclesiastical domains frequently frame the UOC-MP as not merely a religious organization, but as an institutional vehicle for advancing Russian neo-imperial influence.

A Radical Party MP of the 8th convocation (combined a populist, nationalist, and socially protectionist stance; positioned himself as an anti-establishment tribune appealing to rural and working-class voters through rhetoric of economic justice, patriotism, and opposition to oligarchs) stated:

The Moscow Church is not a religious community – it is an FSB [Federal Security Service] outpost. Every church under the Moscow Patriarchate is a potential enemy headquarters. (Interview 3)

In such discursive framings, symbolic capital is rooted in markers such as military service, patriotic activism, and affiliation with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). These credentials are strategically mobilized in electoral contexts, particularly after 2014, to enhance legitimacy through explicit opposition to the UOC-MP.

Nevertheless, a subset of MPs – especially those representing constituencies in eastern and southern Ukraine or whose habitus retains elements of Soviet-era cultural capital – have maintained more ambivalent stances toward the UOC-MP. This reflects the persistence of heterogenous and at times contradictory logics within the Ukrainian

political field. In post-Soviet Ukraine, religion operates not solely as a spiritual or cultural force, but as a form of symbolic capital that is strategically instrumentalized within political competition. This dynamic is particularly evident in the contested status of the UOC-MP, whose entanglement with political elites illustrates the intersection of power, piety, and postcolonial dependency (Fert, 2018).

The depth of this ambivalence was evident already in October 2023, when the Verkhovna Rada held the first reading of Draft Law No. 8371. Although 267 deputies supported the bill, 72 MPs (18%) effectively “disappeared” from the vote while remaining active in other agenda items that same day. Civic monitors from Rukh Chesno documented how deputies either removed their voting cards or abstained without pressing any button, a tactic that allowed them to evade accountability while formally remaining present. The largest proportion of such “vanished” deputies belonged to the groups Restoration of Ukraine (59%), For the Future (29%), and Platform for Life and Peace (27%), while no deputies from European Solidarity or Holos (Voice) employed this tactic (Olīnyk & Salizhenko, 2023).

This pattern underscored the resilience of pro-Russian or ambivalent orientations within parliament. Deputies from successor factions to the banned Opposition Platform – For Life voted against or evaded the bill, often justifying their stance through appeals to “religious freedom” or claims about the patriotism of UOC-MP leaders. Yurii Boiko described Metropolitan Onufrii as a patriot trusted by believers, while Yevhen Shevchenko depicted the UOC-MP as a religious institution historically rooted in Kyivan Rus', drawing spurious analogies with alleged betrayals inside Ukrainian security services. In contrast, pro-European deputies from European Solidarity and Holos unanimously framed the UOC-MP as “the last outpost of Moscow” in Ukraine. As one deputy argued, those who refused to press the button should consider themselves allies of Moscow.

Such evasions demonstrate how religious capital operated as a shield for political actors, allowing them to avoid direct confrontation with Moscow-affiliated institutions while deflecting responsibility through procedural manipulation. This episode helps explain why the law was only adopted in full in August 2024.

A crucial development in this struggle occurred on August 20, 2024, when the Verkhovna Rada adopted Draft Law No. 8371 in its second reading and in full, authorizing the prohibition of religious organizations affiliated with states engaged in armed aggression against Ukraine. Although formulated as a general legal instrument, the law's primary focus was the UOC-MP, which remains canonically subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church despite declarations of independence in 2022. The law granted a transitional period of approximately nine months for religious organizations to sever ties with Moscow, reflecting the preference for a gradual, court-supervised process rather than an immediate blanket ban. Its belated adoption underscored both the political sensitivity of religious capital in Ukraine and the determination of lawmakers to dismantle residual infrastructures of Russian symbolic influence.

The debates preceding adoption reveal how religious capital is mobilized in the political field. Opponents of the bill framed it as “a ban on Orthodoxy” or as evidence of

state “persecution” of believers, thereby attempting to transform a security measure into a civil liberties issue. Inflated claims of “millions of parishioners” further served to amplify the symbolic weight of the UOC-MP, despite sociological surveys showing a steep decline in identification with the church (from 13% in 2021 to roughly 5–6% in 2023) (Razumkov tsentr, 2023).

Historical analogies and deterrence narratives further illustrate the symbolic contest: deputies compared restrictions on the UOC-MP to the Bolsheviks’ repression of religion, or warned that the ban would provoke Russian escalation. These claims reproduce classic tropes of victimhood and “red line” rhetoric, obscuring the structural nature of Russia’s aggression. The persistence of such narratives within the Ukrainian parliament demonstrates how the UOC-MP continues to function as a reservoir of symbolic capital that pro-Russian or ambivalent elites can strategically deploy, even under conditions of martial law.

After Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the Orthodox ecclesiastical landscape fractured, mirroring broader struggles over sovereignty and symbolic autonomy. The division between the Moscow Patriarchate and the emergent Kyiv Patriarchate instantiated competing claims to national and spiritual authority. Initial endorsements by figures such as President Leonid Kravchuk for the Kyiv Patriarchate were later reversed under geopolitical pressure from Moscow, illustrating the resilience of Russian symbolic gravity even amid declarations of political independence.

President Leonid Kuchma institutionalized this ambivalence by simultaneously granting the UOC-MP privileged access to religious infrastructure and pursuing the unrealized goal of ecclesiastical autocephaly. This dual strategy reflects an attempt to navigate between internal legitimacy and external dependency.

The proliferation of the UOC-MP during this period was not merely organic but facilitated by elite networks, oligarchic patronage, and strategic incorporation into electoral processes. The church accrued symbolic capital that was directly convertible into political influence, particularly under the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. During Yanukovich’s tenure, the UOC-MP was not only shielded institutionally but also promoted as the principal moral and historical authority, positioning it above other confessions in the religious hierarchy of the state.

This institutional privileging was accompanied by a coordinated ideological campaign. Figures like Viktor Medvedchuk, in collaboration with Kremlin-aligned media and religious figures, weaponized the UOC-MP to disseminate anti-liberal, anti-European rhetoric – often couched in eschatological or conspiratorial language. UOC-MP sermons and affiliated media frequently portrayed the European Union as a locus of moral degradation, constructing a civilizational dichotomy in which European integration signified spiritual decline and cultural contamination. Such narratives gained public visibility through orchestrated events – most notably the 2013 “Orthodox parade” opposing Ukraine’s EU Association Agreement – demonstrating the strategic deployment of religious capital within hybrid information warfare (Mandaville, 2022).

The post-2014 Revolution of Dignity period marked a turning point in Ukraine's religious field. The UOC-MP's symbolic hegemony was challenged, and President Petro Poroshenko's endorsement of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) – recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019 – represented both a theological and political rupture. President Zelensky's 2022 decision to legally curtail the operations of the UOC-MP represented an escalation in efforts to dismantle Russia's residual symbolic infrastructure in Ukraine. This move aligned with broader de-Russification policies aimed at severing institutional ties to imperial legacies. Despite these formal measures, the UOC-MP's embedded presence within elite and bureaucratic structures – such as unauthorized chapels in government buildings – demonstrates the resilience of its informal networks and the symbolic inertia of religious capital (Artymyshyn, 2022).

The persistence of disinformation about the UOC-MP within the Ukrainian parliament highlights how religious capital continues to serve as a political resource. By projecting themselves as defenders of religious freedom, certain MPs seek to preserve ties with pro-Russian institutions while cloaking them in democratic rhetoric. The fact that such narratives circulate domestically – not just in Russian media – underscores the ongoing struggle to dismantle the UOC-MP's symbolic authority (Iwaniuk, 2020).

Elite patronage of the UOC-MP, particularly through donations and church construction, served as a mechanism for converting economic resources into symbolic legitimacy. The discovery of extensive religious collections in the private residences of Yanukovych-era officials further exposed this nexus of piety, status, and corruption. This entanglement was further evidenced in the performative religiosity of political elites, who publicly aligned themselves with religious institutions while simultaneously engaging in occult or syncretic practices – illustrating the hybrid character of post-Soviet belief systems (Dotsenko, 2023).

Until recently, the UOC-MP operated as more than a confessional body; it functioned as a conduit of Russian symbolic hegemony, embedded in elite networks and instrumentalized for ideological purposes within Ukraine's contested postcolonial space.

The contestation over religious capital in Ukraine transcends theological boundaries; it constitutes a central front in the broader struggle over national identity, elite legitimacy, and postcolonial reorientation.

Language Practices and the Symbolic Hierarchy of Russian and Ukrainian

In Ukraine, language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a symbolic resource central to struggles over cultural capital, national identity, and elite differentiation. The enduring prevalence of Russian within Ukraine's political elite – particularly in the post-Soviet era – reflects a colonial linguistic hierarchy that historically positioned Russian as cosmopolitan and prestigious, while relegating Ukrainian to the symbolic margins as rural and subordinate (Kuznietsova, 2023).

This symbolic hierarchy was institutionally produced through the imperial and Soviet regimes' language policies, which encompassed the suppression of Ukrainian-language publications, the persecution of Ukrainian intellectuals, and chronic underinvestment in Ukrainian-language education and cultural infrastructure. These structural pressures facilitated the internalization of a linguistic habitus among significant segments of the Ukrainian population – including political elites – wherein Russian was perceived as culturally superior and functionally normative. Despite the formal designation of Ukrainian as the sole state language following the 1991 independence, the symbolic capital of Russian endured, particularly within elite bureaucratic and political circles shaped by Soviet socialization (Bilaniuk, 2005).

At the same time, survey evidence shows that from independence onward the share of Ukrainian language use steadily increased while Russian declined (Kulyk, 2018). Corroborating this long-run shift, a corpus analysis of Verkhovna Rada transcripts (1990–2020) shows Ukrainian steadily crowding out Russian in plenary speech – from a low of 76% in 1995 to essentially 100% by the late 2010s, with code-switching progressively receding. Notably, the authors find no clear “jumps” tied to specific language statutes; rather, usage rose consistently from 2007 to 2014, plateaued, and then increased again in 2017–2018 (Shvedova & Kanishcheva, n.d.).

A complementary corpus study of Verkhovna Rada transcripts (1990–2020) likewise shows Ukrainian crowding out Russian – reaching about 100% by 2018; it also indicates that, across the 6th–8th convocations, only about 2–3% of MPs were Russian-only speakers versus about 67–70% Ukrainian and about 27–30% bilingual (Kanishcheva et al., 2023).

Despite this gradual bottom-up shift in parliamentary practice, the Yanukovich presidency (2010–2014) moved to curb – and partially reverse – Ukrainization by institutionalizing asymmetries in favor of Russian. In 2012, the Yanukovich government enacted the so-called “language law,” which permitted the use of Russian as a regional language in areas where at least 10% of the population considered it to be their native tongue – effectively legitimizing bilingual governance and reinforcing the dominance of Russian in public institutions.

The appointment of Dmytro Tabachnyk as Minister of Education and Science further institutionalized this pro-Russian linguistic trajectory. Known for his anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and affiliations with both domestic oligarchs and Russian political elites, Tabachnyk pursued policies aimed at reversing the modest gains of prior Ukrainization efforts. Although officially framed as promoting bilingualism, Tabachnyk's policies functioned to expand the practical and symbolic reach of Russian in schools and universities, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies of linguistic capital. Tabachnyk's tenure illustrates how linguistic capital can be strategically deployed within state apparatuses to reproduce imperial structures of legitimacy while marginalizing indigenous cultural repertoires (Drozdovskyi, 2024).

Despite organized resistance from civil society actors, intellectuals, and student organizations, many elected officials continued to employ Russian in both formal and informal settings, maintaining its status as the unmarked language of elite communica-

tion. Following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity – and even more markedly after the 2022 full-scale invasion – the linguistic field in Ukraine underwent a profound reconfiguration, wherein the symbolic authority of Ukrainian was significantly enhanced. Ukrainian has increasingly come to signify political loyalty, anti-colonial resistance, and civic commitment, while the use of Russian has, in many contexts, been reinterpreted as a marker of symbolic affiliation with the aggressor (Arel, 2017). Nevertheless, residual hierarchies of linguistic value – shaped by long-term symbolic domination – continue to inform elite practices and institutional norms, especially among older or Soviet-socialized actors.

Population-level indicators align with this symbolic revaluation. In June 2024, 78% of respondents named Ukrainian as their native language (52% in 2006), 70.5% spoke only or mostly Ukrainian at home (46% in 2006), and 72% used only or mostly Ukrainian outside the home (46% in 2015). The prestige hierarchy has also flipped: 75.5% judged Ukrainian the more prestigious language among peers, versus 6% for Russian. Pride in the state language reached 65%, alongside high pride in state symbols (flag 64%, emblem 63.5%, anthem 61%) (Razumkov Centre, 2024).

In Bourdieusian terms, linguistic competition in Ukraine is not reducible to a contest between codes but constitutes a struggle over the authority embedded in those codes – authority that is historically sedimented and field-contingent.

Members of Parliament who previously conducted their public engagement in Russian have increasingly adopted Ukrainian, not only to adhere to legal expectations but also to perform alignment with the evolving symbolic order of a sovereign and decolonizing Ukraine.

One MP from Kharkiv, interviewed in late 2023 (locally rooted figure without strong party affiliation, elected on a majoritarian basis, with background in regional business; positioned himself as a pragmatic representative of his district rather than as carrier of a coherent ideological or national program), reflected:

I grew up speaking Russian, and my constituents still mostly do. But after Bucha, after Mariupol – it became impossible to speak that language in the Rada [parliament]. It felt like betrayal. Switching to Ukrainian was a way of taking a stand. (Interview 13)

This statement illustrates the politicization of linguistic performance, wherein the continued use of Russian – even in historically Russophone regions – is increasingly framed as incompatible with post-2022 political legitimacy. Conversely, linguistic fluency in Ukrainian – particularly when performed in public settings such as media appearances and parliamentary sessions – has accrued symbolic capital as a marker of patriotism and political legitimacy.

The linguistic reorientation among elites also intersects with generational and regional dynamics: younger MPs, especially from western and central Ukraine, exhibit greater ease and pride in using Ukrainian, reflecting their accumulation of linguistic capital through long-term exposure and education. By contrast, older politicians and those from historically Russophone regions may perceive the linguistic transition as dislocating, yet often adapt pragmatically to shifting field expectations.

President Volodymyr Zelensky's personal linguistic shift exemplifies the symbolic revaluation of Ukrainian. His public statements about taking private lessons underscore the performative and affective dimensions of language as a vehicle for national unity and resistance. First Lady Olena Zelenska has similarly contributed to the elevation of the Ukrainian language as a component of national soft power, notably through initiatives promoting Ukrainian-language materials in international cultural institutions. These efforts position language as a key vector of global cultural recognition and postcolonial agency.

Through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, these developments represent a revaluation of linguistic hierarchies, wherein the legitimacy of a language is constituted not inherently but through shifts in the broader symbolic and political field.

Lifestyle, Generational Habitus, and the Symbolic Realignment of Ukrainian Elites

Whereas memory politics, language, and religion make elite loyalties explicit, lifestyle practices and consumption habits operate as embodied forms of symbolic differentiation. These practices offer a more implicit, yet no less powerful, register through which political elites position themselves within the post-Soviet field of power.

Lifestyle practices among Ukraine's political elites offer critical insights into the post-Soviet configuration of symbolic capital. As this research demonstrates, Russian elites historically occupied a dominant symbolic position, serving as aspirational models for their Ukrainian counterparts – particularly in the realms of wealth display, taste performance, and elite sociability. This emulative dynamic persisted well beyond 2014, shaping perceptions of legitimacy among both elites and the broader public (Iwaniuk, 2020).

In contrast to Western elite cultures – where discretion, modesty, and civic responsibility often function as markers of legitimacy – Ukrainian elites historically embraced a performative mode of luxury. This aesthetic was expressed across multiple domains: designer fashion, exotic car collections, ostentatious real estate, and hyper-visible public events that served as stages for demonstrating elite status.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, such practices represent compensatory strategies of symbolic capital accumulation in contexts where institutionalized cultural capital (e.g. academic credentials, public service, civic reputation) is underdeveloped or devalued. The public exhibition of wealth thus becomes a mechanism of elite differentiation, even when it provokes critical scrutiny.

As one interviewee, a businesswoman and spouse of an MP (from Kyiv, Russian-speaking, represents a nexus of entrepreneurial and family-based economic capital, with her public role shaped less by ideological positioning and more by networks of business interests, local influence, and social status), put it:

Partying in Moscow is nothing like in Kyiv due to the scale of the event, the level of organization, luxury and vigor. (Interview 8)

This remark signals not only aesthetic preference but also aspirational orientation toward the Russian elite habitus, which valorizes excess, grandeur, and high visibility as integral components of elite status. Such performances of excess – exemplified by extravagant weddings, ownership of football clubs, and curated birthday spectacles – functioned both as symbolic displays and as sites of elite networking. They simultaneously reinforced internal hierarchies and projected status outward, thereby consolidating elite cohesion.

The 2009 opening of Donbas Arena by Rinat Akhmetov exemplifies this convergence of aesthetics and power. Beyond its ostensible function as a sports venue, the event served as a symbolic enactment of elite dominance. Interview data suggests that proximity to influential actors was literally commodified – via “price lists” for seating – underscoring how elite leisure spaces operated as informal arenas of political capital exchange (Iwaniuk, 2020).

The use of Verkhovna Rada registration plates to evade law enforcement, often extended illicitly to relatives or acquaintances, further illustrates how status symbols served to materialize elite impunity. Such everyday practices rendered social distance visible and affirmed the privileged access to legal immunity.

This aspirational mimicry extended to aesthetic valuation. While some oligarchs – such as Viktor Pinchuk – were perceived as aligning more closely with European models of taste and philanthropy, others (e.g. Akhmetov, Kolomoisky, Firtash) were associated with post-Soviet extravagance, signaling an alignment with Russian stylistic norms marked by kitsch and conspicuous consumption.

These lifestyle formations reflect a habitus shaped within a postcolonial symbolic order, where the Russian elite field historically operated as a dominant reference point. Even as military and political antagonism with Russia intensified, the embodied dispositions of Ukrainian elites remained partly tethered to this former center of symbolic authority.

This must be understood within a broader structure of symbolic asymmetry that defined post-Soviet relations between Ukrainian and Russian elites. Lifestyle emulation and cultural deference were not simply aesthetic preferences – they were shaped by the hierarchical distribution of symbolic capital across the post-Soviet elite field.

The relationship between Ukrainian and Russian elites was never one of parity. From the 1990s onward, Russian actors occupied the hegemonic pole of the regional field: commanding greater economic power, deeper transnational networks, and – crucially – greater symbolic legitimacy. Russian elites positioned themselves as the “natural” center of post-Soviet integration, often regarding their Ukrainian counterparts with implicit condescension (Semenova, 2012).

The relationship was never equal. When you dealt with Russian elites, there was always this assumption that they were the center and we were the periphery. They spoke to us as if they felt bigger, more important, more legitimate. You could sense the condescension, even when it wasn't said outright. (Interview 5)

Even in periods of political alignment, Russian elites rarely treated Ukraine as a sovereign peer. Instead, high-level negotiations – such as gas agreements or military base extensions – were often governed through informalism, opacity, and personalistic networks, demonstrating Russia's refusal to engage Ukraine as a legitimate international actor (Hryshchenko, 2010).

This structural subordination extended into the domain of elite habitus. Ukrainian MPs – especially during the Kuchma and Yanukovich years – often cultivated personal ties with their Russian counterparts, seeing them as carriers of geopolitical and symbolic capital. These ties were not only political but also deeply social: shared religious rituals, elite networking, and even cross-border godparenting. Such affiliations conferred informal prestige but reinforced symbolic inequality.

While earlier periods witnessed sustained efforts by some Ukrainian elites – particularly within eastern and southern constituencies – to cultivate ties with Moscow, these affiliations were frequently undermined by unequal treatment. Interview data and political memoirs suggest that Russian elites seldom regarded their Ukrainian counterparts as equals, often displaying overt or implicit condescension. This symbolic hierarchy, rather than ideological divergence per se, frequently served as a catalyst for realignment. The search for recognition – rather than mere access to resources or geopolitical advantage – emerged as a key driver in the gradual pivot of many Ukrainian elites toward Euro-Atlantic institutions, where norms of mutual respect and formal equality, though unevenly realized, held greater discursive traction.

The asymmetrical and informal nature of Ukrainian–Russian elite relations – often embedded in ritualized exchanges, patron-client dynamics, and forms of symbolic violence (Forest & Johnson, 2002) – played a crucial role in reconfiguring the habitus of Ukrainian political actors. While many Ukrainian elites tolerated unequal treatment in exchange for symbolic prestige or geopolitical patronage, over time this dynamic generated friction. The lack of mutual recognition, coupled with growing assertiveness among Ukrainian elites, catalyzed a reorientation toward institutions and discourses that promised a more egalitarian framework of international engagement. These evolving relations of symbolic domination and resistance have contributed to the incremental reorientation of Ukraine's political class away from post-Soviet networks and toward European fields of recognition.

Following the Euromaidan and particularly after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, this symbolic realignment accelerated. The resulting disidentification from Russian imperial imaginaries has not only reshaped Ukrainian elite discourse and identity practices, but also disrupted the foundations of Russia's hegemonic claims over the post-Soviet space.

This broader symbolic reordering – visible in domains ranging from language politics to institutional affiliations – can be interpreted through the lens of symbolic capital accumulation and conversion. As Ukrainian elites navigate the postcolonial constraints of their political field, they simultaneously contest and reconfigure inherited hierarchies of recognition, legitimacy, and cultural capital.

This transnational dimension of symbolic capital helps explain why lifestyle mimicry of Russian elites eventually gave way to symbolic rupture. Post-2014, and even more

starkly after 2022, Ukrainian elites began not only rejecting Russian affiliation in rhetoric and policy but also reconfiguring their embodied practices – language, fashion, religious affiliation, rituals, and international networks – to reflect a new field logic.

Norms of performative luxury are increasingly delegitimized, while modesty, transparency, and patriotic frugality accrue positive symbolic value. Nevertheless, the durable dispositions of the political elite – socialized over decades into practices of performative consumption – continue to manifest in everyday aesthetics and behavioral repertoires, even amid changing symbolic expectations.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that, since 2014 – and particularly following the 2019 parliamentary elections – the Verkhovna Rada has undergone a significant generational renewal. A cohort of younger deputies entered the political field from backgrounds in civil society, volunteer battalions, and the private sector. While often lacking traditional political capital – such as entrenched party networks or dynastic affiliations – these actors brought with them forms of symbolic capital rooted in revolutionary legitimacy (e.g. Euromaidan participation), anti-corruption activism, and internationalized cultural capital, including Western education, English proficiency, and NGO experience.

As one MP from the Holos (Voice) party (from Lviv, young, pro-European reformist, with background in civil society, entered parliament in 2019, emphasizing transparency, decentralization, rule of law, and integration with the EU and NATO) noted in a 2024 interview:

It's not just about policy – it's about how you were raised. I never learned to look at Moscow as a “big brother.” I learned to distrust it. Me and my parents were at Maidan. That's my starting point. (Interview 12)

Another interviewee reflected on this issue as follows:

This goes beyond policy choices; it reflects socialization. My peers and I were never uncertain about the nature of Russia. (Interview 1)

These testimonies illustrate the intergenerational formation of habitus – structured by family history, political rupture, and national trauma – which continues to shape how elites interpret symbolic legitimacy. The generational cleavage observed here is not merely chronological but reflects distinct trajectories of symbolic and cultural capital formation under different historical regimes – Soviet, transitional, and post-Maidan.

The February 2022 full-scale invasion constituted a *moment de crise*, in Bourdieu's terms – an event that restructured the field by altering the relative value of various forms of capital. The elites previously characterized by strategic ambiguity or pragmatic ties to Russia were compelled to recalibrate their symbolic positioning – some through genuine ideological reorientation, others through instrumental adaptation.

The invasion redrew the boundaries of symbolic legitimacy: symbolic and cultural capital aligned with Western integration and anti-colonial resistance, and civic credibility gained primacy. These dynamics are visible not only in policy positions but also in the embodied

aesthetic of elite figures. First Lady Olena Zelenska's promotion of Ukrainian fashion has redefined national style as a domain of soft power, while President Zelensky's utilitarian, domestically produced clothing functions as an aesthetic rejection of elite excess. Their sartorial and symbolic practices reflect the consolidation of a new moral economy, where authenticity, modesty, and national alignment accrue symbolic value.

These lifestyle transformations are not superficial; they materialize a new structure of symbolic capital rooted in postcolonial rupture, civic commitment, and ethical nationalism. Political figures who fail to conform to these expectations – by maintaining linguistic, cultural, or religious ties to Russia – risk symbolic degradation and political marginalization.

Interview data suggests that lifestyle has become a heightened site of symbolic accountability post-2022. As one MP observed (experienced, with strong ties to state institutions, positioned as a defender of Ukraine's sovereignty and supporter of European/NATO integration), even digital self-presentation – on platforms like Instagram – now influences perceptions of political credibility and moral alignment:

You can't wear Russian designers or travel to Dubai like before. People watch. Even your Instagram can damage your political capital. (Interview 10)

Similar observations were made in another interview:

Before the war, these things were private or just about status. Now they are treated as indicators of patriotism and credibility. One careless photo can undo years of political work. (Interview 4)

The premium placed on symbolic coherence also restructures intra-elite hierarchies: figures with limited economic capital but with histories of military service or grassroots activism often compensate through symbolic capital rooted in modesty, discipline, and perceived authenticity.

This generational dynamic intersects with lifestyle transformation in significant ways. The younger generation frequently articulates the Russian threat through civilizational or decolonial discourses, framing Ukraine's identity in alignment with democratic, European, and liberal values. Their habitus tends to reject Soviet iconography and instead valorizes national authenticity, cultural independence, and Western-aligned practices.

In contrast, older elites – whose formative experiences were shaped by the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods – often exhibit more ambivalent orientations toward Russia. This ambivalence is anchored in shared institutional trajectories, Soviet educational networks, and residual symbolic affiliations. While younger MPs tend to reflexively repudiate Russian cultural models, older actors often adopt a more cautious stance in memory politics and symbolic alignments, shaped by concerns over social fragmentation or geopolitical backlash.

In Bourdieusian terms, these shifts represent an embodied transformation of habitus – where aesthetic and ethical distinctions operate as performative expressions of elite field position. They are constantly policed, publicly legible, and politically consequential, reflecting the reorganization of symbolic capital in post-invasion Ukraine.

Conspiracy Thinking as an Epistemic Habit: Disinformation, Distrust, and Post-Soviet Habitus

Beneath the visible dimensions of elite performance – such as taste and lifestyle – lie more durable dispositions of belief. These are embedded in what may be termed epistemic habitus: socially patterned modes of perceiving legitimacy, truth, and threat. Among Ukrainian political elites, such dispositions frequently manifest in conspiratorial thinking, shaped by the sedimented effects of post-Soviet political socialization and elite insecurity.

Interview data reveal a notable prevalence of conspiratorial worldviews among Ukrainian political elites – a phenomenon that resists reduction to ignorance or fringe eccentricity. Rather, these beliefs reflect historically contingent cognitive structures shaped by late-Soviet and post-Soviet experiences with disinformation, opacity, and institutional mistrust.

The legacy of epistemic distrust persists even within the framework of a formally democratic polity and relatively pluralistic media environment. Many MPs exhibit a strong predilection for alternative explanatory models – often conspiratorial in nature – that reduce complex political processes to simplified narratives of manipulation and covert control. Such explanations frequently draw upon familiar tropes from Russian disinformation campaigns, attributing domestic and international developments to the machinations of shadow elites, often framed in transnational or civilizational terms.

For example, in his memoir, former acting President Oleksandr Turchynov recounts that “experienced individuals in the European Parliament” confided to him that global elections are largely predetermined. This statement exemplifies a broader worldview in which formal democratic procedures are interpreted as mere façades, concealing the operations of transnational elite networks (Turchynov, 2012).

As one interviewee (parliamentary correspondent) put it:

One of the influential politicians recently told me that the president of France was elected not by the French people, but by the Rothschilds. Moreover, surveys conducted before the elections do not constitute any evidence to him. The guy is absolutely convinced that the Rothschilds interfered in everything and imposed the president. (Interview 7)

Another interviewee, an MP, stated as follows:

Outcomes are decided long before voting day by global financial groups, and polls are simply adjusted afterward to fit the script. Numbers and surveys mean nothing – what matters is who “really” pulls the strings. (Interview 11)

These examples reveal the affective and cognitive appeal of conspiracy narratives, which provide explanatory closure and symbolic coherence in a political field marked by

uncertainty and external threat. The dismissal of empirical evidence – such as polling data – further reflects a distrust of institutional knowledge regimes.

These conspiratorial narratives are not ideologically neutral; they often echo Soviet-era discourses that framed liberal democracy as inherently deceptive and externally orchestrated. Their amplification through Russian media ecosystems and online echo chambers exacerbates their resonance within elite circles. The prevalence of these beliefs is further facilitated by widespread reliance on digital media and insufficient critical media literacy among segments of the elite, which renders them susceptible to misinformation and algorithmically reinforced echo chambers (Leshchenko, 2014).

From a Bourdieusian standpoint, the susceptibility to conspiracy thinking reflects a deficit in institutionalized cultural capital – particularly the interpretive competencies associated with academic training, civic education, or journalistic literacy. It also points to a broader blurring of boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate epistemic authority within the elite field (Iwaniuk, 2024).

Conspiracy thinking is thus not reducible to cognitive error; it is a product of field conditions in earlier convocations, marked by low institutional transparency, dense informal networks, and a symbolic economy in which access and loyalty outweighed expertise. Moreover, such epistemic orientations frequently coexist with informal affiliations to Russian actors – not necessarily via ideological convergence, but through shared hermeneutic frameworks that normalize distrust, secrecy, and external attribution of political agency.

In this context, symbolic capital may derive less from technical expertise or public legitimacy than from perceived access to “insider” narratives – offering elite actors a means of sustaining status in a symbolic economy where empirical validation is secondary to interpretive authority.

Approaching conspiracy thinking as a manifestation of epistemic habitus enables a more sociologically grounded interpretation: not as an anomaly or pathology, but as a historically structured mode of sense-making shaped by authoritarian legacy, cognitive socialization under conditions of opacity, and the symbolic ambiguity of Ukraine's postcolonial positionality.

Conclusion

This article advanced a dual argument. First, since 2014 – and decisively after 2022 – Ukraine's symbolic order has been rearticulated across language, religion, and memory, reshaping how elites define threat and national identity. Second, elements of elites' epistemic habits endure beneath these shifts, manifesting in lifestyle continuities, legacy networks, and conspiratorial frames. The evidence shows symbolic acceleration without full epistemic turnover. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and enriched by a postcolonial perspective, the analysis has demonstrated that elite understandings of Russia are structured by embodied dispositions, social trajectories, and intra-field struggles over legitimacy and distinction. These perceptions are not static but evolve in relation

to shifting field dynamics, particularly in response to critical junctures such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of 2022.

Crucially, the findings align with the study's two-level analytical strategy. Through field mapping, MPs were situated by party family, education, region, religious orientation, and volumes of cultural, social, and symbolic capital. This positioning helps explain patterned variation in threat perception: actors with internationalized cultural capital, a Ukrainian linguistic habitus, and distance from Moscow-linked religious structures were early and consistent framers of Russia as an existential enemy, while Soviet-socialized or Russo-phone-embedded actors tended to hedge or rebrand rather than rupture. Narrative and discursive analysis complements this picture by showing how elites translate those positions into meaning: they draw symbolic boundaries between Europeanness and Russianness, mobilize legitimacy markers such as language use, memory work, and religious stance, and narrate personal trajectories that anchor their authority. In short, positions in the field and the stories elites tell about those positions co-produce perceptions of Russia.

By situating elite behavior within the Ukrainian political field and analyzing how various forms of capital – linguistic, religious, educational, lifestyle, and civilizational – are mobilized to define threat and construct national identity, the article has shown how geopolitical orientations are deeply embedded in symbolic hierarchies and internalized histories. The revaluation of Ukrainian over Russian language, the symbolic delegitimation of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the increasing salience of “civilizational capital” all reflect a broader transformation of the elite habitus, whereby affiliation with Western norms and decolonial narratives has become a key marker of political legitimacy.

At the same time, the second level of analysis clarifies why transformation outpaces resocialization. Coding of interviews and documents by threat perception, symbolic boundaries, legitimacy markers, and trajectories reveals the persistence of an epistemic habitus characterized by informality and conspiratorial reasoning. These repertoires supply cognitive closure under uncertainty and enable procedural evasions that blunt the force of formal reforms. Thus, symbolic acceleration coexists with slow-moving dispositions. The February 2022 rupture functioned as a moment of re-capitalization that increased the value of wartime service, Ukrainian linguistic performance, and de-imperial memory, while depreciating Moscow-linked religious and cultural capital. Yet conversion remains uneven across cohorts and regions, because inherited positions and socialization continue to shape how new legitimacy is taken up and narrated.

Importantly, the article highlights how the postcolonial condition continues to shape elite subjectivities and symbolic boundaries, even as overt dependence on Russia is increasingly repudiated. Practices of lifestyle imitation, epistemic habits of conspiratorial thinking, and residual deference to Russian symbolic authority reveal the unevenness and contradictions of this transition. Generational and regional stratification underscores that reconfiguration of the political field remains contested and asymmetrical in access to legitimate capital.

The findings also underscore that background and parliamentary generation matter for how elites draw symbolic boundaries and interpret Russia. Deputies of the 8th convocation, many of whom were socialized in the late-Soviet environment and retained Russophone or Moscow-linked ecclesiastical affiliations, often exhibited ambivalence: they abstained procedurally on sensitive votes, appealed to notions of “religious freedom,” or adopted deterrence narratives that downplayed rupture. By contrast, younger MPs entering after 2014 and especially in the 9th convocation, often with backgrounds in civil society, Western education, or volunteer battalions, were structurally positioned to frame Russia as an existential civilizational enemy. For them, symbolic boundaries such as “Europeanness versus Russianness” or “patriotism versus collaboration” were not abstract categories but lived markers of legitimacy, mobilized through language performance, religious distancing, and memory politics. In Bourdieusian terms, these symbolic boundaries are sites where capitals are revalued and converted: linguistic proficiency, religious alignment, or memory activism function as symbolic capital, enabling deputies to reposition themselves in a transformed field. From a decolonial perspective, this boundary work represents the dismantling of hierarchies historically rooted in Russian imperial and Soviet domination. In other words, to speak Ukrainian in parliament, to denounce the Moscow Patriarchate, or to invoke the Holodomor as a framing device is not simply to express opinion but to redraw the symbolic frontier of political legitimacy. This demonstrates how elites actively negotiate decolonization within the field, converting embodied histories into new repertoires of authority while simultaneously confronting the inertia of their own epistemic habitus.

In short, reform travels faster than habitus: symbolic distancing from Russia has raced ahead, while dispositions sedimented in elite socialization change more slowly and unevenly.

Central to this analysis is the twin finding that the political field has undergone significant symbolic transformation since 2014/2022 and that elite epistemic habits remain partially intact, shaping how that transformation is enacted and contested. This transformation reflects broader shifts in how elites perceive national identity, political legitimacy, and geopolitical threats. The concept of habitus, as employed in Bourdieu’s framework, has been instrumental in revealing how these perceptions are shaped by past experiences and structures of power, while also guiding future actions.

In advancing a sociological reading of threat perception, the analysis demonstrates how symbolic power operates within domestic fields to produce geopolitical meaning. It suggests that to understand the full implications of Ukraine’s post-2014 transformation, one must attend not only to state policies or formal institutions but also to the symbolic economies, embodied logics, and historical residues that shape elite behavior. In doing so, this analysis offers a nuanced and relational account of how national identity, legitimacy, and postcolonial rupture are navigated in times of systemic crisis. The use of Bourdieu’s theory, coupled with a postcolonial lens, provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Ukrainian elites navigate the complex interplay of history, memory, and power

in their engagement with Russia, offering broader implications for the study of political elites in postcolonial and post-Soviet contexts.

Theoretically, framing outcomes as a tension between field transformation and habitus durability clarifies why post-imperial change can be rapid yet incomplete; empirically, it points to the need for not only institutional redesign but also interventions in elite recruitment, transparency of networks, and accountability practices.

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Interview 3 – with MP (Radical Party of Oleh Liashko), Kyiv, February 2018.

Interview 4 – with MP (People’s Front), Kyiv, July 2020.

Interview 5 – with MP (Batkivshchyna), Kyiv, August 2021.

Interview 6 – with MP (independent), Kyiv, August 2021.

Semi-structured interviews with elite-adjacent actors closely connected to the parliamentary field

Interview 7 – with a parliamentary correspondent, Kyiv, August 2021.

Interview 8 – with a businesswoman and spouse of an MP, Kyiv, August 2021.

In-depth interviews with Members of Parliament of the 9th convocation (2022–2024)

Interview 9 – with MP (Servant of the People), online, June 2023.

Interview 10 – with MP (European Solidarity), online, December 2022.

Interview 11 – with MP (Batkivshchyna), online, May 2023.

Interview 12 – with MP (Holos), online, November 2024.

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Postkolonialne zmagania a kapitał symboliczny. Postrzeganie Rosji przez ukraińskie elity polityczne

Abstrakt

W niniejszym artykule autorka analizuje, w jaki sposób kapitał symboliczny i kulturowy kształtuje postrzeganie Rosji jako zagrożenie geopolityczne przez ukraińskie elity polityczne, koncentrując się na przemianach, które zaszły od aneksji Krymu przez Rosję w 2014 roku i pełnoskalowej agresji na Ukrainę w 2022 roku. Wykorzystując teorię praktyk Pierre'a Bourdieu, dowiedziono, że owo postrzeganie jest nie tylko reakcją na wydarzenia zewnętrzne, lecz także efektem wewnętrznych zmaganiań w polu politycznym, na które wpływają pozycje elit, zgromadzony kapitał i ucieleśnione doświadczenia. Studium uwzględnia również perspektywę postkolonialną, aby prześledzić, jak dziedzictwo rosyjskiego imperializmu nadal wpływa na ukraińskie elity polityczne, kształtując ich tożsamość, legitymizację i reakcje na zmieniające się zagrożenia. Przedstawiona analiza relacyjna pozwala głębiej zrozumieć dynamikę zmian tożsamości narodowej, polityki pamięci i walki o władzę w kontekście postkolonialnym i postradzieckim, podkreślając rolę hierarchii symbolicznych w konstruowaniu narracji o władzy politycznej i zagrożeniach.

Słowa kluczowe: postkolonializm; kapitał symboliczny; kapitał kulturowy; ukraińskie elity polityczne; pole polityczne

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