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THREE DECADES AFTER SREBRENICA: HISTORICAL REVISIONISM, TRIUMPHALISM, AND DENIAL OF GENOCIDE

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Abstract. Three decades after the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, the struggle over historical truth remains a defining feature of post-conflict Bosnia and the broader Balkans. This paper examines the persistent dynamics of historical revisionism, triumphalism, and genocide denial that have emerged in political discourse, public memory, and institutional narratives since the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice legally recognized the genocide. Drawing on political speeches, media representations, and commemorative practices, it analyzes how competing national projects instrumentalize the memory of Srebrenica – whether through the glorification of convicted war criminals, the erasure of victimhood, or the framing of genocide as a contested interpretation rather than an established fact. By situating Srebrenica within global patterns of genocide denial and memorial politics, the study highlights the urgent need to defend evidence-based historical narratives against politically motivated manipulation and to reinforce the moral and legal imperatives of genocide recognition.

Keywords: Srebrenica, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Serbia, genocide denial, genocide triumphalism

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1. Introduction

The war in Bosnia (1992–1995) is characterized by mass ethnic cleansing, carried out to create ethnically homogeneous territories, primarily Serbian ones. The Bosniak Muslim population from eastern Bosnia found refuge in the town

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of Srebrenica, which was declared a "safe zone" by the United Nations in 1993. However, this did not prevent Serbian forces from attacking and capturing the town in July 1995. The Bosniak population massively headed towards the nearby place of Potočari, where the barracks of the Dutch UNPROFOR soldiers were located. Although some of the refugees were given shelter, the Dutch soldiers received orders not to intervene. Soon, members of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) arrived in Potočari (Pollack 2003a: 793–794, 2003b: 188).

In the following days, men were separated from women and taken to an unknown direction. Women were placed on buses that took them to territory under Bosniak control. In the following days, there was no trace or word of the men who had been taken, and suspicions grew that they had been killed. Serbian soldiers under the command of General Ratko Mladić took the captured men to several locations in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they were executed. Over the course of one week, more than 8,000 men and boys were killed (Toom 2020: 358).

The bodies of those killed were buried in several mass graves. Once suspicions arose that this was an act of genocide, the VRS launched an operation to conceal this crime. With the help of heavy machinery and local public utility companies, these graves were dug up and the remains were moved to secondary and tertiary graves. This destruction of the remains later led to problems with identification, as the heavy machinery destroyed the bodies and scattered their parts to different locations across the country (Kontsevaia 2013: 17).

After the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) began investigating this case and filing indictments, primarily against Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. After decades of investigation and trials, more than ten individuals were convicted of genocide (UNIRMCT s.a.).

However, although the court rulings of the ICTY and the verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have unequivocally established that genocide occurred in Srebrenica, denial of this fact is a pervasive narrative in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

The problem with this narrative is greater because it comes from official bodies in Serbia and the Bosnian entity of Republika Srpska, as well as from some officials in Montenegro. Such organized denial of the Srebrenica genocide represents an open undermining of peace in the Balkans and creates permanent tension and hatred, primarily between Serbs and Bosniaks.

2. Denial – "the final stage of genocide"

Denial is something that follows each genocide once it is over. Perpetrators of genocide try to hide their tracks and pretend that it never happened or manipulate and distort facts to remove the mark of "perpetrator" from themselves. Additionally, denial serves to further politically manipulate a particular community whose members were the perpetrators to strengthen the hate towards other groups considered hostile

by the former. This section will present the most important findings and theories related to genocide denial.

Stanton (1996) created the "Ten stages of genocide" model. He developed this model during the previous decades, and it became widely used by numerous organizations and governments. "Denial" is named the tenth and final stage of genocide. According to Stanton, the perpetrators of genocide initially attempt to hide their tracks. Mass graves are dug through, bodies burned, and all evidence and witness accounts are destroyed. There are many examples of this. When the Nazis realized defeat was imminent, they dug through mass graves and burned the bodies of those killed in concentration camps. After the genocide in Srebrenica, bodies were buried in mass graves. When speculations of genocide arose, the perpetrators began digging primary graves out and relocating the victims' body parts to secondary or even tertiary mass graves to cover their tracks.

Stanton (2008) also claims that denial "is actually a continuation of the genocide, because it is a continuing attempt to destroy the victim group psychologically and culturally, to deny its members even the memory of the murders of their relatives." That is, the goal of genocide denial is to perpetuate the genocide in some form. Denial represents a big blow to the survivors and the victims' families. Massive psychological and emotional pressure is put on said persons through denial. Therefore, we cannot say that genocide is over so long as its denial exists, especially if it comes from official addresses. Officials' roles are major, considering they have the means of sanctioning or inciting denial. Likewise, they must ensure that the judicially confirmed truth reaches the people, first and foremost through official education, so that the victims would never be forgotten and the genocide never repeated.

Charny (1999: 159) states that the perpetrators desire to absolve themselves through denial. Such activity represents an attack on the collective identity of the group against which the genocide was committed, preventing it from healing. Charny agrees with the constatation that genocide denial is the final phase of genocide, which can last long after the killings stop. In cases of state-sponsored genocide denial, there are possibilities for future genocidal killings.

In his further work, Charny attempts to present different forms of deniers. In "A two-tier theory of psychological motivations of denial" (Charny 2000: 19), he tries to puzzle out the psychological motivation of deniers. In the first continuum, Charny goes "from innocent" denial to "malevolent denial," where he focuses on whether or not deniers know of the event they are denying. In the second continuum, he goes from "innocent disavowals" to "celebration of violence" based on whether or not the denier participates in celebrating previous violence and invoking the new.

With each genocide, there are those deniers who are entirely aware of the truth and the facts relating to a particular event. Due to their malice, they still opt for lying, distortion, denial, and revisionism. On the other hand, many people deny genocide simply because they do not know enough. One part of these deniers accepts incorrect interpretations of events because they are in line with their values and other opinions. However, some never want to inform themselves. Charny puts these in the "innocent denier" category (2000: 20).

In the second continuum, we noted that some celebrate violence and invoke its repetition, while others deny past genocides but do not support anything similar happening again. Genocide celebrators are usually groups of fanatics who call for further violence. In Srebrenica's case, we can include various Serbian sports fan groups known for public invocation of genocide. Conversely, the "innocent disavowals of violence" category includes deniers and revisionists who wish to fake and falsify facts about a previous genocide but do not call for its repetition. This group justifies its actions with a so-called yearning to reach historical truths and reconciliation (Charny 2000: 25–26). In the former Yugoslavia, we see these attempts in the drastic downplaying of the number of Srebrenica victims, the Jasenovac concentration camp, or through equalizing the Chetniks with the People's Liberation Movement (the Partisans).

Smith et al. (1995: 13) also claim that genocide denial in academic circles is underestimated and, therefore, very dangerous. The authors argue that "deliberate denial is a form of aggression that ought to be regarded as a contribution to genocidal violence in its own right."

Oranlı (2018: 45–50) points out the importance of the political background of genocides. He believes that genocide denial is an "ideologically supported political lie." Such a lie is, above all, systemic and encapsulates a broad spectrum of factors. Simply, genocide denial becomes a political goal so that the political elites can maintain their ideology. Lies create an entirely new "truth" and perception of events. This is usually achieved through educational programs so that the citizens would be served the ideologically compatible "truth," i.e., fake historical facts, to maintain and heighten the hate toward one group. This activity leads to the rise of historical revisionism.

Denial at a systemic level is much more dangerous than denial at an individual level. Altanian (2021: 136–138) views "genocide denialism" as a "larger, orchestrated, ideological, political or cultural pattern of denial." Through such activity, genocide against a particular group is sought to be justified, and the group itself is presented as a threat, making genocide a necessity. In some cases of genocide denialism, the term "genocide" is strictly avoided. For example, some Serbian officials admit that a "great crime" had happened in Srebrenica but deny the existence of genocide. The goal of this behavior is to create a different (or incorrect) perception of those events. Such a distortion of facts is dangerous and could negatively impact the "open-minded" part of the population and make it difficult for them to reach the proper conclusions.

"Material self-interest" is a primary reason for genocide denial, says Jones (2013: 791). In his opinion, denial maintains the status quo and thus allows for political and financial gain. We find this exact situation in today's Serbia, where the political elites maintain nationalist rhetoric to preserve their position of power. According to Jones, this is characteristic of societies that would wish to preserve their preferred (though fake) image of the state and of themselves, thus avoiding the reality that contradicts their understanding.

Jones (2013: 791–793) further lists some of the "common discourses of genocide denial," such as "hardly anybody died," "it was self-defense," "it was not intentional," and "we are the real victims." All of these discourses we find in Srebrenica's case, and we will speak more about them in the later sections. We should especially note that genocide deniers usually try to dispute the existence of genocidal intent. Since the intent to destroy a particular group partially or entirely is what differentiates genocides from crimes against humanity, it is no surprise that the deniers would first seek to strike at the term itself. Naturally, international courts carefully draw conclusions related to genocidal intent as it is such a delicate matter.

The criminalization of genocide denial is a heavily debated subject. While most believe that punishing those who deny genocides is more than necessary, there are opinions that doing so would infringe on the "freedom of speech." Unfortunately, countries have not reached a consensus on the subject. Most member countries of the European Union have criminalized genocide denial. On the other hand, numerous states defend freedom of speech and refuse "the role of government as the arbiter of historical fact" (Smith 2010: 131).

3. Triumphalism – more than denial?

We saw above that Charny wrote of those who celebrate genocides and call for new killings. This behavior goes far beyond the scope of the mere denial of genocide and should therefore be carefully analyzed. Celebrating genocides and striving to repeat them is a crime in and of itself. Unfortunately, such behavior is a grim reality in the states of the former Yugoslavia.

Halilovich (2017: 7) says that "in this stage, perpetrators, their sponsors, and the politics behind genocide do not deny the killings anymore but glorify them." He further states (2021: 123–124) that genocide triumphalism manifests itself through ceremonial celebrations of the genocide's date; celebrations of war criminals and their glorification as heroes; singing of songs celebrating the killing and the genocide; and the belittling and discrimination of the victims, their families, and those returning to the former killing fields. He finally concludes that:

> This culture of genocide triumphalism goes beyond genocidal denial, in genocide studies also known as the last stage of genocide. Namely, in Serbia and the Serb-controlled part of Bosnia (RS), the Srebrenica genocide is not merely denied anymore, but it is celebrated and its perpetrators glorified, while the Bosniak survivors are exposed to humiliating and degrading treatment, if they choose to return to their pre-war places now in RS (122).

Karčić (2022: 99–109) views genocide triumphalism as "instrumentalized hatred." Such triumphalism and celebration of war criminals reflect in declaring war criminals heroes and making them unique "reality show celebrities." Giving media platforms to war criminals leads to their glorification and provides them with

means to continue their genocidal policies since they would have access to a broad audience. Karčić also sees a significant issue in the emergence of nationalist songs that mobilize and maintain the celebratory narrative. In addition, triumphalism is reflected in "erasing history," for example, through memorials erected at genocide sites that serve to distort the facts, deny the genocide, and present the perpetrators as the "real victims."

Additionally, institutionalized triumphalism can serve as a form of "strategic interest" (Džananović 2022: 121). This is especially the case in societies governed by a strong nationalist narrative and where the governing elites exploit it to maintain power.

Charny (2011: 15) finally asks the question of whether those who celebrate genocides and call for new killings will ever be sanctioned. Limits on speech must exist, especially for speech that calls for the repetition of violence that has already taken thousands of lives. This behavior and nurturing of the hateful narrative, primarily when sponsored by the state, can cause numerous issues. It can prevent reconciliation and potentially even cause new bloodshed.

4. Historical revisionism

Historical revisionism "means the effort to, either for individual or collective ideological and political gain, revise scientific interpretations of particular historical events or periods to remove their traumatic impact on the collective consciousness and identity" (Bandžović 2020: 138). Revising historical facts is an attempt to "escape" the reality and collective responsibility that may endanger national identity.

Serbian historian Latinka Perović (2012: 32) says that the goal of historical revisionism is to create "the basis for a new national identity." Each nationalist ideology, including Serbian, carries the effects of its actions throughout history. "The meaning of historical revisionism is to interpret those effects in such a way as to ensure the duration of the ideology itself." A government led by nationalist ideology attempts to keep itself in power and convince the citizens of its infallibility and correctness. Thus, it uses the distortion and falsification of generally accepted facts and passes them on to the masses it wishes to influence.

Naturally, anyone who does not think in line with such a government and its ideology is the ultimate enemy. That imaginary enemy, in the opinion of nationalists, endangers their "national identity." The fight against this "enemy" is the core of revisionism. Cipek (2019: 5) states that "in the core of radical right-wing ideology lies, namely, the myth of a homogeneous nation." That homogeneous nation would have no internal enemies. It would therefore be an environment where the nationalist ideology could implement its ideas and dictate its own version of the past and the facts. He further states that revisionists are not interested in history but only use it for daily political purposes (7).

Škorić and Bešlin (2017: 635) express the idea that "negationists do not seek proofs which converge in some conclusion, but rather seek evidence which fits

into their ideology." Because of this, revisionists consider only those facts suited to their ideology. There is simply no room for doubt with ideologically accepted facts. Such a selective approach to facts is one of the primary characteristics of historical revisionism. Škorić and Bešlin (2017) additionally state that the revisionists' goal is not to offer new findings but to undermine the existing ones that are not ideologically suitable to them. We find the root of this in what we said earlier about viewing dissenters as enemies that pose a constant threat of destroying "our community." Because of that, it is necessary to dispute any research from the enemy side since danger lies in ideologically incompatible facts.

Revisionists wish to influence their select audience "therapeutically," i.e., to manipulate select communities to mitigate possible deficiencies psychologically. This could be a fictional reduction of guilt by denying crimes committed, using myths to awaken national consciousness and pride, or inventing theories of a global conspiracy against "our folk" (Tucker 2008: 5). This kind of action exists in today's Serbia, where a selective approach to facts serves to dodge the collective shame of the 1990s. In addition, a romantic interpretation of history has long since become part of everyday life, and stories of a "heroic and glorious past" push the narrative of superiority over other peoples labeled as "enemies." Inevitable is also the "global conspiracy" narrative invented to "impose shame on Serbia," "destroy Serbdom and Orthodoxy," and so on.

Furthermore, historical revisionism could serve as an initiator of new conflicts so that "glory could be reclaimed" and a "great and homogeneous state" could once again be formed. Hall and Malešević (2013: 75) define this as "the revisionist state: a state dissatisfied with the current international order and willing to incur high costs by using force to change the territorial status quo or the regime of other states." Something similar happened in the 1930s when the Nazis used the great dissatisfaction of the German people. In such moments, they succeeded in imposing the narrative of Germany's past glory that should be restored. In addition, they denied Germany's responsibility for the destruction in World War I and blamed the "global conspiracy" and the Jews for the country's condition at the time.

5. Historical revisionism, triumphalism, and denial of the Srebrenica genocide

Historical revisionism is probably the worst form of genocide denial. We speak of this when we look at the education of new generations. By purposefully falsifying and distorting the facts, the revisionists attempt to fabricate a new reality and an entirely new world – a reality without collective responsibility, in which the perpetrator's responsibility is transferred to the victim.

History books should, as a rule, present accepted facts in accordance with modern scientific standards. Simply put, history textbooks from which children learn at school should be truthful. They should use scientifically verified facts and not pseudohistorical and revisionist narratives. However, is that the case?

Historical revisionism has long since become part of everyday life in the Balkans. Naturally, this process has not circumvented history textbooks, and new generations are prone to be manipulated with facts compatible with the political elites.

The most striking revisionist narrative that formed at the start of the 1990s and later is one of the two alleged antifascist movements during World War II – the Partisans and the Chetniks. This narrative served the Serbian nationalist elites in power to abolish the Chetniks' cooperation with the Nazis. Their goal was to present the Chetniks as fighters against Nazism and Fascism and equalize them with the People's Liberation Movement of Yugoslavia, i.e., Tito's Partisans (Cipek 2019: 15–17).

Everything the Serb nationalists had wanted to achieve in the 1990s was realized with Milošević's fall and the assumption of power of the democratic opposition. Nationalism did not disappear with Milošević and others indicted by the ICTY in The Hague.

In 2004, the People's Assembly of the Republic of Serbia enacted the "Law on amendments to the Law on the rights of fighters, disabled veterans, and their family members." This law granted the Chetnik fighters the same rights as the fighters of the People's Liberation Movement of Yugoslavia, i.e., the Partisans (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2004).

In 2011, the People's Assembly of the Republic of Serbia enacted the "Law on rehabilitation." This law made it possible to be rehabilitated for crimes committed during World War II (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2011).

Four years later, Chetnik leader Dragoljub Draža Mihailović was rehabilitated by the High Court in Belgrade (Al Jazeera 2015). The ruling raised the question of the victims: is it moral to rehabilitate someone responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of non-Serbs in World War II?

The desire to fabricate history has sometimes led to total historical absurdities. Namely, on May 9, the "Day of Victory" is celebrated in Belgrade to commemorate the victory against Nazism in Europe. Of course, nothing would be strange here if, at one point, pictures of Dragoljub Draža Mihailović were not shown on a screen right next to those of Tito. The speakers at that commemoration were Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, and the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik (Vurušić 2021).

This paved the way for future revisionism and fabrication of World War II and postwar history. At the same time, it was necessary to update textbooks to align with the prevailing ideological and political understandings of the 1990s.

In 2002, the new history textbooks were published in Serbia. The only change was related to World War II in Yugoslavia, i.e., the relations between the Chetniks and the Partisans. These books (and all the following editions) hone the narrative that equalizes these two movements and even presents the Chetnik movement as the right one. This is justified by claims that the Chetniks were the only movement that cared about the Serbian national interests. Conversely, the authors blame Yugoslavia's Partisans and the Community Party for "dividing the Serbian ethnic space" (Stojanović 2008: 157–164).

Such an interpretation not only bends and falsely presents the facts but also takes away the Montenegrins' and Bosniaks' right to their own language and their ethnic and national identity. In the Serbian language textbook for the eighth grade of elementary school, approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia, it is stated that "according to the stance of the Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language, the Croats, Bosniaks, and some Montenegrins call this language [Serbian] as Croatian, Bosnian/Bosniak, and Montenegrin" (Marinković 2020: 7).

As for the interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it also fell under political and ideological influence. This is especially the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where students are taught from textbooks according to their ethnicity. Thus, Bosniak children in Srebrenica, part of Republika Srpska, learn history according to the plan and program of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, their classmates learn it from textbooks issued by the Republika Srpska entity. The classes are divided according to ethnicity, so when Bosniak children have a history class, the Serbs have geography and vice versa. Here we see a clear presence of ethnic segregation created for the political and ideological gain of those in power (Erduan 2020).

Beyond clear segregation, children do not learn the same facts. In the textbook used by elementary school children of Serbian ethnicity, the Srebrenica genocide is nowhere to be found. It is only stated that "the Army of Republika Srpska captured Srebrenica and Žepa." Additionally, this textbook shows the Serbs as the sole victims of ethnic cleansing (Obrenović 2020).

We can see a similar interpretation of events in the history textbook for the third and fourth years of high school. This textbook is also used by the Bosniak children of Srebrenica, i.e., the family members of those who died in the genocide. The textbook maintains that the desire of the Bosniaks and Croats in 1991 was to discriminate against Serbs and create a state that was not a state of the Serbian people. There is no mention of the siege of Sarajevo or of the verdicts related to the crimes against civilians during the siege. Also, there is no mention of the crimes committed in Srebrenica. Nearly identically to the elementary school textbook, it states that "the VRS captured the Bosniak enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa in July." Radovan Karadžić is described as a "psychiatrist, poet, and politician," and Ratko Mladić as a "Serb general and commander" (Vasić 2020: 238–241).

In the eighth-grade elementary school textbook used by students in Serbia, it is stated that "the massacre in Srebrenica is a war crime and a crime against humanity committed by the VRS with the help of paramilitary formations against soldiers and civilians of Bosniak ethnicity. The total number of victims is disputed. According to some, over 8,000 people were killed, and others consider this number an exaggeration" (Obrenović 2020).

The history textbooks used in Serbia do not analyze the Serbian side's accountability in the crimes committed against non-Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Conversely, Serbs are presented as the sole victims of the war. This is additionally reinforced by photographs found in the textbooks, which explicitly present the suffering of Serbs (Đureinović and Jovanović 2020: 25).

This interpretation of events questions the verdicts related to the Srebrenica genocide. The ICTY unequivocally concluded in its verdicts that genocide against Bosniaks had been committed and sentenced the most prominent political and military Bosnian Serb leaders for it. Moreover, the number of victims killed in the genocide has been established, both by the ICTY and by other institutions, leaving no room to dispute or doubt these findings. Through such interpretations, there is a desire to instill doubt into the students' minds and make them question the verdicts of international courts, thus leading them to form opinions of a conspiracy to shame the Serbian people.

Since signing a Memorandum in 2010 between the Ministry of Education and Culture of Republika Srpska and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia, work has been done to harmonize the history education programs (Veselinović and Zorić 2019). This process seeks to establish the same views on events in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Naturally, all of this has a political agenda. In his speech to the People's Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in February 2021, the minister of the interior, Aleksandar Vulin, said that the state of Serbia must write the "history books" (Bogdanović 2021). What is worrying is that this statement was uttered by a high government official, even though Vulin is recognized as someone who harbors nationalist sentiments. Since the statement represents an important ministry, it is safe to assume that Vulin's stance on who should write the history textbooks is the stance of the entire government. Such a narrative could be interpreted as a desire of Serbia to create a history textbook based on its national interests and not on facts. Of course, the result of that historical revisionism and wrongful interpretation of facts would be the rise of nationalism and animosity toward other ethnic groups in Serbia and Republika Srpska.

Interpreting false facts to produce animosity toward other ethnic groups through history textbooks is not only aimed against Bosniaks, Croats, and Albanians. The fourth-year high school history textbook published in Serbia in 2021 states that after the restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006, the Serbs in Montenegro found themselves in "a challenging situation." It goes on to say that Serbs were treated unequally, fired from their jobs, that the government in Montenegro sought to reduce their numbers, that the Serbian Orthodox Church was persecuted, and that Montenegrin history textbooks insulted Serbs. None of this has any basis in reality but is a product of propaganda. The Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested and demanded that Serbia remove these statements (Pobjeda 2022).

The most common form of historical revisionism in the Srebrenica case is reducing the number of victims. By doing so, the revisionists want to present fewer victims as proof that no genocide has happened. Additionally, they try to trivialize the victims' deaths by claiming that the numbers are exaggerated and that those who are counted among the victims actually died elsewhere (Green 2020: 9).

Of course, historical revisionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily comes from the political leadership of the Bosnian Serbs. The most significant contributor to and promoter of historical revisionism is the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Apart from his claim that no genocide happened in Srebrenica, which he

repeated several times, he stated many other similar things. In June 2015, he said that Srebrenica is "the biggest scam of the 20th century" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2015). In April 2015, shortly before the "Srebenica, reality and manipulations" conference, Dodik said that "the Bosniaks are trying to build a myth of Srebrenica. That is a false myth; that myth does not exist" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019a). The product of that very conference is an 800-page collection of papers that represents an attempt to rewrite history by presenting and publishing false facts and manipulations. Since the benefactors of this conference were institutions of Republika Srpska, and the collection can be found on the website of the Republika Srpska's Representative Office in Serbia, we can safely conclude that revisionism is accepted, promoted, and supported by the Bosnian Serb leadership (Predstavništvo Republike Srpske u Srbiji 2023). Dodik repeated what he had said about the "myth" right before the genocide's anniversary in July 2019 and pointed out that the "Bosniak national identity is built on the myth of Srebrenica" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019b).

The publication produced by this conference is certainly not the only revisionist book published in recent times. A considerable number of books revising events of the 1990s are published each year. Many of those are authored by convicted war criminals. One of them is a three-volume work by Vojislav Šešelj titled "There was no Genocide in Srebrenica," published in 2019 and presented at the International Book Fair in Belgrade (KTV 2019). For years now, this fair has been the host for numerous revisionist books, and the owner of the fair is the City of Belgrade (Ćirić n.d.).

The individuals and institutions from Republika Srpska and Serbia are not the only ones responsible for revisionist narratives. Numerous international organizations and individuals often play the revisionist role. Many individuals contribute to revisionist policy through their publications or statements. Among them are Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, David Peterson, John Pilgera, Michael Parentia, Jared Israela, and others. The fact that one of the most prominent genocide deniers, Peter Handke, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2019, speaks of just how open the denial of the Srebrenica genocide is (Green 2020: 30, 40–41).

In July 2015, an attempt was made at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to adopt a resolution that would characterize the events in Srebrenica as genocide. Of the fifteen UNSC member-states, only ten voted in favor of the resolution, while Russia was against it, and China, Venezuela, Angola, and Nigeria abstained. The resolution did not pass due to Russia's veto. Of course, this is just an extension of Russia's support for Serbia's policy and Russia's stance on Srebrenica (United Nations 2015).

It is logical to conclude that honing and encouraging revisionist policies suits only those who see the harm in the truth and facts. By looking at historical events and similar processes that have happened in the past, we can see that revisionism only serves those who wish to continue with nationalist policies. Unfortunately, experience shows that nationalist policies are the easiest way to govern in Serbia.

Malešević says that nationalism in Serbia today is "fully grounded and deeply entrenched in the institutions and the everyday life of [their] citizens." The goal of constantly exposing students in Serbia to the nationalist interpretation of history is to

turn them into nationally conscious people as a whole before they come of age, i.e., become eligible to vote (Malešević 2019: 227–228).

By creating a new generation of nationalists, a new army of voters is secured that will support such policies. Of course, the goal of politicizing history is also the future development of ethnic conflicts (Ognjenović and Jozelić 2020: 10). This is crucial for the Serbian nationalist elites, primarily because of Kosovo, Republika Srpska's desire to secede, and the ever-frequent mentions of "uniting" all Serbs into a single Serbian state.

Political elites imposed historical revisionism to form new nationalistic generations – and they succeeded. Fostering policies of historical revisionism has had an effect since the 2000s. In the case of the Srebrenica genocide, this is reflected in the increasing incidence of denial and triumphalism. Unfortunately, we can note that denialism and triumphalism have massively spread among the youth. The new nationalist group's assumption of power in Serbia has paved the way for these incidents, as they are backed by the state. This is the proof of a connection between the nationalistic elites, corrupted school programs, and their byproduct – youth drunk with nationalism and people denying and celebrating the Srebrenica genocide and the murder of over 8,000 Bosniaks.

In many cases, the denial of the Srebrenica genocide crosses all standards of denialism. It grows into a celebration of death and crimes committed against Bosniaks in Srebrenica – it grows into triumphalism.

Hariz Halilovich, a professor of global studies at RMIT University in Melbourne (Australia), invented this term (Karčić 2021: 61). In his opinion, triumphalism transcends the scope of denialism, and thus in many cases in Serbia and Republika Srpska, genocide is not denied but celebrated (Halilovich 2021: 122).

The most striking way of celebrating the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Srebrenica genocide is commemorating the Day of Republika Srpska on January 9 each year. On that day in 1992, the Assembly of the Serbian People in Bosnia and Herzegovina declared that the Serbian People's Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would later be renamed as Republika Srpska, would become one of the two entities comprising the modern Bosnia and Herzegovina. That same assembly decided to celebrate January 9 as the Day of the Republic. Naturally, this decision is a form of secessionism made to create an ethnically pure Greater Serbia. The formation of a great Serbian state never came to fruition, but ethnic homogenization in the area certainly did. With ethnic cleansing and genocide, most non-Serbs that inhabited those parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina were either exiled or killed.

The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared the formation of the so-called Serbian People's Republic unconstitutional on February 28, 1992, along with all the laws determining its holidays. However, after the Dayton Accords, this date continues to be commemorated in the Republika Srpska entity, and in 2007 it became part of the "Law on the Republika Srpska holidays," adopted by the People's Assembly of Republika Srpska. The Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared the Day of Republika Srpska unconstitutional.

This did not daunt the Bosnian Serbs, who continue commemorating the date. In July 2016, the Assembly of Republika Srpska decided to call a referendum on the question. The Constitutional Court blocked this decision.

Nevertheless, the referendum was held on September 25, 2016. Over 99% of voters voted to continue commemorating January 9 as the Day of Republika Srpska. A month later, the Assembly of Republika Srpska passed a law declaring January 9 as the Day of Republika Srpska. The Constitutional Court then once again declared this holiday unconstitutional, but the Day of Republika Srpska continues to be commemorated each year (Obradović and Čilić 2020).

This day is generally commemorated with a parade of the armed police forces of Republika Srpska. Apart from the representatives of Republika Srpska, Serbian politicians also participate in the event. Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, and the high government official, Aleksandar Vulin, are frequent guests of this gathering. Another frequent guest is Russia's ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church holds a liturgy in Banjaluka each January 9, since that day is also the Feast Day of Republika Srpska (Ibrahimović and Arnautović 2023, Veselinović and Katić 2022).

The "Day of Srebrenica's liberation" is also often celebrated. Serbian extremist organizations, above all the Eastern Alternative from Bratunac, celebrate July 11 – the day when the VRS led by Ratko Mladić entered Srebrenica. Since family members of those killed in the genocide are often present in Srebrenica around that time, they are met with posters of Ratko Mladić calling them to a celebration of the "Day of Srebrenica's liberation" (Dnevni avaz 2020).

Congratulations on "Srebrenica's liberation" also come from high officials in Serbia. Thus, in 2019, a member of parliament of the governing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) wrote on Twitter, marking the "Day of Srebrenica's liberation" and thanking Ratko Mladić for the "brilliantly executed Krivaja military operation" (Mitrović 2019).

The Eastern Alternative and other organizations have also pasted posters of Ratko Mladić in recent years, congratulating him on his birthday, calling him a hero, and reminding everyone that "no genocide happened in Srebrenica." In their statements for the media, these organizations call Mladić a "great Serb" and call for the "secession of RS and merging with mother Serbia" (Aktuelno 2020, Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020a, B92 2021).

Celebrating war criminals, primarily Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, is frequent. When Karadžić was arrested in 2008, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) organized mass protests where protestors clashed with police and demolished the town. The acting president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, as an official of the SRS, participated in these protests (RTS 2008). It is interesting to note that on July 20, 1995, while mass executions were ongoing in and around Srebrenica, Vučić gave a speech in the People's Assembly of Serbia and warned the international community that for each dead Serb, they would kill a hundred Muslims (Diković 2022).

The banners of support for Karadžić and Mladić are frequent at football, basketball, and handball matches in Serbia and Republika Srpska. The Serbian clubs

Partizan and Red Star Belgrade stand out the most in this regard. Incidents are most frequent in matches against clubs with a Bosniak ethnic majority. On one occasion, in a match between Partizan and Novi Pazar, the former's supporters held out the banners with images of Ratko Mladić and chanted "Knife, string, Srebrenica" (Al Jazeera 2021). This chant, celebrating the murders in Srebrenica, is often used by extremist sports fans and other extremist groups. When the football club Partizan played in The Hague (Netherlands) in 2019, the city of ICTY, Partizan's supporters went in front of the prison and chanted Serbian songs. Mladić was then on trial at The Hague and sent the sports fans his thanks and greetings through his son (Mondo 2019). The Novi Pazar handball club decided to leave the First League of Serbia since a match delegate refused to react to the chants of Ratko Mladić's name by Red Star Handball Club supporters (Portal Analitika 2021a). The chants of Mladić's name are also frequent in Serbia's national representative matches. During a football game against Montenegro's national team in March 2023 in Podgorica, Serbia's fans chanted Mladić's name and sang Serbian nationalist songs devoted to the Chetnik movement (CDM 2023).

In many towns in Serbia and Republika Srpska, one can see graffiti and murals dedicated to Karadžić and Mladić. One such graffiti is in Banjaluka in the form of a street sign that says "Radovan Karadžić Street" (Klix 2020). Belgrade is host to a large mural of Karadžić (Mihajlović 2019). Likely the most prominent example would be when in 2021, a group of extremists in Belgrade painted murals of Mladić and Dragoljub Draža Mihailović. This caused a fierce reaction from some citizens and the civil sector. The civil activists wanted the murals painted over, but the police forbade it. Two civil activists were arrested after they threw eggs at the murals. The murals were splattered with paint several times but were always promptly cleaned up (Zdravković 2021). The former Higher Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, said in late 2021 that he was "shocked by the size and number of murals of war criminals" in towns across Bosnia and Herzegovina and called for their removal (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021a). The wave of graffiti and murals in late 2021 did not bypass Montenegro; murals appeared in Podgorica, Kotor, and Herceg Novi (Aktuelno 2021).

The celebration and support of war criminals Karadžić and Mladić do not only come from personal and marginal addresses but also from official ones. In 2016, right before the elections, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, put up a sign with Karadžić's name at the newly opened student home in Pale. The sign was removed in late 2020 (RTCG 2020).

After Mladić's conviction in November 2017, Dodik said that Mladić was a "true hero and patriot" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2017). On the occasion of the second verdict against Mladić in June 2021, a video was published on the official Facebook page of Dodik's party – the League of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) – titled "The General has today become part of history" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021b).

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) proved itself a significant ally of convicted war criminals during the wars of the 1990s. The sympathizing of the SPC's leadership with Karadžić and Mladić continued long after that. In 2005, the ICTY's

chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, publicly accused the SPC of helping them hide in Montenegro (PCNEN 2005). Six years later, in an interview, the metropolitan of the SPC in Montenegro, Amfilohije Radović, admitted that he had offered shelter to Karadžić in one of the Montenegrin monasteries (Jovićević 2011). After Mladić was convicted in 2017, Patriarch Irinej of the SPC called the verdict a "devil's work" (Portal Analitika 2017).

Numerous priests of the SPC can frequently be seen at gatherings of extremist movements where war criminals are celebrated, primarily Mladić and Karadžić. Their "activity" is present in Srebrenica itself. Thus, in October 2022, a group of SPC priests led a religious procession through Srebrenica and stopped in front of SDA (Party of Democratic Action) offices, where they read prayers (N1 BiH 2022). Shortly before Christmas Eve and Day in January 2020, a column of cars passed by the Memorial Center and Potočari cemetery, where victims of the genocide are buried. On that occasion, those passing blared their car horns and sang Serbian nationalist songs (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020b). In September 2014, near the Memorial Center and one of the mass graves, a new Serbian church was built and opened (Al Jazeera 2014). Near Srebrenica stands Karno Monastery, whose hegumen, Luka Babić, is known for posing for photographs dressed in Chetnik uniform and holding guns, as well as for organizing gatherings where Chetnik songs are sung (Radio Sarajevo 2022).

Sports chants are not the only expressions that celebrate genocide and war criminals. Commercial songs are also prone to this. Songs are often played at festivals, celebrations, and weddings. There are many of these songs, and several new ones come out each year, which reflects their popularity and the number of those who harbor extremist ideologies.

The internet is full of these songs and recordings of occasions where they are performed live. One of the most popular ones has the lyrics "Oh Pazar, new Vukovar, oh Sjenica, new Srebrenica," calling for the ethnic cleansing and slaughter of Bosniaks in the Serbian towns of Novi Pazar and Sjenica. On YouTube, one can find various recordings of this song performed live at weddings and at a celebration of a child's birth, in which police officers from Priboj are the ones singing (Sandžak Press 2013, Sandžak-Bošnjaci 2022). In that video, we hear the lyrics, "Srebrenica you are dear to us, by God you'll repeat thrice."

There are many more songs about Karadžić and Mladić. In one song titled "Bula should know," the viral duo Žare and Goci sings the following lyrics: "I was born where there were no Mosques, I have hated Muslims since I was little" (Superton Official 2015). In another song, the same duo celebrates Karadžić and ethnic cleansing, singing: "Radovan, what more could you want, half of Bosnia writes in Cyrillic" (OrthodoxPower 2010).

On the occasion of the second verdict against Mladić, a new lineup of the duo, Goci and Lazo, recorded a song dedicated to him. In it, Mladić is called a hero and compared to Stepa Stepanović and Živojin Mišić, the Serbian military leaders of World War I. One line says: "I will tell them shortly, all Serbs are Mladić Ratko" (SreĆko 2021).

There are dozens of other songs on YouTube that celebrate Karadžić and Mladić. Among them are some that are performed with the traditional Montenegrin musical instrument – the gusle.

The most popular song celebrating Radovan Karadžić is the song "From Bihać to Petrovac Selo." This song was recorded in 1992 and has become known worldwide among Islamophobic and far-right circles. With the help of the online meme culture, the song became known as "Serbia strong" or "Remove kebab." Online, one could find a considerable number of various interpretations of this song. Its chorus says: "Karadžić lead your Serbs, show that they do not fear anyone." Brenton Tarrant, the attacker in the Christchurch (New Zealand) mosque massacre, played this song during the live-streamed car ride preceding his attack in which he would cold-bloodedly murder 51 Muslims. Tarrant stated in his manifesto, which was found shortly after his arrest, that "more recently I have been working part-time as a kebab removalist" (Coalson 2019).

In numerous television programs across Serbia and Republika Srpska, war criminals are celebrated, and in some, they are frequent guests. The Serbian Happy TV is undoubtedly at the forefront in this regard and, at one point, even had Mladić himself as a guest by phone from The Hague's prison (TV Happy 2018). Furthermore, Radovan Karadžić is a frequent columnist for some Serbian media in which he comments on various political topics such as the war in Ukraine and many others (Karadžić 2022).

Triumphalism, in this sense, is something unique to Srebrenica. The mass celebration of war criminals, their crimes, and the genocide itself poses a serious problem for society. Addressing it is made more difficult by the unwillingness of the state to act and react on moral grounds. Moreover, Serbia's recognition of a crime but not genocide motivates disturbers to continue with triumphalism.

By doing so, they make war criminals into unique "rock stars." Those free often appear on TV shows, and those in prison are given the opportunity to be heard by millions, which generally makes their incarceration and punishment pointless.

Calls for a repetition of ethnic cleansing and genocide are also an everyday occurrence. Of course, this is a product of systematic and widespread nationalism promoted by the top governmental officials and religious leaders.

In the majority opinion, denial is the final stage of each genocide. Stanton (1996), who created the classification, stated that the social elites, i.e., lawyers, diplomats, and even politicians or religious officials, often deny genocides. This section deals with those who represent the religious leadership in Serbia, the Republika Srpska entity, and Montenegro.

Jones (2022: 171) says that genocide denial can be divided into two kinds – state-sponsored and freelance. However, freelance denial cannot have an impact without the state's support and is often marginalized.

The fact that a genocide had occurred in Srebrenica is generally accepted by most of the world. The deniers are discredited, and their claims are proven false (Hoare 2017: 10). However, the campaign and attempts to deny the genocide are still ongoing. The question is: why? It is not hard to answer when we consider

Jones's claim. We can conclude that the denial of the Srebrenica genocide is based on political and state interests. Like the genocide itself that was conducted with vast logistical and institutional support, its denial, too, is institutional.

In September 2002, the Government of Republika Srpska published the "Report about case Srebrenica," which explicitly denies the genocide. The report states that no more than 1,900 Bosniak soldiers died in combat and that around 100 of them died as prisoners of war. The report denied that civilians were killed in Srebrenica. Interestingly, the report came out only a month before the Republika Srpska elections (Radio Free Europe 2002).

Under pressure from the international community, a new report came out in 2004. In it, the Government of Republika Srpska admitted that between 7,000 to 8,000 Bosniaks had been executed alongside serious infringements of international humanitarian law. In November of that year, the Governemnt of Republika Srpska officially apologized for the events in Srebrenica (Brezo 2018, Wood 2004).

In March 2010, the People's Assembly of Serbia adopted the "Declaration on Srebrenica," condemning war crimes. However, the declaration does not mention genocide (Cvetković and Martinović 2010). One of the most frequent ways the Serbian political leadership denies the Srebrenica genocide is by using terms such as the "great crime" to avoid the word "genocide."

Denialist currents strengthened with the Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) assumption of power. This is no surprise considering that the SNS was founded by former Serbian Radical Party (SRS) members. Denialism grew significantly with the emergence of a new Greater Serbian nationalism known as the "Serb world." The rise of nationalism has affected the entire region.

Thus, the Government of Republika Srpska formed a commission in 2019 to revise the 2004 report. The new report was presented in June 2021 and claimed that no genocide had occurred. It states that there were around 3,500 Bosniak victims (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021c).

Despite the international community's threats of sanctions, Milorad Dodik remains the primary denier of the Srebrenica genocide, and he does it almost daily. Even though genocide denial has been prohibited in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2021, Dodik does not seem to care. He continually denies the genocide even after the Prosecution of Bosnia and Herzegovina opened a case against him in March 2023 (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2023).

Tomislav Nikolić, the leader of the SNS, took power as the president of Serbia in 2012 and claimed there had been no genocide in Srebrenica but a "great crime" (Al Jazeera 2012). The following year, Nikolić apologized and asked for forgiveness in the name of Serbia but dodged calling the crimes in Srebrenica a genocide (Al Jazeera 2013).

The Serbian political leadership continued denying the Srebrenica genocide in the following years. The then prime minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, visited the Memorial Center in Potočari in 2015 and paid tribute to the victims. Vučić then said that a "great crime happened in Srebrenica" and avoided calling it a genocide by describing the events as a "horrible crime" (Danas 2019, Martinović and Bogdanović 2020).

In one interview in late 2018, the prime minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, stated that she "does not think that a genocide happened in Srebrenica," but that it was a "terrible crime" (Sebastian 2018). She said something similar a year later, stating that "a horrible, terrible, and massive crime had happened in Srebrenica" but avoided using the term "genocide" (Bogdanović and Martinović 2020).

The institutional denial of genocide is reflected in the financing of NGOs by Republika Srpska to deny the genocide and fabricate "some new facts." One such organization is the Srebrenica Historical Project in the Netherlands (Mulagić 2014: 166).

One of the most frequent forms of denial of the Srebrenica genocide is the justification of crimes committed there by pointing to crimes committed against Serbs. This is not only the case with the crimes against Serbs in the Podrinje region and the wars of the 1990s. Srebrenica is often compared to the sufferings of the Serbian people during World War II. The Jasenovac death camp is cited most frequently.

In April 2023, on the occasion of the Day of Remembering Jasenovac victims, Dodik said that no genocide had happened in Srebrenica but a crime and that the Serbs were the actual victims of genocide. He added that seceding Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and uniting it with Serbia was his ultimate goal (Danas 2023).

At the start of 2021, a movie titled "Quo Vadis, Aida?" was released. It speaks of one family's suffering during the Srebrenica genocide. The movie was nominated for the 93rd Academy Awards in the "Best International Feature Film" category. At the same time, under the patronage of Serbia's state institutions, the movie "Dara from Jasenovac" came out. It spoke of the suffering of Serbs in the titular Ustasha regime death camp in Croatia. The movie was Serbia's candidate for the Academy Awards in the same category as the former but did not receive a nomination. Many critics said that the "Dara from Jasenovac" movie was Serbia's response to the Srebrenica one. This claim is supported by the fact that the director of "Dara from Jasenovac" publicly mocked the victims of Serbian prison camps in the 1990s following the movie's premiere (N1 2020, Sarajevo Times 2020, Vele 2021).

That "Dara from Jasenovac" is a propagandistic piece that aims to stoke the flames of interethnic hatred was proven by the situation surrounding the premiere in Montenegro. After "Quo Vadis, Aida?" was scheduled for its premiere at the state-owned Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG) on December 29, 2021, the Prva TV scheduled the premiere of the "Dara from Jasenovac" movie for the same date and time. Prva TV is part of the Serbian television company of the same name and is close to Vučić and in Montenegro led by the pro-Serbian officials of the Democratic Front (DF). That night a protest was held in front of the RTCG's offices by DF's members, and they carried banners saying "Srebrenica was not a genocide" (Portal Analitika 2021b, Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021d).

Claims that Srebrenica was the source of Serbian "vengeance" date from the day the VRS entered Srebrenica. While entering the town, Mladić stated, "The moment has finally come for the vengeance against the Turks in these lands" (ushmmfellows

2011). The narratives of "revenge" were used by officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The metropolitan of the SPC in Montenegro, Amfilohije Radović, said that Srebrenica was revenge for the crimes committed by Naser Orić (Leverkühn 2022). Amfilohije mentions revenge as something positive, even though the Bible forbids any form of vengeance (Institut za izučavanje religije 2023: 961). As Anzulovic (2000: 177) concluded, "The people who should represent the moral conscience of the nation and condemn the crimes committed in the attempt to create a Greater Serbia are instead ardent nationalists and inciters of xenophobia."

The denial of the Srebrenica genocide is also present in Montenegro, especially after the pro-Serbian parties came to power in August 2020. At a discussion in the Parliament of Montenegro in March 2021, the minister of justice, Vladimir Leposavić, refused to call the crimes in Srebrenica genocide. He said that what had happened in Srebrenica was a topic for dispute and that he "was ready to admit that a genocide happened in Srebrenica when that is unequivocally concluded." Leposavić added that the ICTY verdict was, in his opinion, compromised as "it hid evidence of crimes against Serbs in Kosovo" (Hajdarpašić and Matijašević 2021).

Under the pressure of the international community and the pro-Montenegrin opposition, the Parliament of Montenegro dismissed Vladimir Leposavić as minister, and, on the same day, adopted the "Resolution on the prohibition of the denial of the Srebrenica genocide" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021e). However, this resolution is a "dead letter." Only a day after the resolution's adoption, the official of the DF and the mayor of Nikšić, Marko Kovačević, reacted. In a statement for one Serbian news outlet, he said that "Serbs are under attack and should defend themselves" and that he thinks that "there was no genocide in Srebrenica." The Montenegrin Prosecution accused Kovačević of inciting national and religious hatred, but he was later acquitted by the court in Podgorica (Pobjeda 2023).

Genocide denial is also part of election campaigns. Some people connected with the events in Srebrenica are often candidates for public offices.

For example, in Serbia's elections, VRS major, Svetozar Andrić, ran for public office as part of the League of Serbian Patriots (SPAS). Andrić was named commander of staff of the Drina Corps by Radovan Karadžić in 1995. The corps participated in Srebrenica and bears the greatest responsibility for the genocide. Andrić was the deputy speaker of the Municipal Assembly of Novi Beograd. Since 2020, he has been the acting member of parliament in the People's Assembly of Serbia (YIHR 2020: 23).

A study of the narratives used in Serbia's parliamentary and presidential campaigns, conducted by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), concluded that most parties and candidates deny the Srebrenica genocide. The Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the NADA coalition, the Sovereignists (Suverenisti), Zavetnici, and Dveri stand out above all (YIHR 2022: 8). The high representatives of these political parties openly deny that a genocide happened in Srebrenica.

The formation of this societal layer that denies and celebrates the Srebrenica genocide was slow but carefully planned. We explained in detail the process of creating revisionist narratives by the state, which are then presented to the youth.

This was conducted methodically, so a new layer of society drunken with nationalism would form, comprised of those born after the wars of the 1990s and those that were still children at the time of war. Additionally, the nationalists' assumption of power in Serbia in 2012 stoked the flames of these sentiments, especially after 2019, when we saw the ever-frequent use of the term "Serbian world" – a new form of Greater Serbian nationalism. Thus, we notice the intensified denial and celebration of genocide in Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro in the following years. We conclude that this new generation's coming of age, combined with the nationalists' rise to power, is the source of denial and celebration of genocide even greater than immediately after the war.

The influence of the Serbian nationalist currents on the citizens of Republika Srpska, Serbia, and Montenegro is dangerous. If we look at election results in the last few years, we can safely say that such narratives are generally accepted. From this, we conclude that if this trend continues, the region's future does not look bright. Of course, there are ways to suppress genocide denial.

6. Conclusion

All genocides have one common characteristic. After the killing is over comes the denial that the killings happened. Such denial usually comes from the perpetrators and those who share their ideology. Gregory Stanton named denial as the final stage of genocide. This means that genocides do not end with the final bullet shot or the last swing of a machete. They continue so long as the last denier lives. That is the case with the Srebrenica genocide.

With a desire to create an ethnically homogeneous Greater Serbia, Serbian nationalists have strived to clean the territories they wished to be part of the said ethnically great state. This could only be achieved in two ways – persecution and murder. Unfortunately, both were carried out during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ethnic cleansing became a widespread method in the homogenization of territories. Hundreds of thousands of people would be banished from their ancestral homes just because they had the wrong first and last names. Also, tens of thousands of men, women, and children would be killed.

The town of Srebrenica was a major strategic position and a target during the entire war. Serbian ideologues believed that its geographical position in eastern Bosnia, along the Serbian border, meant that it belonged to the newly-formed state – Republika Srpska. On the contrary, the two parts of the new state would be cut off from one another, and the Drina River would once again represent a border.

In 1995, the Serbian forces began losing the war, and their plan for a homogeneous Serbian state comprised of parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina grew ever more unrealistic. Srebrenica was a major barrier to that. Thus, the Bosnian Serb leadership decided to capture the protected Srebrenica enclave.

Due to the attack on Srebrenica in July 1995, many Bosniaks who sought shelter in the safe zone headed for the United Nations base in Potocari. Some men tried to

escape through the dense woods into the Bosniak-controlled territories. Only a third of them survived the journey.

In the days that followed, thousands of men seeking safety behind blue helmets would be sent to the gallows. The total number of men killed would surpass 8,000. Their bodies would end up buried in numerous mass graves.

After everyone noticed that a vast number of men were missing, and as survivors began to appear, assumptions arose that international humanitarian law had been violeted. After the war ended and research began, it was concluded that the men had been killed.

Each genocide must be well organized and planned. This was also the case with Srebrenica. Apart from organized executions performed by the Army of Republika Srpska, the members of its Ministry of the Interior, and paramilitary groups, there were also activities covering up the genocide.

Along with the military, the entire municipal services from Serbian towns were employed to cover up the genocide. Mass graves were dug through, and the victims' remains were scattered in dozens and hundreds of secondary and tertiary graves to cover up the genocide committed and to prevent victim identification.

However, their attempts failed, and with the help of modern technologies, many graves have been uncovered and many victims identified. Thousands of victims have been found and re-buried at the Potocari cemetery. Some families still await the discovery of their loved ones' remains.

The ICTY and domestic courts in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina convicted dozens of war criminals. Among them, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić bear the greatest responsibility for the genocide and were sentenced to life imprisonment. Dozens of others who directly participated in the executions are yet to be convicted.

After the war had ended and the first verdicts for the Srebrenica genocide came, a massive denialist movement arose primarily in Serbia and Republika Srpska. The deniers are usually politicians and religious officials but also ordinary people. Since this is a case of systematic and organized genocide denial, we can say that it is a form of a state project. The governing elites profit from strong nationalist sentiments since it guarantees their position of power. Nationalism brings in the cheapest votes.

Apart from the direct denial of genocide by politicians and religious officials, the state has a major role in historical revisionism. Through revising history and fabricating its own view on events that has nothing to do with the facts, an attempt is made to create a new generation of nationalists. This dangerous narrative creates fertile ground for the growth of intolerance and hate among the Balkan peoples.

Triumphalism, or the celebration of genocide, is one of the key characteristics of Srebrenica genocide denial. We can say that genocide denial evolved into a new triumphalist phase. All across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and the Serbian diaspora worldwide, the killings of Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 are celebrated. This usually happens at sports events, through various chants and banners calling for the genocide's repetition; commercial songs; the celebration of war criminals; and so on. This is the most dangerous form of genocide denial since it proves the existence of a group that wishes to commit it again.

It is challenging to end genocide denial, especially since it is such a well-organized project, supported by governing structures. However, it is not impossible. Of course, a broad and strong response by society's democratic elements is necessary. We primarily mean the judiciary, non-governmental and international organizations, religious communities, scientific institutions, cultural creators, and artists.

Above all, it is necessary to demystify denialist narratives in ways close to ordinary people. Music, film, photography, art, and social media, are just some ways the common, propaganda-inflicted man could be approached. Naturally, this requires strength of will, finances, and personal bravery.

Srebrenica genocide denial will likely go on for at least another few decades. The rise of nationalism and populism evident around the globe will make the matter more pronounced. Unfortunately, that kills the victims again and inflicts pain on their families.

However, in post-conflict societies and societies lacking democracy, optimism is crucial – optimism for a better, more just future. Even though that optimism is often shaken to the core, especially after what is happening in Ukraine, it must not perish.

The fight between good and evil has been waged since time immemorial. If good were to surrender, then evil would rule, and that would be our end. We cannot allow that. The same goes for the fight for a free and democratic Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Data availability statement

All data supporting the findings are contained within this article and its referenced sources.

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Appendix

The death and funeral of Ratko Mladić: a new wave of triumphalism and denial

Ratko Mladić, the convicted war criminal and former commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, died on August 27, 2026, at the age of 84 in the UN detention unit in The Hague (Protić and Anđeljković 2026). His death was met with widespread mourning in Serbia and the celebration of his figure and deeds as those of a national hero. Logically, the question arose regarding the transfer of his remains and his burial, for which there were justified concerns that it would become an act of glorification of a war criminal and denial of his actions, namely, the genocide (Raskrinkavanje 2026).

Despite international condemnation and warnings from the European Union, he was buried in Belgrade on September 7, 2026, with full state and military honors, closely resembling the funeral of a national hero. Many statesmen and politicians from Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro attended the funeral or expressed their condolences to the Mladić family. For example, the speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro, Andrija Mandić, expressed his condolences to Ratko Mladić's son.

This act was met with strong condemnation both domestically and internationally, and an initiative for Mandić's dismissal was also launched (Mudreša 2026).

In the days following Mladić's funeral, a significantly increased level of glorification of his figure and deeds, as well as an open denial of the Srebrenica genocide, became evident. Murals depicting him have been painted, graffiti bearing his name has become a frequent occurrence, and attempts to rehabilitate him in the public sphere by various actors in social life have also been evident (Danas 2026).

Such behavior represents an evident form of genocide triumphalism, in which a convicted war criminal sentenced to life imprisonment is celebrated. The fact that such practices have continued even after so many years demonstrates that denial of the Srebrenica genocide is not a matter of the past but rather an everyday occurrence that perpetuates interethnic hatred and prevents any form of reconciliation.

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ADDRESSING THE PRODUCTIVITY PARADOX IN SMALL STATES THROUGH FEEDBACKED SHOCK-SENSITIVE SCENARIO-BUILDING

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Abstract. Estonia ranks among the world's top performers in digital government and startup ecosystems, yet its labour productivity stands at ~77.5% of the EU average and is drifting further from the government's target of 110% by 2035. We argue that this productivity paradox is best understood as a failure of national innovation system coherence. Using an intuitive-logics scenario methodology extended with design science and feedbacked shock-sensitivity testing across 26 events, we develop four scenario trajectories for Estonia's 2035 productivity outcome along the dimensions of collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity, ranging from continued drift to convergence towards the target. The analysis reveals three coherence failures: a translation gap between digital infrastructure and private-sector productivity, a structurally disconnected startup sector, and an unresolved valley of death at technology readiness levels 4–7. We suggest that economy-wide productivity requires complementary investment in management quality, translational infrastructure, and cooperative networks that allow innovation to diffuse beyond the highest-performing actors.

Keywords: national innovation systems, productivity growth, small open economies, design science research, systems architecting, scenario planning, innovation diffusion, resilience

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1. Introduction

Estonia occupies an unusual position in the comparative innovation literature. By most conventional measures, it is a post-Soviet success story: ranked among the top performers globally for digital government, boasting a disproportionate number of technology unicorns relative to its population size, and hosting one of the most vibrant startup ecosystems in Central and Eastern Europe (StartupBlink 2026). Yet its labour productivity stands at approximately 77.5% of the EU average, a figure that has declined in recent years rather than converging towards the government's stated target of 110% by 2035 (European Commission 2024, Statistikaamet 2024). The digital state and the productive economy appear to be in dissonance.

This divergence is what we call the small-state productivity paradox. It is not unique to Estonia: the broader literature has long noted that innovation system strength does not translate automatically into firm-level or economy-wide outcomes (e.g. Fagerberg and Sapprasert 2011, Bui et al. 2025). What makes Estonia theoretically interesting is the specificity of its configuration: a deliberately engineered digital infrastructure of world-class quality coexisting with a private sector that has not absorbed its productivity potential; a startup concentration of global significance that remains structurally disconnected from the majority of the economy; and a management quality deficit that limits firms' capacity to translate available technology into sustained value creation (OECD 2024a, Vadi et al. 2026).

This paper argues that Estonia's productivity paradox is best understood as a problem of national innovation system (NIS) coherence. Drawing on scenario analysis, systems thinking and design science methodologies, and a comparative examination of small-state NIS configurations, we propose a two-axis framework that positions NIS measures along the dimensions of collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity and apply this framework to the Estonian case. A method for testing the framework under internal and external shocks is developed, applied, and analysed. Our argument is that both top-down (strong institutions) and bottom-up (incentives, engagement, cooperation and a self-policing culture among citizens) elements are needed to raise productivity and overcome the middle-income trap in a small state. High performance in individual NIS components (e.g. digital infrastructure, R&D intensity, startup formation) does not produce economy-wide productivity gains when the components are not institutionally aligned, i.e. when the innovative activity of leading actors does not diffuse through the system to raise the productivity floor for the broader economy.

This paper is based on an earlier policy report prepared by the authors (Valtna, Lilo and Summatavet 2026). The report presented the initial scenario framework, empirical observations, and policy recommendations. The present article develops these original results into a theory-informed research framework by integrating contemporary literature on NIS, institutional implementation capacity, innovation diffusion, and strategic foresight, thereby extending the original work from policy analysis to a generalisable contribution to small-state productivity research.

This paper addresses three research questions that follow from this paradox.

RQ1: What are the axes along which small-state NIS coherence varies, and how can these be operationalised based on the existing literature?

RQ2: What are the specific mechanisms through which Estonia's NIS coherence failures produce the productivity paradox?

RQ3: What development trajectories does Estonia face under different coherence configurations, and how robust is each trajectory to external and internal shocks?

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the theoretical foundations and coherence gap in the NIS literature; Section 3 maps comparative cases (Ireland, Singapore, Iceland); Section 4 introduces the methodology; Section 5 applies the framework to Estonia; Sections 6 and 7 discuss implications, limitations, and conclusions.

2. Literature review

This section reviews the theoretical foundations of NIS research, small-state configurations, and the coherence gap that motivates this paper's analytical framework.

2.1. National innovation systems: theoretical foundations

In the classical NIS literature, innovation is the principal driver of productivity growth and structural transformation. The concept of NIS emerged from the recognition that innovation is not generated by firms, universities, or governments in isolation, but through interactions among organisations, institutions, markets, and policies (Freeman 1987, Lundvall 1992, Nelson 1993, Edquist 1997). Innovation is understood as a nonlinear, evolutionary, and path-dependent process in which learning, experimentation, and knowledge exchange occur across organisational and sectoral boundaries. Consequently, productivity growth depends not only on the availability of resources, but also on the capacity of the wider system to generate, diffuse, adopt, and commercialise knowledge.

While NIS theory has successfully established innovation as a systemic phenomenon, it provides limited guidance regarding how small open economies convert innovation capability into broad-based productivity growth under conditions of external dependence and uncertainty.

The NIS framework was built on large industrial economies, where the central question was how institutional configurations shaped technological change across broad industrial fronts (Freeman 1987, Nelson 1993). Edquist (1997, 2011) advanced the framework by identifying systemic failures, i.e. conditions in which individual components perform adequately but their interactions do not. Small open economies, facing external dependence and limited institutional scale, are particularly exposed to such failures. This creates the coherence gap the present paper seeks to address: a system can score highly on individual components while still failing to convert these into economy-wide productivity gains.

2.2. The role and limitations of small states

Innovation rarely follows a linear path from invention to economic impact. Knowledge creation, adoption, diffusion, and commercialisation occur through iterative interactions among firms, institutions, investors, and users (Edquist 1997, Caraça et al. 2009). This suggests that generating innovation and diffusing innovation are distinct challenges. Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002, 2018) conceptualise innovation as a sequence of interconnected settings involving development, production, and use, each requiring different infrastructures, relationships, and institutional arrangements. The transition from one setting to another is frequently more difficult than invention itself. These bottlenecks are reinforced by the dynamics of technology adoption. Sociotechnical transition research further demonstrates that innovation adoption is shaped by interactions between technological niches, incumbent regimes, and broader societal landscapes (Geels and Schot 2007). The process can be accelerated or hindered by specific intervention points within the system, including infrastructure, regulations, incentives, and coordination mechanisms (Kanger et al. 2020).

A recurring challenge is the 'valley of death', where promising technologies fail to progress from development to market deployment due to financing, coordination, and capability gaps (Auerswald and Branscomb 2003, Owen et al. 2019). The diffusion of innovations depends on a sufficiently large pool of adopters willing to absorb uncertainty and experiment with new solutions (Moore 1991). These challenges are amplified in small economies, where capital pools are shallower and fewer actors can support long innovation cycles.

Innovation and growth are further shaped by power-law dynamics, where a small number of firms generate a disproportionate share of economic value while most experiments fail to scale (Crawford et al. 2015). Ecosystem research suggests that such outcomes emerge from individual firm capabilities as well as interactions among specialised actors, complementary assets, and network structures (Jacobides et al. 2018).

The challenge is not unique to small states: Draghi (2024) identifies weak innovation diffusion and commercialisation as a broader European competitiveness problem. Europe performs relatively well in research, technology development, and product creation, yet struggles to achieve widespread adoption and productivity gains. Small economies must compensate through deliberate coordination, ecosystem orchestration, and international integration. In small economies, these constraints may emerge earlier, as limited scale can weaken development and production stages through insufficient testing environments, specialised suppliers, pilot customers, and translational infrastructures.

The literature suggests several mechanisms for overcoming these constraints. Mazzucato (2014) emphasises mission-oriented investment and public-sector market shaping, Perez (2002) highlights institutional alignment during technological transitions, and Li et al. (2025) stress dynamic capabilities in sensing opportunities and adapting resources. Similarly, smart specialisation seeks to concentrate resources

around regional strengths and entrepreneurial discovery processes (Foray 2014, McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2015). While these approaches generate important learning effects, implementation outcomes have been uneven because they depend on coherent intervention portfolios that address multiple systemic barriers simultaneously rather than on isolated policy instruments (Wieczorek and Hekkert 2012). Strategic prioritisation alone is insufficient without complementary capabilities for coordination, execution, and diffusion.

The implication for the innovation systems of small states, developed most fully by Edquist and Hommen (2008) in their ten-country comparative study, is that small NISs are necessarily more selective than large ones: they must develop coherent specialisation strategies supported by institutions that facilitate knowledge flows across a narrower but deeper innovation base, rather than across the board.

2.3. The coherence gap: what the literature implies but does not theorise

The dominant tradition in NIS scholarship treats these systems primarily as performance machines: configurations of actors, institutions, and linkages whose value is measured by their contribution to economic growth. A large volume of work has measured NIS dimensions and analysed their relationship to growth outcomes (Lee et al. 2021), with more recent contributions extending this to the firm level: stronger NIS environments encourage firms to invest more in intangible assets, now considered the primary drivers of economic resilience and value creation (Bui et al. 2025). The causal logic is systemic and straightforward: robust national innovation support catalyses corporate innovative activity by improving the expected returns to knowledge investment.

This performance-centred framing rests on an assumption that is increasingly difficult to sustain: that aggregate innovation system strength translates reliably into economy-wide outcomes. Recent evidence cuts against this assumption in two distinct ways. First, the NIS-to-firm-investment relationship is systematically moderated by governance quality, inequality, and workforce demographics, meaning that two countries with equivalent NIS scores can produce very different firm-level outcomes depending on their structural context; second, and more directly, stronger political institutions related to innovation can, under certain conditions, crowd out private intangible investment rather than stimulate it (Bui et al. 2025). A system that is strong in aggregate may contain internal contradictions that suppress the very behaviour it is designed to encourage.

The institutional literature provides the clearest explanation for these differences. Torres de Oliveira et al. (2022) show that institutional complementarities (the degree to which different institutional elements reinforce rather than contradict each other) shape whether firms' external knowledge search is productive or whether they retrench into closed strategies. Kafka and Kostis (2024) find that institutional weakness and uncertainty compound each other in suppressing domestic firms' innovation performance, while simultaneously creating opportunities that internationally mobile actors exploit: a domestic/foreign asymmetry that can make aggregate metrics look

healthy while underlying interaction failures persist. Casadella and Tahi (2025) extend this further, arguing that a system can be innovative in aggregate while remaining incoherent at the level of distribution and institutional alignment.

At the policy level, the same pattern appears. Howoldt (2024) finds that systemic instruments, most concerned with actor linkages and coordination, are selected more in response to institutional membership than to diagnosed system needs. Park et al. (2024) identify the result as policy patching: functional completeness without systemic coherence. Kivimaa and Kern (2016) add that transitioning to more coherent configurations requires active destabilisation of incumbent arrangements, which is politically most difficult. Karpińska's (2020) analysis of Polish innovation policy illustrates the consequences: substantial investment produced insufficient returns not because actors or resources were absent, but because the institutional arrangements linking them were not functionally complementary.

Put simply, NIS performance depends not primarily on the strength of any single component but on the degree to which components operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. Bui et al. (2025) call this the need for strong but flexible in-country institutions; Howoldt (2024) identifies it as the gap between instrument choice and system need; Torres de Oliveira et al. (2022) frame it as institutional complementarities at multiple levels; Kivimaa and Kern (2016) name it the political challenge of coherent policy mixes; Karpińska (2020) captures it as the unintended consequences of misaligned policy ambition and institutional implementation capacity. The present paper takes up this gap by dividing coherence into two operational axes and using their intersection to construct a scenario matrix that can be stress-tested against plausible disruptions.

3. Empirical literature

3.1. Comparative cases: ceiling/floor dynamics in small states

The cases of Ireland, Singapore, and Iceland discussed in this section are chosen to illustrate distinct NIS configurations that each illuminate a different aspect of the coherence problem. Each case maps differently onto the framework developed in this paper, with collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity as the deciding factors for the success of NIS measures.

3.1.1. Ireland: foreign direct investment (FDI)-led growth and the translation gap

Ireland's NIS is built on attracting FDI: the state uses tax policy, investment promotion, and educational investment to attract innovative multinational companies (MNCs), functioning primarily as a market shaper rather than a system builder (O'Malley et al. 2008). Institutional implementation capacity is high, and the state executes its chosen strategy effectively, but the model structurally bypasses domestic collaborative capacity. MNCs do not need domestic knowledge networks to operate, and so none develop. The result is a persistent translation gap between the innovative

ceiling set by foreign firms and the productivity floor of the domestic economy (O'Malley et al. 2008, Doran et al. 2014).

3.1.2. Singapore: directed state capacity and the scale-up ceiling

Singapore represents directed state capacity: deliberate public investment, coordinated industrial policy, and a sequenced upgrading strategy have shifted the economy from technology adoption towards technology creation (Wong and Singh 2008, Lee et al. 2024).

The state addressed opportunity and network failures in frontier sectors by identifying anchor tenants, stimulating venture capital markets, and positioning Singapore as a node connected to global innovation hubs rather than competing with them.

In Singapore's case, collaborative capacity is largely state-manufactured rather than culturally embedded: the network structures that make ecosystems function are constituted by state design rather than emerging endogenously from actor behaviour. The system's coherence is high where state coordination reaches and lower where it does not: the floor is well-maintained, but the capacity to multiply innovative actors beyond the state-championed cohort and raise the ceiling has remained constrained (Lee et al. 2024).

3.1.3. Iceland: niche specialisation and the diffusion constraint

Iceland's recent past illustrates the inverse configuration: high collaborative capacity within a densely networked financial sector, combined with insufficient institutional implementation capacity to monitor or regulate what that cooperation was producing. The liberalisation of financial markets in the late 1980s fostered an adventurous innovation culture and rapid sectoral growth, but governance arrangements failed to keep pace. The regulatory authority remained weak while the banking sector grew tenfold, and close ties between banks, the media, and politicians produced state capture rather than oversight (Sigurjonsson 2010, Wade and Sigurgeirsdottir 2012). The 2008 collapse is the sharpest available illustration that collaborative capacity without implementation capacity is not merely insufficient but also dangerous. For small states, the lesson is that foresight and regulatory reach are not optional complements to networked cooperation but preconditions for it.

Across these three cases, a consistent pattern emerges: NIS coherence failures may take different forms depending on which axis is weak, but in each case the result is the same: innovative capacity concentrates at the ceiling, often without raising the floor. Section 4 introduces the methodological framework through which this dynamic is examined in the Estonian case.

3.2. Research gap

The empirical picture developed above points to a gap in the existing literature. The NIS framework provides a vocabulary for describing the components of innovation systems and for diagnosing their individual failures, but it does not provide a systematic framework for analysing the degree to which those components are internally aligned.

The three comparators illustrate this gap. Ireland's NIS is highly coherent within its FDI-attraction model but incoherent in the connection between that model and the development of the indigenous economy. Singapore's NIS is highly coherent in the sectors and firms it has deliberately built but lacks the distributed institutional implementation capacity that would generate broad-based innovative activity. Iceland's NIS is coherent within its resource-based niche clusters but lacks the cross-sector architecture that would connect niche innovation to the broader economy. Each represents a system that performs well on its own terms while failing to produce the kind of economy-wide, floor-raising productivity growth that the NIS literature treats as the ultimate objective.

4. Methodology

The present research takes the stance that the challenge of improving productivity is the responsibility of policymakers. Scenario planning is chosen as the primary tool for conveying the knowledge obtained. Design science and systems architecture methods are used to overcome the shortcomings of the methodological tools.

4.1. Scenario planning methods

The practical challenge of improving productivity in a small open economy requires a methodological approach that is comprehensive, repeatable, interactive, and capable of supporting decision-making under uncertainty. The task is not only analytical but also organisational: decision-makers must engage with complex interdisciplinary evidence within a limited time while operating in a turbulent geopolitical environment. While scenarios have high potential to meet these requirements, the solution needs to be adapted to a dynamic environment. Thus, instead of static narratives, the solution needs to provide dynamic sociotechnical trajectories subject to feedback effects, adaptation processes, and internal and external shocks.

The underlying scenario methodology employed in this study builds primarily on the intuitive logics school of scenario development (Wack 1985, Schwartz 1997, van der Heijden 2005), which uses critical uncertainties to construct a set of internally coherent alternative futures. As this approach remains methodologically open, it provides limited guidance on how to integrate feedback mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, and shock-response analysis into a coherent process (Postma and Liebl 2005, Bishop et al. 2007).

Scenario development and systems thinking. The present study addresses a normative and transformative question (Börjeson et al. 2006): understanding the barriers to productivity growth and identifying pathways towards a desired future state. The two settings differ from Ward and Schriefer's (2003) strategic, exploratory scenario study in two important respects. First, whereas relevant knowledge in a corporate setting is largely embedded within the organisation, the productivity challenge requires combining external academic knowledge, policy objectives, and decision-making authority distributed across multiple actors. The commissioning ministry defines the policy objective, the academic team develops the analytical framework, and implementation remains the responsibility of policymakers. Second, the complexity of the challenge requires extensive external knowledge sourcing through desk research rather than participatory data collection (van Notten et al. 2003). Consequently, while continuous interaction with decision-makers is not feasible, their engagement remains essential for the uptake and application of the knowledge generated during the project (Rowland and Spaniol 2021). Decision-maker engagement therefore becomes a design requirement of the artefact rather than merely a dissemination activity.

Along the same lines, the system dynamics framework (Kunc 2024), including the use of 2 × 2 scenario matrices, system modelling, and feedback loops, differs from the present study in its treatment of stakeholder interaction and adaptive response mechanisms. Consequently, the resulting feedback processes and shock-response analyses are distinct.

Kunc (2024) and Ward and Schriefer (2003) both demonstrate prior integration of scenario planning, systems thinking, and stress-testing, but in settings that differ significantly from the present one. In what follows, we address the task at hand as a problem to be solved. The research is positioned at the intersection of scenario development, solution design, and systems architecture for a dynamic, complex system. The design specifications for the present approach are therefore defined by what existing methods leave underdeveloped: feedback mechanisms, shock testing, adaptability to environmental conditions, and decision-maker engagement. (Independently, in Valtna et al. (2026), the authors have developed a solution that shares multiple similar structural elements with Smulders et al. (2026).)

4.2. Design science problem-solving method

The study applies the design science problem-solving method (Romme 2003, Romme and Holmström 2023) to develop an interactive scenario artefact for policymakers. Rather than producing only analytical findings, the method requires the construction and validation of a usable tool: a scenario-based decision-support model that integrates productivity diagnostics, NIS analysis, and shock-sensitivity testing.

The artefact was developed iteratively. The intuitive logics framework served as the baseline, with its limitations, identified in Section 4.1, defining the design specifications. The systems architecture approach (Rechtin and Maier 2010) provided the organising principle: defining the structure, relationships, and governing

principles of the artefact to achieve coherent behaviour under uncertainty, integrating economic, institutional, technological, and social dimensions while maintaining transparency between elements.

The resulting artefact maps the key drivers and barriers to productivity in a small open economy, defines the two scenario axes, develops four scenario trajectories, and stress-tests them against 26 endogenous and exogenous shocks. For each shock, the tool identifies the directional effect on the scenario matrix, the societal groups that gain and lose, and the restoration mechanisms available to policymakers. The artefact was tested with academic researchers and practitioners from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and refined based on their feedback. Development continues as new factors emerge.

4.3. Data and sources

The study combines academic literature, policy documents, statistical indicators, industry reports, and expert assessments to analyse productivity growth in a small open economy. Academic sources provided the conceptual foundations for NISs, innovation diffusion, ecosystem development, sociotechnical transitions, resilience, and scenario planning. Empirical evidence was drawn primarily from publications by the OECD, the European Commission, the IMF, and Statistics Estonia, complemented by national studies on management quality, startup ecosystems, and productivity performance.

Rather than relying on a single dataset, the research synthesises evidence from multiple sources and levels of analysis. The collected material was used to develop the operationalised productivity model, identify key observations and paradoxes, define the scenario axes, and construct the shock-testing framework. The resulting artefact therefore represents an integrated evidence-based synthesis designed to support strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

5. Results: Estonia's NIS in the coherence space

5.1. System-level model of small-state productivity

Productivity definitions. The OECD (2001) defines productivity as the ratio of outputs to inputs used in production and identifies productivity growth as one of the principal long-term drivers of economic prosperity and higher living standards. At the same time, the OECD Productivity Manual (2001) and Stiglitz et al. (2009) acknowledge that productivity indicators are imperfect proxies for economic performance, as they measure realised outputs rather than the underlying capabilities that generate future growth. Innovation investments, organisational learning, and societal effects, including institutional reforms, education, and knowledge creation, may temporarily reduce measured productivity while simultaneously strengthening long-term productive capacity.

The scale-dependent characteristics highlighted in Section 2 suggest that productivity growth in small open economies depends not only on innovation capability itself, but also on the coherence with which knowledge, institutions, policies, and resources are translated into economy-wide productivity gains.

Operationalised productivity model. Productivity in this study is treated as a system-level outcome generated through the interaction of firms, households, the public sector, and capital providers. Firms are the primary creators of productivity through value added, exports, innovation, and reinvestment. However, Estonia has largely exhausted the convergence model based on lower labour costs and efficiency gains. Future growth depends on moving towards higher-value products, knowledge-intensive activities, digitalisation, and stronger positions in global value chains.

Households contribute through skills, adaptability, entrepreneurship, and labour quality. Given Estonia's demographic constraints, future gains depend less on labour quantity and more on better utilisation of human capital, continuous learning, and movement into higher-productivity activities.

Capital providers, including domestic and foreign investors, enable technological upgrading and scaling. The key challenge is not the availability of capital itself, but its effective allocation towards productive and innovative activities. Consequently, future productivity growth depends primarily on improving cooperation, translating innovation, and strengthening institutional capabilities rather than on accumulating additional resources alone.

The public sector contributes to productivity primarily through institutional implementation capacity rather than direct value creation. Its highest-leverage role is to establish predictable rules, impartial governance, and efficient public services that enable cooperation between firms, researchers, investors, and citizens. In small open economies, where resources and actors are limited, generalised trust (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005) becomes a critical productive asset. Trust lowers transaction costs, accelerates knowledge exchange, facilitates collaboration beyond personal networks, and increases society's capacity to coordinate long-term investments. Consequently, the public sector's greatest contribution to well-being may not be the provision of capital itself, but the creation of institutional conditions that allow knowledge, capital, and talent to be combined to generate sustained productivity growth.

Productivity paradoxes and systemic tensions. Having defined productivity, we proceed to examine the current setting and how past decisions shape today's productivity outcomes. The analysis revealed several observations and tensions that suggest Estonia's productivity challenge is not primarily a question of missing resources, but of how existing resources are organised, translated, and deployed across the economy.

Varblane and Varblane (2010) operationalise productivity in the Estonian context through labour productivity measured as value added per employee, while further decomposing value added into labour costs, capital replacement costs, and residual income. This approach highlights an important distinction between the creation of value and the capacity to retain resources for future investment and development. Their analysis demonstrates that productivity differences are shaped by technology

as well as economic structure, value-chain position, managerial capability, and the ability to generate residual income for reinvestment.

Recent economic developments indicate that Estonia's productivity challenge is partly structural rather than cyclical. The loss of eastern export markets, increasing geopolitical uncertainty, demographic pressures, and the energy transition have exposed vulnerabilities in the economic model (European Commission 2024, IMF 2025). At the same time, many Estonian firms continue to operate in lower value-added segments of global value chains, limiting their ability to accumulate the residual income needed for reinvestment, innovation, and international expansion (Varblane and Varblane 2010). While internationally recognised examples of high productivity exist, particularly in the startup sector, their impact remains concentrated and has not diffused broadly throughout the economy (Martinson 2026).

A second group of observations concerns the apparent disconnect between innovation capability and aggregate productivity. Estonia is widely regarded as a successful digital state, with strong digital infrastructure and entrepreneurial activity. Nevertheless, productivity levels remain significantly below those of leading European economies (OECD 2024a, European Commission 2025). Similarly, many policy recommendations advocated by the OECD, the IMF, and European Union institutions – including investments in innovation, digitalisation, and knowledge transfer – have been implemented for years without producing the expected productivity convergence. This suggests that the challenge may lie not in the absence of policy instruments, but in the system's ability to translate and diffuse their effects across the broader economy (Caraça et al. 2009).

A third group of observations relates to the interaction between scale, capital accumulation, and adaptation. Estonia's relatively limited stock of accumulated capital increases dependence on labour productivity growth and makes the economy more sensitive to external shocks (Piketty 2014, OECD 2024a). At the same time, productivity-enhancing investments often require long time horizons before generating measurable economic returns. This creates tension between short-term political and economic pressures and the sustained investments required for innovation, organisational renewal, and structural transformation (Perez 2002, Mazzucato 2014).

A related tension emerges between societal aspirations and organisational practice. While breakthrough innovation, entrepreneurship, and technological leadership are widely valued, recent evidence suggests that managerial cultures remain predominantly operational, with limited emphasis on experimentation, strategic learning, and organisational renewal (Vadi et al. 2026). In practice, organisations are often expected to innovate without fully embracing the uncertainty, internal competition, resource reallocation, and risk of failure that innovation entails. These observations collectively point to productivity as a systemic phenomenon shaped by coordination, adaptation, and long-term capability development rather than by individual policy measures or technological investments alone.

A fourth group of observations concerns the tension between productivity and societal survival. NIS coherence must therefore be assessed against a broader

definition of system performance than productivity alone. Productivity measures reward the efficient transformation of inputs into economic outputs, yet societies also invest in capabilities that secure their long-term existence. Estonia's support for Ukraine, defence expenditure exceeding 5% of GDP, and family policies such as parental leave redirect labour, capital, and public resources away from immediately productive activities. In the short term, these choices may reduce measured productivity and economic efficiency. However, they strengthen national security, demographic sustainability, social resilience, and the state's capacity to continue developing under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty (Stiglitz et al. 2009, OECD 2024a). Productivity growth, therefore, cannot be assessed independently of the societal capabilities that enable future prosperity and survival.

5.2. Conceptual learnings for small national innovation systems

The system-level model introduced in Section 5.1 abstracts from several characteristics of innovation processes that are particularly consequential for small economies and that a successful strategy needs to take into account.

Outlook and expectations management based on economic concepts. The challenge for small open economies is how to compensate for limited scale through coordination, specialisation, and institutional adaptation (Katzenstein 1985, West 2017).

While diversity increases resilience and preserves options, the innovation literature suggests that concentration generates cumulative advantages through specialised networks, infrastructures, talent pools, and learning effects (Foray 2014, Jacobides et al. 2018). The challenge is therefore not choosing between diversity and concentration, but balancing them. Excessive fragmentation prevents critical mass, while excessive concentration risks lock-in and fragility, a dynamic resembling the Seneca effect (Bardi 2017).

The reviewed literature suggests four implications for policymakers. First, innovation investments rarely translate directly into economic outcomes. Significant delays often exist between investment and measurable productivity gains, with major technological transitions frequently requiring 10–15 years or more to generate broad economic effects (Perez 2002, Mazzucato 2014).

Second, innovation generation and innovation diffusion are distinct challenges. Successful innovations must repeatedly pass through development, production, adoption, and diffusion stages, requiring multiple rounds of knowledge transfer among research organisations, firms, users, supply chains, and institutions.

Third, innovation outcomes are inherently uneven. Ecosystem spillovers, scale effects, and network externalities amplify the success of a limited number of actors, while most experiments fail to scale. Consequently, productivity gains emerge through concentrated successes rather than uniform improvements across the economy.

Fourth, productivity growth depends on institutional continuity. Innovation systems require transparent institutions, predictable rules, trust, and cooperation over extended periods. Consequently, the role of policy extends beyond supporting

innovation generation to sustaining the conditions that allow innovations to diffuse throughout the economy and ultimately contribute to long-term productivity growth, resilience, and well-being.

The Estonian case, examined in the following section, illustrates how these characteristics interact in a specific configuration and where the resulting coherence failures concentrate.

5.3. Estonia's digital state paradox and system incoherence

Digital state paradox. Estonia's case is particularly revealing because it combines elements of all three failure modes noted in Section 3: FDI and foreign-owned innovation that does not diffuse, concentrated innovative actors that do not connect to the mainstream economy, and niche-specific digital infrastructure that does not translate into private-sector productivity, all within a single national system.

Estonia's e-government model is among the most thoroughly documented cases of state-led digital transformation in the scholarly literature (Kattel and Mergel 2019). Yet digital public services have not been absorbed into private-sector productivity at a comparable rate: OECD (2024) data show that AI and digitalisation have penetrated approximately 10–15% of firms outside the technology sector, while the majority of manufacturing, construction, logistics, and services firms continue to operate without systematic digital transformation (European Commission 2025, Vadi et al. 2026). The translation gap between a publicly available digital infrastructure and its uptake by private actors is what drives Estonia's digital state paradox.

This gap is not primarily technological, as Estonia's population has high digital literacy, and the technical infrastructure is accessible. Vadi et al.'s (2026) study of Estonian management practices offers a clue: firms with higher value added make decisions based on future needs rather than present constraints, apply more decentralised decision-making structures, and integrate technology strategically rather than adopting it as a cost item. The majority of SMEs, by contrast, operate in what the study characterises as a reactive mode: they neither perceive the need for change nor know how to achieve it. The result is that nearly 40% of workers are overqualified or underqualified for their positions (OECD 2024b) – not a skills problem in the conventional sense, but a management problem: the organisational structures needed to deploy available human and technological capital productively are absent.

Startup concentration and the diffusion problem. Estonia's startup ecosystem is, by any per-capita measure, a global outlier. With approximately 17,000 startup employees contributing 4.5–5.5% of GDP, and with sales per employee in the startup sector exceeding the Estonian and EU averages by several times, the sector demonstrates that very high productivity is achievable in Estonia's economic context (Martinson 2026). This is the high ceiling: a small cohort of highly innovative firms operating at the global productivity frontiers.

The problem is that innovation-economy outcomes follow a power-law rather than a normal distribution logic: a small number of firms create the majority of value, while most attempts do not reach scale. This is not unique to Estonia; it

characterises innovation ecosystems globally. What is distinctive about Estonia is the structural disconnection between this high-performing cohort and the majority of the economy. The startup sector's knowledge, networks, and productivity approaches do not diffuse to incumbent SMEs, traditional manufacturing, or the construction and logistics sectors, which together account for a substantial share of employment. The European Commission (2020) documents that the concentration is partly a function of policy design: the Startup Estonia programme and associated instruments are calibrated to support startup formation and growth, not to build absorptive capacity in the incumbent economy.

The TRL 4–7 gap: where coherence breaks down. A third mechanism is the valley of death at technology readiness levels (TRL) 4–7 (Mankins 1995, 2009), between laboratory proof-of-concept and first commercial application. Estonia has genuine research capacity, particularly in information and communications technology, materials, and life sciences, and a culture of startup formation that can generate early-stage ventures. What is systematically weak is the institutional infrastructure connecting these two: translational platforms, pilot facilities, first-customer mechanisms, and bridge financing instruments that would allow research outputs to become commercial products (Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002, 2018). The knowledge does not move from the university to the firm, not because the actors are absent or unwilling, but because the institutional scaffolding that Torres de Oliveira et al. (2022) identify as a precondition for productive cooperation is insufficiently developed.

Estonian firms also lack the capacity to formulate clear R&D demand. The bottleneck is on both the supply side (insufficient translational platforms) and the demand side – firms operating in a reactive management mode do not generate the kind of specific, actionable research questions that would allow universities and public research institutions to orient their work towards commercially relevant problems. This is institutional incoherence at its most micro-level: two sets of actors with potentially complementary resources – research capacity and market proximity – separated by a failure of the interaction rules that would make collaboration productive.

Mapped onto the framework axes, Estonia presents a distinctive configuration: moderate-to-high institutional implementation capacity in specific domains (digital infrastructure, startup policy) combined with structurally low collaborative capacity across the broader economy. The result is a system with a high ceiling and a low floor – precisely the condition the scenario analysis in the following sections is designed to explore.

5.4. From conceptual synthesis to scenario design

Identification of critical system dimensions. The preceding literature review and empirical observations suggest that Estonia's productivity challenge is shaped less by the availability of resources than by the ability to coordinate, adapt, and translate resources into value creation. The literature highlights recurring themes of innovation diffusion, ecosystem formation, institutional continuity, adoption dynamics,

and long-term capability development. Similarly, the section on observations identified tensions related to innovation translation, managerial adaptation, capital accumulation, and the diffusion of productivity gains beyond a limited number of high-performing actors.

The purpose of the scenario design phase is therefore to identify the critical uncertainties that may lead to qualitatively different productivity trajectories in the future. Following the intuitive logics tradition of scenario development, candidate dimensions were evaluated against three criteria: (1) high influence on long-term productivity growth, (2) high uncertainty regarding future development, and (3) relative independence from one another.

A broad range of potential dimensions was considered, including technological development, digitalisation, demographics, geopolitical conditions, innovation intensity, human capital, energy transition, collaboration, and institutional performance. While many of these factors significantly influence productivity, several were found to be either consequences of deeper systemic mechanisms or strongly interdependent. The two axes synthesise several underlying factors and reflect the ability to initiate and execute change: (1) collaborative capacity describes bottom-up and cultural aspects such as the ability of firms, research organisations, investors, public institutions, and citizens to exchange knowledge, coordinate actions, pursue shared objectives, and self-police social and moral norms; and (2) institutional implementation capacity describes the top-down ability of institutions to establish legitimate and predictable rules, coordinate collective action, protect long-term societal interests, and adapt governance arrangements to changing circumstances (Wieczorek and Hekkert 2012). In this sense, institutions do not merely constrain behaviour but actively shape the environments within which decisions are made and collective outcomes emerge.

Institutional implementation capacity also contributes to the creation of generalised trust – the expectation that individuals, organisations, and public authorities will behave in a fair, predictable, and cooperative manner (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). More broadly, institutional implementation capacity determines the extent to which societies can formulate, implement, and sustain collective rules and long-term investment strategies, thereby enabling resources to be mobilised towards shared productivity objectives (Acemoglu et al. 2005). In the context of productivity growth, institutional implementation capacity determines whether resources can be mobilised towards shared objectives and sustained over time, with future generations in mind.

Construction of the scenario space. The two dimensions identified above can be understood as system-level resources that determine how effectively a society converts knowledge, capital, technology, and human capabilities into productivity growth. Unlike external conditions such as geopolitical developments, technological disruptions, demographic change, or energy transitions, these dimensions are largely endogenous.

Both dimensions may vary independently between fragmented and coherent states. Collaborative capacity ranges from isolated actors and weak knowledge

exchange to coordinated ecosystems characterised by trust, learning, and shared objectives. Institutional implementation capacity ranges from reactive and fragmented governance to effective execution, strategic continuity, and the ability to coordinate collective action over extended periods. Together, they describe the system's capacity to mobilise resources, adapt to shocks, and sustain long-term development.

Following the intuitive logics tradition of scenario planning, the purpose of the scenario framework is not to predict the future, but to explore a set of internally coherent development paths that emerge from different combinations of critical uncertainties (Schwartz 1997, van der Heijden 2005). The intersection of collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity produces four qualitatively different system configurations. These configurations represent alternative trajectories through which innovation, technology diffusion, labour mobility, investment behaviour, and productivity growth evolve over time.

While all scenarios are exposed to the same external environment, they differ fundamentally in their ability to respond, adapt, and transform available resources into long-term productivity growth and societal well-being. Building on the operationalised productivity framework and the preceding conceptual analysis, each scenario is examined through the interaction of institutions, collaboration, innovation, technology diffusion, labour mobility, and investment dynamics.

5.5. The four scenarios as analytical positions

The intersection of the two axes generates four analytically distinct system configurations, each representing a qualitatively different logic of NIS functioning (Figure 1). The four configurations are described here as analytical types; their application to Estonia's current position and possible future trajectories follows in Section 5.8.

5.6. Stress testing and feedback mechanisms

To evaluate the robustness of the four productivity configurations, the scenario framework was stress-tested against 26 internal and external shocks (Appendix 1).

The internal shocks include radical policy choices, institutional dysfunctions, and societal interventions that originate from within Estonia. Examples range from AI-enabled public-sector transformation and strategic industrial concentration to risk-avoidant governance, universal basic income, talent repatriation, and new approaches to social welfare. The external shocks include technological breakthroughs, geopolitical fragmentation, demographic pressures, climate and energy disruptions, financial instability, migration, and changes in global digital infrastructures.

With the system's starting point placed at a neutral reference point, the analysis examined which scenario (system configuration) each shock would push the economy and society towards, who would gain and lose most from the change, how to correct the course towards the desired path, and which actors would be responsible for the correction.

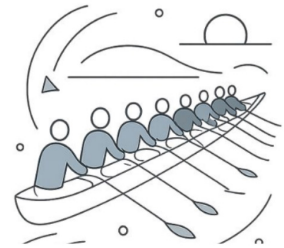
low ← collaborative capacity → high

Village



A vibrant but unscalable system: civil society, firms, and research institutions engage actively; innovation culture is strong; networks and pilot solutions proliferate. The state cannot provide the strategic framework or market-creation capacity that would convert this energy into economy-wide structural change. Young people and talented workers are active but insecure; incomes are unstable; inequality grows even as creativity thrives. The 2035 projection is approximately 80–85% of the EU average.

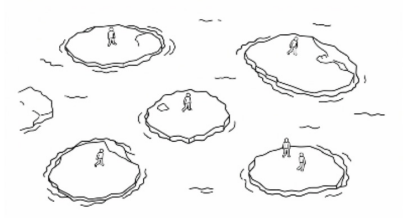
Synchronised Estonia



The only configuration in which the productivity target of 110% of the EU average by 2035 is achievable. The state establishes clear priorities, creates markets, and functions as an innovation catalyst, rather than waiting for the market to find solutions, actively shaping the conditions for private-sector development to occur. Firms and research institutions operate in an integrated ecosystem; cooperation is systemic. AI and digitalisation diffuse broadly across the economy. The system can absorb shocks and adjust trajectories.

low ← institutional implementation capacity → high

Every man is an island



Policy remains reactive and fragmented: programmes emerge in parallel without systemic connection, and the state is unable to function as a market shaper or innovation accelerator. Firms and research institutions optimise within their own domains; the most capable individuals and organisations connect to international networks rather than contributing to domestic system development. The 2035 projection is approximately 70% of the EU average productivity.

Low ceiling



A bureaucratically effective but dynamically constrained system: institutions function and reforms are implemented, but the state lacks the vision and the actor network to create new markets or push the economy towards higher value-added activities. Firms focus on efficiency and risk reduction rather than innovation. The system reaches a plateau, unable to generate the structural transformation needed for sustained productivity convergence. The 2035 projection is approximately 85–90% of the EU average: stability without ambition.

Figure 1. The four configurations on the collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity axes.

Taken together, the shocks serve as probes that reveal the strengths and weaknesses of different system configurations. Rather than focusing on the probability of individual events, the analysis examines how different configurations (Figure 1) influence the system's ability to absorb disturbances, adapt to changing conditions, and sustain long-term productivity growth. The purpose of stress testing is therefore not to predict future crises, but to identify vulnerabilities, recovery mechanisms, and strategic capabilities required for resilience in a turbulent environment.

Feedback-to-shock pattern analysis provides an interactive tool for engaging decision-makers. The list of shocks can be edited interactively, and the shock analysis can be conducted through various team exercises.

A collective analysis of the 26 shocks is presented in Appendix 2. The internal and external shocks are not distributed evenly across the scenario space. Instead, they reveal structural biases, vulnerabilities, and recovery mechanisms embedded in the system.

First, the shock set is not neutral. Most shocks place downward pressure on either collaborative capacity or institutional implementation capacity, reflecting the reality that coordination and institutional quality are difficult to build but relatively easy to erode. Several shocks directly increase fragmentation, uncertainty, or resource competition, while comparatively few automatically strengthen cooperation or governance capacity. This implies that maintaining a high-performing trajectory requires continuous effort, whereas drift towards lower-performing trajectories can occur through inertia alone.

Second, the shocks cluster unevenly across the scenario space. Many external shocks tend to push the system towards the 'Every man is an island' trajectory by reducing trust, increasing uncertainty, and weakening long-term coordination. A smaller group of shocks, particularly those associated with artificial intelligence, digitalisation, startup growth, strategic investment, and talent attraction, create opportunities to move towards 'Synchronised Estonia', provided sufficient institutional and collaborative capabilities already exist. Few shocks naturally reinforce the intermediate scenarios. Instead, 'Low ceiling' and 'Village' often emerge as transitional states between fragmentation and synchronisation.

Third, the distribution of impacts is highly uneven. The groups most vulnerable across scenarios are workers in routine occupations, regions dependent on declining industries, younger generations entering the labour market, and individuals who rely on strong public services. These groups are disproportionately affected when collaboration weakens or institutions lose the capacity to coordinate adaptation. Conversely, the principal beneficiaries of positive shocks are highly skilled workers, entrepreneurs, globally connected firms, researchers, and investors capable of rapidly exploiting new opportunities. Without effective diffusion mechanisms, productivity gains therefore risk concentrating within a limited number of sectors, firms, and individuals.

Fourth, the recovery patterns are remarkably consistent across shocks. Successful recovery rarely depends solely on additional financial resources. Instead, recovery mechanisms repeatedly involve rebuilding trust, restoring coordination between

actors, strengthening institutional execution, accelerating knowledge diffusion, and improving the translation of innovation into economic activity. This finding aligns with the literature review, which identified innovation diffusion and ecosystem coordination as critical determinants of productivity growth.

Finally, the burden of recovery is not distributed evenly. While governments play an essential role in establishing rules, reducing uncertainty, and coordinating collective action, the actual recovery effort is shared across the innovation system. Firms undertake technological adaptation and investment, research institutions generate and transfer knowledge, investors provide risk capital, and citizens contribute through skills development, labour mobility, and participation in collaborative networks. The strongest recovery trajectories emerge when these actors operate as a coordinated system rather than as isolated entities.

Of the 26 shocks, roughly two-thirds are fundamentally tests of institutional implementation capacity, while only a minority primarily test technological capability.

5.7. Stress testing of scenario trajectories

The focus then shifted from the individual shock-feedback level to system-level analysis. The resilience of the four scenario configurations became the subject of individual testing. The driving questions were: how well can different configurations handle the shocks? How many shocks can be managed in a way that benefits society under each configuration: 'Every man is an island', 'Low ceiling', 'Village', or 'Synchronised Estonia'?

To ensure comparability, each shock was reformulated as a societal challenge or opportunity requiring a response rather than as a predetermined positive or negative event (Appendix 3). The analysis builds on resilience theory (Holling 1973, Walker et al. 2004), which views societies as adaptive systems exposed to disturbances, disruptions, and structural change.

Following Walker et al. (2004), the shocks were sorted into three categories that required different reactions from the economy and society. Resilience is the ability to maintain core functions amid disruption. Adaptability refers to the ability to reorganise resources, institutions, and behaviours while remaining on the same development trajectory. Transformability refers to the ability to create a superior trajectory when existing arrangements become inadequate. For each challenge, the response of each scenario was assessed on a three-level scale (improvement, no change, decline). The resulting patterns were then aggregated to identify the relative strengths, vulnerabilities, recovery potential, and critical dependencies of each scenario configuration type.

Table 1 summarises the number of shocks that were resolved positively across the three challenge categories in each scenario. (If the situation derived from the shock description was not possible in a given scenario, the total number of opportunities was reduced.)

Table 1. Positive challenge-resolution outcomes across resilience, adaptability, and transformability challenge categories

Configuration	Resilience challenges (n = 10)	Adaptability challenges (n = 9)	Transformability challenges (n = 7)	Critical dependency
C1 Every man is an island	0/10	2/9	0/7	Trust and institutional rebuilding
C2 Low ceiling	2/8	4/8	5/6	Collaboration and ecosystem spillovers
C3 Village	2/5	7/9	4/7	Scaling and implementation capacity
C4 Synchronised Estonia	8/8	8/9	7/7	Long-term institutional continuity

The stress tests reveal a clear division of strengths. Configuration C1 ('Every man is an island') performs poorly across all challenge categories, indicating that fragmentation simultaneously undermines resilience, adaptation, and transformation. Configuration C2 ('Low ceiling') demonstrates limited resilience and moderate adaptability but performs relatively well when challenges can be addressed through institutional intervention and top-down coordination, enabling transformation. Configuration C3 ('Village') exhibits strong adaptive capacity and above-average transformability, reflecting the strength of bottom-up initiatives and social mobilisation. However, its weak performance on resilience challenges suggests that cooperation alone cannot compensate for limited implementation capacity when society faces systemic disruptions.

Configuration C4 ('Synchronised Estonia') is the only scenario that performs consistently well across all three dimensions. The combination of collaborative capacity and institutional implementation capacity allows the system to absorb shocks, adapt to changing circumstances, and implement structural transformations when necessary. Its few weaknesses occur in challenges involving severe societal fragmentation, where communication and coordination mechanisms themselves become impaired.

Taken together, the results support the central proposition of this study: neither institutional implementation capacity nor collaborative capacity alone is sufficient to sustain productivity growth under uncertainty. Small open economies require both. The ability to combine top-down coordination with bottom-up cooperation emerges as the key determinant of resilience, adaptability, and long-term development.

5.8. Estonia's current position and the mechanisms of incoherence

Estonia's current NIS configuration does not fit neatly into any single quadrant. Its institutional infrastructure, particularly the digital state, the startup policy ecosystem, and the research funding framework, demonstrates elements of implementation

capacity. Its startup sector and the density of its technology community demonstrate elements of collaborative capacity within that specific actor group. However, at the level of the broader economy, the system exhibits the characteristic patterns of configurations C1 and C2: fragmented policy instruments that do not constitute a coherent strategic framework, cooperative relationships that are strong within the innovative elite but weak between that elite and the majority of firms, and digital infrastructure whose productivity potential has not been absorbed by the private sector.

The three mechanisms driving this position (the translation gap, startup concentration, and the TRL 4–7 gap) are examined in detail in Section 5.3. Their combined effect is to place Estonia in the lower half of the coherence space: moderate implementation capacity in specific domains, but structurally low collaborative capacity across the broader economy.

5.9. The role of the state across configurations

In the 'Village' configuration, the state acts as a facilitator of experimentation and community initiatives. Cooperation is strong, but the absence of implementation capacity limits the scaling of successful initiatives and reduces resilience to systemic shocks. Only in the 'Synchronised Estonia' configuration does the state function as an architect and orchestrator, aligning actors, incentives, and institutions around shared long-term objectives.

The stress-testing results demonstrate that these differences extend beyond innovation policy. The same configuration that determines the effectiveness of R&D support, startup policies, or digitalisation programmes also determines the system's capacity for resilience, adaptation, and transformation. Top-down capability alone can sustain stability and implement targeted reforms, while bottom-up cooperation alone can generate experimentation and adaptation. However, neither is sufficient to address the full range of societal challenges. The highest performance consistently emerges when institutional implementation capacity and collaborative capacity reinforce one another.

The significance of this finding is that the effectiveness of a policy instrument depends less on its design than on the system configuration in which it operates. Investment in translational infrastructure, digital platforms, or innovation support generates broad productivity gains only when firms, institutions, and citizens possess the capabilities required to absorb and diffuse their effects. What distinguishes the 'Synchronised Estonia' configuration from the others is precisely that its institutional architecture creates and sustains these complementarities. In the other configurations, the complementarities remain absent – not because the instruments are wrong, but because the system conditions for their effectiveness do not exist.

6. Discussion

6.1. What small states can and cannot do

The relevant literature and the Estonian scenario framework together generate a set of propositions about the conditions under which small-state NIS configurations can and cannot produce economy-wide productivity gains. These propositions are not universal laws but conditional generalisations whose validity depends on the specific structural features of small open economies. Yet they are sufficiently robust across the cases examined to constitute a theoretical contribution to the literature on NIS and productivity in small open economies, rather than simply observations about Estonia.

First, small states cannot sustain broad technological diversification across all trajectories and should not attempt to. Lee et al.'s (2021) cycle-time typology demonstrates that successful catching-up requires either deliberate specialisation into short-cycle-time sectors or sustained investment in knowledge localisation and diversification within a defined technological base. The Irish, Singaporean, and Icelandic cases all illustrate the consequences of partial commitment to one or the other: each has achieved high performance within its chosen model while encountering structural ceilings in the transition to the next stage. Estonia's configuration adds a fourth variant: an innovation system characterised by world-class digital infrastructure and entrepreneurial capability whose productivity effects remain weakly diffused across the wider economy.

Second, the 'rising tide' logic, in which innovation-driven growth in leading sectors diffuses to raise the productivity floor for the broader economy, operates only when the system is coherent. A high ceiling is not sufficient; what is required is an institutional architecture that connects the ceiling to the floor: translational infrastructure, the development of management quality, cooperative networks that bridge the innovative elite and the mainstream economy, and a state capable of maintaining strategic direction across political cycles. Where these conditions are absent, innovation activity concentrates rather than diffuses, and the resulting aggregate productivity statistics reflect a small number of frontier firms rather than economy-wide development. This suggests that innovation generation and innovation diffusion should be treated as analytically distinct processes within NISs.

Third, the specific form of coherence that small states need differs from that required by large economies. Large NISs can sustain significant incoherence between subsystems because the scale of each subsystem is sufficient to generate its own internal momentum. Small NISs lack this buffer: the overall system cannot reach critical mass in any of the subsystems. The Nordic model's integration of innovation policy with educational, social, and labour market policies, documented by Casadella and Tahi (2025) for Sweden and Finland, is not a cultural preference but a structural necessity: small states cannot afford the coordination costs of treating these as separate policy domains.

More broadly, these findings resonate with Acemoglu and Robinson's (2019) argument that sustained prosperity depends on the co-evolution of capable institutions

and capable societies. While their 'narrow corridor' is developed in the context of political institutions and liberty, the present study operationalises a comparable logic for NISs. Institutional implementation capacity and collaborative capacity are treated as complementary productive resources whose interaction determines whether innovation is translated into economy-wide productivity growth. From this perspective, system coherence is not merely a desirable characteristic of an innovation system but a productive capability in its own right.

6.2. Policy implications

The framework generates policy implications that are both specific to Estonia and applicable to comparable small open economies characterised by limited scale, external dependence, and innovation-driven development. Three are of particular significance.

The first concerns the sequencing of interventions. The scenario analysis demonstrates that investment in frontier innovation support (startup ecosystems, deep-technology research, FDI attraction) produces different outcomes for country-level productivity depending on whether the absorptive capacity of the broader economy is being developed in parallel. Without investment in management quality, translational infrastructure, and the institutional scaffolding for knowledge diffusion, frontier investments raise the ceiling without affecting the floor. The findings therefore suggest that innovation policy should be evaluated both by its ability to generate frontier innovations and by its capacity to diffuse them throughout the wider economy.

The second concerns the state's institutional identity. The scenario framework demonstrates that the difference between the 'Synchronised Estonia' configuration and the others is not primarily a matter of specific policies but of the state's role in the innovation system. A citizen who understands their active contribution, together with a state that understands itself as a market shaper actively creating the conditions for private sector development through procurement, standards, data access, and translational investment, generates qualitatively different system dynamics from those of a system in which the state understands itself as a regulator and service provider. Mazzucato's (2014) entrepreneurial state concept captures this distinction, but the scenario framework grounds it in the specific institutional mechanisms through which it operates in a small-state context.

The third concerns the interaction between institutions and society. The results indicate that institutional implementation capacity and collaborative capacity should not be interpreted as substitutes. Strong institutions cannot compensate indefinitely for weak cooperation, just as strong societal initiative cannot overcome persistent implementation failures. The highest-performing configuration consistently emerges when both capacities reinforce one another. This finding aligns with institutional theories that emphasise the joint evolution of capable states and capable societies (Acemoglu and Robinson 2019), while extending them to explain productivity dynamics within NISs.

More generally, the framework suggests that productivity policy should be understood as the design of coherent sociotechnical systems rather than the optimisation of individual policy instruments. Investments in digitalisation, research, entrepreneurship, education, or translational infrastructure generate their greatest impact when embedded within institutional arrangements that promote coordination, trust, and long-term implementation. From this perspective, the effectiveness of innovation policy depends less on the number of interventions than on the coherence of their interactions.

6.3. Limitations

The analysis presented in this paper is subject to several limitations that circumscribe the generalisability of its conclusions. First, the scenario methodology produces qualitative analytical positions rather than quantitative trajectory estimates. While the framework identifies alternative system configurations and their relative strengths and vulnerabilities, it does not specify the magnitude of the interventions required to shift between configurations, or the threshold conditions under which such transitions would occur. It explains directional tendencies and comparative outcomes rather than predicting precise developmental paths. This limitation is inherent in scenario analysis under conditions of deep uncertainty, and consequently the policy implications should be interpreted as strategic rather than prescriptive.

Second, the comparative case analysis is necessarily selective. Ireland, Singapore, and Iceland were chosen to illuminate specific aspects of the coherence problem, not to constitute a representative sample of small-state NIS configurations. Denmark, Finland, and the other Nordic cases – present in the studies of Edquist and Hommen (2008) and Casadella and Tahi (2025) – might generate somewhat different conclusions about the conditions for high coherence, particularly regarding the role of corporatist institutions and labour market flexibility. The framework should be tested against a broader comparative base in future research.

Third, the axes themselves are theoretically derived rather than empirically validated. The framework positions NISs qualitatively along two dimensions without a measurement instrument for either. Operationalising these axes through composite indices, drawing on existing data sources such as the European Innovation Scoreboard, Worldwide Governance Indicators, or OECD innovation policy surveys, would allow the framework to be applied systematically across a broader sample of small states and tested against quantitative productivity outcomes. This represents the most significant avenue for future research, and the one most likely to determine whether the coherence framework constitutes a replicable analytical tool or remains a theoretically productive but case-specific contribution.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Estonian productivity paradox – strong innovation indicators combined with persistently below-average economy-wide productivity – is best understood as a problem of NIS coherence rather than a shortage of innovation resources. Drawing on NIS theory, institutional economics, systems thinking, and scenario analysis, the study demonstrates that strong digital infrastructure, entrepreneurial activity, and research capability remain insufficient unless they are effectively translated into productivity gains throughout the wider economy.

The principal contribution of this study is the operationalisation of NIS coherence through two interacting dimensions: institutional implementation capacity and collaborative capacity. The analysis suggests that productivity in small open economies is better understood as an emergent property of coherent sociotechnical systems than as the cumulative outcome of individual innovation policies. Strong institutions, frontier firms, digital infrastructure, or research excellence are individually insufficient if they remain weakly connected. What differentiates successful productivity trajectories is the capacity of institutions and society to coordinate, diffuse, and sustain innovation over time.

Methodologically, the study extends the intuitive logics tradition of scenario planning by integrating systems thinking, design science, resilience theory, and structured stress testing into a feedbacked shock-sensitive scenario framework. Rather than treating scenarios as static narratives, the framework models alternative productivity trajectories as adaptive sociotechnical systems capable of responding to endogenous and exogenous shocks.

Although developed using the Estonian case, the framework is intended to be transferable to other small open economies facing similar challenges of innovation diffusion, institutional coordination, and external vulnerability. Future research should operationalise the proposed coherence dimensions quantitatively and evaluate their explanatory power across broader comparative settings. More generally, the study suggests that productivity should be understood not simply as the outcome of technological progress or innovation intensity, but as an emergent property of coherent sociotechnical systems capable of translating knowledge into economy-wide value under conditions of uncertainty.

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Declaration of the use of AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT-5 (academic version) and Anthropic's Claude as academic writing assistants for searching literature, editing language, and enhancing clarity. The scenario matrix illustrations were created using Gamma.app. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Data

Desk research data used to develop the scenario axes are described in Section 4.3. Data used for shock-resistance and feedback analysis, along with scenario testing, are presented in the Appendices.

Appendix 1. Shortened shock descriptions

Appendix 2. Scenario analysis according to the feedback framework

Appendix 3. Generalised challenge set for scenario stress testing

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BETWEEN FORM AND SPIRIT: A SPIRITUAL INQUIRY INTO THE ART OF HORSE PAINTING IN CHINA

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Abstract. Unlike Western traditional horse painting, rooted in mimetic theory, Chinese horse painting has embodied spiritual significance since its origins, seeking the perfect fusion of *form* (*xing*) and *spirit* (*shen*). This paper utilizes comparative East–West aesthetics, cultural memory theory, and iconographic analysis to examine its artistic spirit across three dimensions: historical, spiritual, and aesthetic. Historically, the genre's evolution accords with Hegel's triadic model: symbolic, classical, and romantic. Spiritually, the myth of the Dragon-Horse bearing the River Chart is analyzed to trace the genesis of the "Dragon–Horse spirit" (*longma jingshen*) and its enduring influence on the morphology and spiritual aspirations of equine imagery. Aesthetically, meticulous-style (*gongbi*) and freehand-style (*xieyi*) horse painting, though technically divergent, are shown to be unified by the principle of "form–spirit oneness" and by the common medium of ink wash, thereby epitomizing the character of Eastern art.

Keywords: Chinese horse painting art, dragon–horse spirit, national spirit, cultural memory, meticulous-style equine painting, freehand-style equine painting

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1. Introduction

Painting as an art form is a spiritual activity through which humanity transcends the demands of material survival. Its essence lies in encoding collective emotions and worldviews into visual symbols with aesthetic intent. However, as Erwin Panofsky observed, "The meaning of a work lies concealed behind its subject matter

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and form; without interpretation, meaning does not spontaneously manifest itself" (Yi 2022: 54).

This process of aesthetic encoding finds particularly vivid expression in the specialized genre of Chinese horse painting. From prehistoric rock engravings to contemporary ink-wash works, equine imagery has served as a visual language through which successive generations of Chinese painters articulated their conceptions of social order, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetic ideals. Jan Assmann defines the relationship between canon and archive as a "permanent dialectic": "... a situation very swiftly arose that Aleida Assmann describes as the separation of cultural memory into 'working and storage memory' – or 'canon and archive'" (Assmann 2011: 80). This conceptual framework illuminates the evolutionary lineage of *form* and *spirit* in Chinese horse painting. The tradition's continuity and transformation can be understood as the product of a dynamic interaction between archive – the accumulated repertoire of pictorial techniques and formal conventions – and canon – the selective reactivation and reinterpretation of these resources in response to shifting cultural imperatives. Through this interplay, Chinese horse painting has long transcended the horse's utilitarian associations to become a living cultural signifier.

This study, adopting a comparative East–West perspective, applies iconographic analysis and cultural memory theory to investigate the spiritual connotations of Chinese horse painting from a broad historical dimension. In the Yellow River basin and adjacent grasslands, horses have been integral to core social activities – hunting, warfare, and transportation – since the late Neolithic period. Their image has steadily



Figure 1. The Mandela Mountain petroglyphs (Bronze Age) (Fan and Fan 2014: 24).

accumulated layers of cultural metaphor and aesthetic value. Over thousands of years, horses have not only fulfilled vital productive functions but have also acquired distinct sociocultural roles, securing their place as one of the most enduring subjects in Chinese art.

The term *spirit* is capacious in scope. In the specific context of Chinese horse painting, this paper examines two primary dimensions: first, the national ethos embodied in the *dragon–horse spirit* (龙马精神) – a symbolic construct fusing the cosmic dynamism of the dragon with the noble vigor of the horse; and second, the aesthetic philosophy of the *unity of form and spirit*, a guiding principle that defines the genre's artistic pursuit.

As the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, once remarked: "The reduction of the horse to a domestic state, is the greatest acquisition, from the animal world, ever made by the art and industry of man. This noble animal partakes of the fatigues of war, and seems to feel the glory of victory." (Buffon 2011: 3). Since its domestication, the horse played a pivotal role in human history before the modern era, providing indispensable power for hunting, warfare, travel, and transport. However, the unique character of Chinese horse painting lies not merely in documenting this material history of human–horse relations, but in constructing a symbolic system centered on the *dragon–horse spirit*.

Petroglyphic research reveals abundant prehistoric equine imagery in rock art from regions such as the Yinshan and Altai mountains. These horse forms (Figure 1), typically carved in profile with bold, rough lines, may be regarded as the genetic source of the Chinese pictorial principle of "modeling through line." As early as the late Neolithic period, the Chinese had already developed the concept of the dragon as a totem. By the Shang and Zhou periods (c. 16th–5th centuries BCE), horses and dragons had become prevalent motifs within the decorative system of ritual bronzes. The *Rites of Zhou* (《周礼》) records that "horses eight *chi* or taller are considered dragons," hinting at the earliest intertextual conception of dragon and horse. In the pre-Qin classic *Book of Changes* (《周易》), the *Qian* hexagram draws upon the image of the horse, abstracting its robust and unyielding character into the ideal of ceaseless self-improvement.

As a visual art form spanning millennia, Chinese horse painting has evolved alongside the spiritual development of Chinese civilization. Since the 20th century, the utilitarian role of the horse has been rendered obsolete by industrialization. Yet, the tradition has undergone a modern transformation, integrating its inherent spirituality with Western art amid the currents of "Western learning spreading eastward."

Despite abundant research on technique, style, and form, scholarship has seldom addressed the fundamental question: Why has the horse, in Chinese art history, transcended its practical role to become an ever-renewing spiritual symbol? This paper seeks to address that gap, employing an interdisciplinary approach to elucidate both its national spirit and aesthetic consciousness.

2. Historical dimension: the evolution of form and spirit in horse painting art

In China, no other animal has so fully embodied a constellation of noble virtues and enjoyed such enduring admiration as the horse. Much like the lotus in traditional Chinese painting – whose ability to blossom from muddy waters lends it the symbolic meaning of purity and resilience (Li and Zhu 2024: 424) – the horse has long represented auspiciousness, good fortune, and the vitality of unbroken life cycles. Across the centuries, the history of horse painting offers a window into the aesthetic trajectory and spiritual ethos of Chinese art.

2.1. From productive tool to cultural symbol: origins and early development

The earliest phase of Chinese horse painting extends from prehistoric times to the pre-Qin era (c. Paleolithic period–3rd century BCE), corresponding to what Hegel termed the "symbolic stage" of art. This period's evolution accords with Jan Assmann's theory of "cultural memory": the rough lines of petroglyphs, totemic motifs, and the pictographic structure of the oracle-bone character for "horse" together form the visual genetic code of "storage memory," providing the material foundation for symbolic continuity. Its "functional memory" emerges in the steady elevation of meaning – from survival-driven reverence for hunting implements to the sanctity conferred by creation myths, culminating in a spiritual metamorphosis from the utilitarian to the deified.

One of the earliest major productive achievements of the Chinese people was the domestication of the horse. By the Shang dynasty (c. 16th century BCE), horses had become the primary productive force in society. Beyond their role in production and military preparedness, they served as transport for royalty and nobility and as objects of burial sacrifice. Unlike other livestock, such as donkeys or mules, horses were imbued with hierarchical significance, serving the political authority of the ruling class. From the *Chariot and Horse Procession* images of the Han dynasty to Zhang Xuan's *Spring Outing of Lady Guo* in the Tang to Yang Jin's *Kangxi's Southern Inspection Tour* in the Qing, equestrian travel has consistently functioned as a marker of social status.

Ancient rock art in northern China – such as the Mandela Mountain petroglyphs in Inner Mongolia – depicts numerous horses. Carbon-14 dating suggests that the earliest examples date to around 30,000–40,000 years ago in the Late Paleolithic, preserving humankind's earliest visual cognition of the horse. As humanity's "primordial language," these images functioned much like mythology or epic, appearing in totemic, shamanic, hunting, and warfare contexts. Despite primitive tools and techniques, ancient artists displayed acute observation of equine anatomy, achieving proportional accuracy and vivid stylization.

Before the adoption of written pictographs, all cultures passed through an extended phase of pictorial ideography. In China, the ancient oracle-bone script preserved pictographs of the horse from over three thousand years ago, making

China the only civilization to use pictographic writing continuously to the present day. This underlies the long-standing assertion that "calligraphy and painting share a common origin." The evolution of Chinese horse painting parallels the development of Chinese characters, moving from representational to abstract, from pictographs to symbolic forms (Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution of the Chinese character "马" (*horse*) from pictograph to modern linguistic symbol

Glyph form						
Name	Oracle bone script	Large seal script	Bronze script	Small seal script	Clerical script	Simplified Chinese
Period	c. 11th century BCE (Late Shang Dynasty)	c. 8th century BCE (Western Zhou)	322 BCE (Warring States period)	374 BCE (Qin Dynasty)	185 CE (Eastern Han Dynasty)	Post-1956 (Modern China)
Source	Inscription on oracle bones (King of Shang offered sacrifices to the former King Zhongding with the courtesy of a guest)	Inscription on the Mao Gong Ding, a bronze ritual vessel of the Western Zhou Dynasty	Inscription on the bronze tally (In 322 BC, King Huai of Chu issued a tax-exempt passage certificate to King Qi of E for transporting goods)	Stone Drum inscriptions before the Qin Dynasty	The Stele of Cao Quan of the Eastern Han Dynasty	Adopted in the Chinese character simplification scheme

In the Shang dynasty (c. 16th–11th centuries BCE), the "horse" character carved on oracle bones (late oracle-bone script in Table 1) represents the earliest extant horse imagery from China's civilized era. To highlight distinctive features, the depiction adopted a side-standing pose, well-suited to carving techniques. In the Warring States period, bronze inscriptions simplified the form further, substituting the horse's eye for the entire head. With the rise of centralized imperial authority, horses assumed an increasingly prominent role in social life, and horse imagery became a powerful symbol within the ritual system. The *Rites of Zhou* records: "In the third month of spring, cattle and horses are assembled, mares are led to pasture for breeding, and sacrificial animals, colts, and calves are counted and recorded" (Zheng and Kong 1999: 488), indicating that by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), horses had been incorporated into the state's annual sacrificial system.

The ancient creation myth of the *River Chart and Luo Script* (河图洛书), first recorded in the *Book of History* (《尚书》), endowed the horse with sacred significance, establishing its archetype as a spiritual vessel. From the earliest rock engravings and pictographic images emerged the foundational artistic genes of Chinese horse representation: linear form and the pursuit of expressive essence. As the dragon–horse concept evolved alongside human–horse relations, Chinese horse painting entered a crucial stage of paradigm formation and artistic maturation.

2.2. Paradigmatic establishment and dragon–horse intertextuality: the classical phase

From the Qin through the Tang dynasties (3rd century BCE–9th century CE), horse painting gradually shifted from purely sacred or symbolic representation toward realism, with increasingly refined techniques. The classical paradigm germinated in the Wei and Jin periods (220–420 CE) and reached full maturity in the Tang dynasty, achieving the perfect integration of *form* (*xing*) and *spirit* (*shen*). During this process, "storage memory" was enriched by the maturation of *gongbi* (meticulous) techniques and the compositional mode of "dragon–horse unity." In contrast, "functional memory" deepened through the association of horses with imperial authority and sovereign majesty.

In the Eastern Zhou through Qin–Han eras, horse imagery appeared in silk paintings, lacquerware, tomb murals, pictorial stones, and pictorial bricks. The world-



Figure 2. Anonymous' *Painted Horse on Lacquered Vessel*, Qin Dynasty (Collection of Hubei Provincial Museum) (Yu 2015: 115).

famous terracotta horses of the Qin dynasty, with their vivid modeling, exemplify the 3rd-century BCE three-dimensional style. Influenced by the Confucian principle of "unity of form and substance," horse painting often incorporated decorative patterns, as seen in the *Painted Horse on Lacquered Vessel* (Figure 2), excavated in 1978 from tomb No. 44 at Shuihudi, Yunmeng, Hubei. The horse's robust form, surmounted by a bird in flight, evokes the impression of a steed soaring skyward. Based on legendary dragon–horse imagery, its elongated lines and draconic traits convey a distinctly romantic sensibility.

The Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), with its vast unified empire, elevated equestrian culture to new heights. Superior horses imported from Central Asia under Emperor Wu enriched both the quantity and quality of the imperial stables. Horses became political symbols, with the emperor himself likened to the "celestial horse" in poetry. The celebrated stone carving *Horse Trampling the Xiongnu* at General Huo Qubing's tomb epitomizes this monumental use of equine imagery for imperial propaganda. Han tomb reliefs – such as those at the Wu Family Shrine in Shandong – capture vigorous, dynamic horses through bold curves and knife-like incisions, creating the distinctive "Han horse" aesthetic (Figure 3). As E. H. Gombrich observed, "When a Chinese artist had to represent a prancing horse, he seemed to fit it together out of a number of rounded shapes" (Gombrich 1985: 104).

The Wei–Jin era saw the rise of aesthetic theory in painting, with Gu Kaizhi's "spirit-resonance" approach (*chuanshen lun*) shifting emphasis from formal likeness to spiritual expression. His *chi-neck, dragon-body* paradigm – seen in the *Nymph of the Luo River* (Figure 4) – integrated draconic attributes into equine form through fine, even lines, imbuing them with ethereal motion. This romanticized morphology reflects the intellectual freedom of the literati in this period.

The Tang dynasty brought the art of horse painting to its zenith. Saddled-horse painting (鞍马画) became an independent genre, with court painters such as Han Gan perfecting the classical paradigm. Han's *Herding Horses* (Figure 5) demonstrates meticulous observation of imperial steeds, aligning with physiognomy texts of the era. His rounded, muscular horses and angular human figures capture the grandeur of the High Tang, securing his influence for centuries.

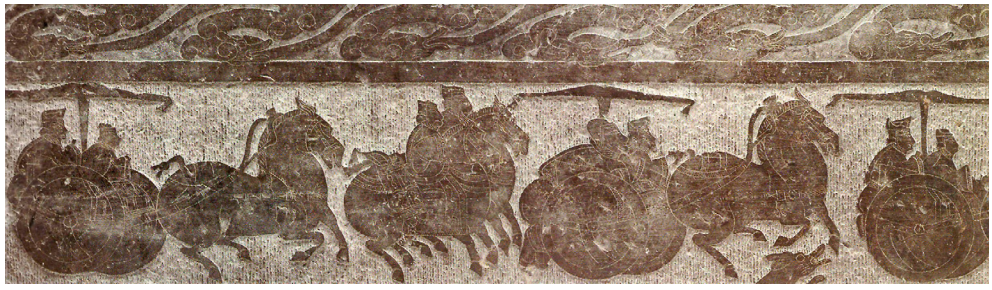

Figure 3. Anonymous' *Procession of Carriages and Horses*, Han Dynasty (pictorial stone relief) (Chen 2014: 1).



Figure 4. Gu Kaizhi's *Nymph of the Luo River* (detail), Jin Dynasty (Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum).



Figure 5. Han Gan's *Herding Horses*, Tang Dynasty (Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 37).

2.3. Literati aesthetics and temporal reconstruction: the transformation of horse painting

Following the establishment of the Tang dynasty's classical paradigm, Chinese horse painting underwent two pivotal transformations between the 10th century and the modern era: first, the rise of literati painting in the Song dynasty fostered a *linear delineation* approach to equine imagery; second, the modern period – under the impact of Western art – saw a turn toward expressive ink-wash painting. Throughout these transitions, the interplay between "storage memory" and "functional memory" persisted: the former embodied in the transmission of calligraphic brushwork and ink-wash modeling techniques; the latter in the evolving spiritual content, from the Song literati's rational pursuit of *gewu zhizhi* ("investigating things to extend knowledge") to the symbolic nationalism of Xu Beihong's horses, where technical innovation corresponded directly with transformations in cultural meaning. The strong infusion of Western modernist concepts ultimately freed horse painting from older constraints, enabling its integration into global art and its shift toward subjective, autonomous expression.

In the Song dynasty (960–1279), the ruling elite cultivated refined literary and artistic tastes, while neglect of military affairs led to a decline in horse administration. In painting, the emergence of *wenrenhua* (literati painting) promoted a restrained, elegant aesthetic that supplanted the sumptuous craftsmanship of the Tang. Representative artists include Li Gonglin, Li Tang, and Chen Juzhong.

Li Gonglin's *Five Horses* (Figure 6) depicts five tribute steeds from the Western Regions, rendered with precise linear outlines softened by light ink washes, exemplifying the understated spirit of literati horse painting. The *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings*

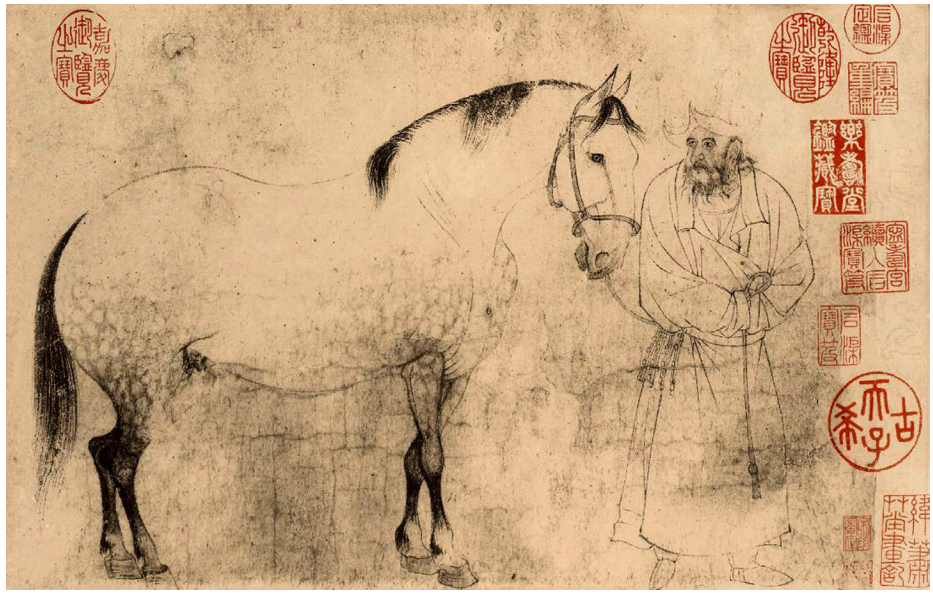

Figure 6. Li Gonglin's *Five Horses* (detail), Song Dynasty
(Collection of Tokyo National Museum, Japan) (Chen 2014: 84).



Figure 7. Zhao Mengfu's *Training Horses*, Yuan Dynasty
(Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 78).

(宣和画谱) remarks: "Generally speaking, Gonglin prioritizes conceptual intention, with compositional arrangement and ornament as secondary" (Yu 2016: 131). Here, "conceptual intention" refers to capturing the horse's temperament, making spiritual expression paramount, and subordinating form and color. Though monochromatic and devoid of polychrome flourish, Li's variations in brushwork allow viewers to sense the horses' robust physique and extraordinary bearing.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the Mongol rulers – an equestrian people – revitalized horse administration and horse culture, triggering a renaissance in equine art. The Yuan *jamuci* postal relay system, with its vast network of courier stations, dramatically increased demand for horses and stimulated breeding industries. The era's foremost horse painter, Zhao Mengfu, upheld the principle of "calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin," incorporating calligraphic brushwork into his compositions. His innovation lay in situating horses within natural environments, infusing the work with an authentic, everyday atmosphere. In *Training Horses* (Figure 7),a groom leads steeds against the wind, vividly evoking the pastoral life of the steppe.

In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), foreign cultural influences began to permeate Chinese painting. While horse painting adopted some Western concepts, it experienced no fundamental transformation. Artistic achievement lagged the vigor of the Han–Tang and the sophistication of the Jin–Yuan periods. Court painters largely replicated Tang–Song conventions, with subject matter confined to imperial banquets and palace stables.

From the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) onward, the intense encounter between Chinese and Western art ushered in a new phase. The Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) transformed traditional *gongbi* techniques by combining Western perspective with inherent color rendering, creating a Sino-Western synthesis. His *Ten Prized Steeds: Snow-Spotted Eagle* (Figure 8) demonstrates precise rendering of form, structure, and proportion, achieving the verisimilitude of Western oil painting and exerting significant influence at court.



Figure 8. Giuseppe Castiglione's *Ten Prized Steeds: Xuediandiao*, Qing Dynasty (Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 19).

By the late 19th century, folk artists such as Ni Tian and Ren Yi experimented with *xieyi* (freehand) horse painting in ink wash. Among Shanghai School painters, some works approached the *mogu* ("boneless") style, which models form without contour lines, relying solely on ink wash. Yet, lacking integration of Western anatomical knowledge, these works fell short of a structural breakthrough.

The decisive transformation of modern ink-wash horse painting came with Xu Beihong, hailed as "the foremost master of freehand horse painting." In 1919, while studying at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris under the academic painter Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, Xu was deeply influenced by Western aesthetics. Integrating Western painting theory with Chinese ink-wash traditions, he pioneered a new expressive paradigm. His *Galloping Horse* (Figure 9) broke free from formulaic convention while maintaining a distinctively Chinese spatial ethos. As French art historian Philippe Cinquini observed, "Xu's negative space is not absence but pneumatic extension; the horse dissolves into atmosphere, reminding the viewer that Chinese cosmology renders nature and animal as interstitial breath. In Géricault, by contrast, the horse's flank becomes a tensed spring, its vascular

bulges a clockwork of anatomical certainty – the canvas traps vitality as torque" (Cinquini 2023: 199).

By the 1930s, amid the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Xu's equine imagery shifted from literati refinement to national spirit, often portraying unbridled horses running free – symbolizing the collective memory of the *dragon–horse spirit*.

From a historical perspective, the technical evolution of Chinese horse painting can be summarized as three stages – engraving, meticulous brushwork, and freehand expression – corresponding to the stylistic arc from crude to refined to bold. This aligns with Hegel's tripartite progression of symbolic, classical, and romantic art, reflecting universal patterns in artistic development. The interaction of "storage memory" (technical transmission) and "functional memory" (spiritual renewal) has propelled the tradition from classical paradigms into modern forms, forming a complete genealogy of the unity between *form* and *spirit* in Chinese horse painting (Table 2). The driving force behind this synthesis lies in the deep cultural genes established by creation myths such as the *River Chart and Luo Script*.

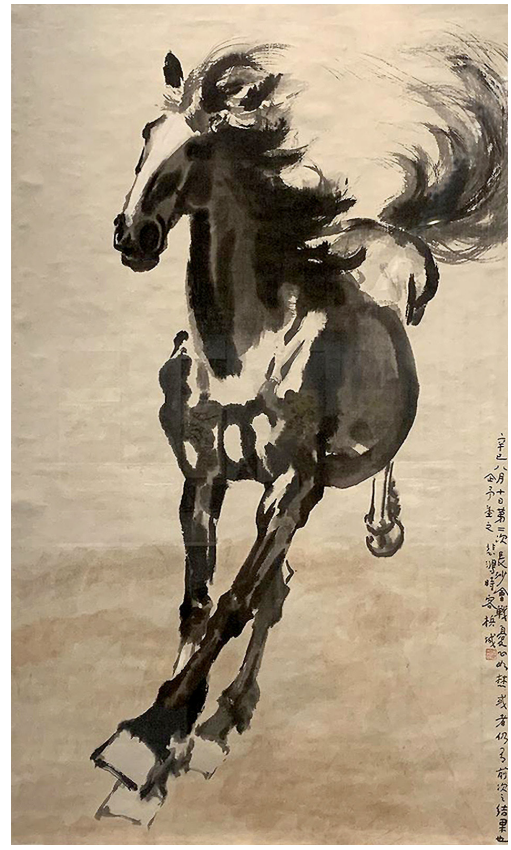

Figure 9. Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horse*, Modern Period (Collection of Xu Beihong Memorial Hall).

3. Spiritual dimension: the national cultural spirit of the dragon–horse totem

The ancient *Hetu Luoshu* (河图洛书) mythology sanctified the horse, giving rise to "dragon-horse" (*longma*) – a symbolic synthesis of the dragon totem and the noble qualities of the horse. In Chinese cosmology, this image became a national totem. As Jan Assmann has observed, such mythic narratives lie at the core of cultural symbol formation. The *Book of Changes* conceptualized the dragon-horse as a cosmological vehicle, enabling the *dragon–horse spirit* (*longma jingshen*) to be crystallized and transmitted through the dual records of text and image. As a result, horse painting

Table 2. Genealogy of form-spirit evolution in Chinese horse painting

Period	Author	Representative work	Medium	Technique (storage memory)	Artistic characteristics	Spirit (functional memory)	Current collection location
Prehistoric	Anonymous	Rock art, Damaidi, Gansu	Rock	Engraving	Rough linear modeling	Survival worship	Damaidi, Gansu
Western Zhou	Anonymous	"马" on the Da Yu Ding	Bronze	Casting and engraving	Symbolic pictograph	Ritual symbol	National Museum of China
Han Dynasty	Anonymous	Chariot and Horse Procession	Slate	Carving	Standardized integration of dragon-horse	Symbol of royal power	Wu Family Cemetery Stele Museum
Eastern Jin Dynasty	Gukaizhi	The Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Detailed rendering	Serpentine neck and dragon-like body	Palace Museum, Beijing
Tang Dynasty	Han Gan	Night-Shining White	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Gorgeous and delicate	Aura of a Golden Age	Metropolitan Museum of Art, USA
Song Dynasty	Li Gonglin	Five Horses	Silk	Bai Miao (plain drawing)	Simple and elegant	Philosophical inquiry through observation	Tokyo National Museum, Japan
Yuan Dynasty	Zhao Mengfu	Taming the Steed	Paper	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Incorporating calligraphic brushwork	Literati elegance	National Palace Museum, Taipei
Qing Dynasty	Giuseppe Castiglione	Horses: Snow Speckled	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Realistic modeling and color	Imperial aura	National Palace Museum, Taipei
Modern Era	Xu Beihong	Galloping Horse	Paper	Freehand brushwork	Ink-wash freehand style	National resistance	Xu Beihong Memorial Hall

across the millennia has remained closely linked to the dragon, continually infused with national spirit. The ongoing reinterpretation of this primal symbol – adapting to historical changes – constitutes a process of "functional memory," ensuring the *dragon–horse spirit's* enduring vitality.

3.1. Longma futu: the influence of the dragon–horse concept on equine art

Tracing this cultural gene leads inevitably to the *longma* concept. Many scholars contend that the Chinese dragon totem emerged from the fusion of multiple animal totems, with the horse's head as a principal element. Wen Yiduo argued: "The dragon is a totemic being – an imagined creature existing only in symbolic form – created by combining many different totems" (Shi 2011: 16).

The Han-dynasty text *Shangshu Zhonghou·Wohe Ji* (尚书中侯·握河记) recounts: "When Fuxi ruled the world, a dragon-horse bearing a diagram emerged from the Yellow River" (Xia 2000: 4710). According to this foundational myth, the culture hero Fuxi, upon seeing a dragon-horse rising from the river with mysterious markings, derived the Eight Trigrams from them, thus inaugurating Chinese civilization. This image – the *longma futu* (龙马负图, "dragon-horse bearing the diagram") – became the central symbol of cultural genesis (Figure 10).

As the bearer of the River Chart, the dragon-horse was imbued with sacred authority, becoming a lasting emblem of auspiciousness and the cultural archetype of the *dragon–horse spirit*. Viewed cross-culturally, this fusion of sanctity and vitality is distinctive. In Chinese thought, the *longma* synthesizes dragon-like celestial potency with the horse's earthly vigor to create a triadic unity of *animal–nature–cosmos*. By contrast, Western equestrian imagery – such as the charger in the legend of St. George – operates within a binary logic of *saint–beast*, severing the horse from cosmological resonance and subordinating it to a human-centered moral narrative (Sterckx 2023: 7).

In Western traditions, dragons are often cast as embodiments of evil. As Chen notes, "A typical theme is the 'guardian dragon'. While often endowed with

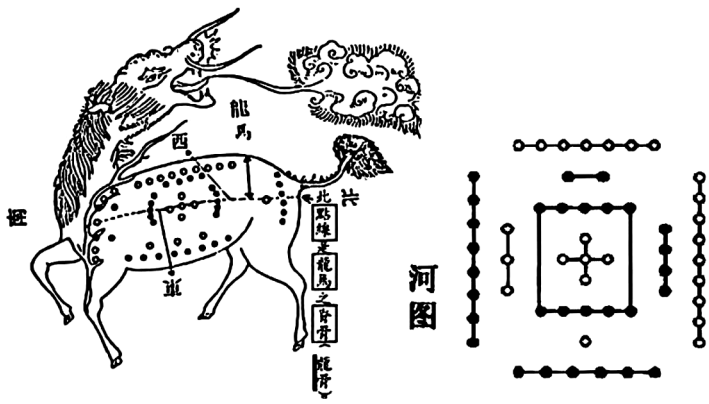

Figure 10. *Longma futu*: the dragon-horse bearing the diagram and mystical symbols (Cai 2022: 12).



Figure 11. *Horned Deity Riding Scene*, Han Dynasty
(Collection of Hunan Provincial Museum) (Fu 2023: 86).

protective abilities, their fierce and terrifying appearance perpetually instills unease" (Chen 2021: 78). Horses in such narratives serve largely as instrumental mounts for knights, reinforcing conqueror–conquered dualities. In contrast, the Eastern conception of *dragon–horse intertextuality* pursues a unity of *form* and *spirit*, rooted in the cosmological worldview of "Heaven's vigorous movement," rather than adversarial logic.

From the pre-Qin through Han dynasties, dragon–horse symbolism became increasingly integrated into artistic creation. For example, the lacquered coffin from the Mawangdui Han tomb features mythical beasts with elongated, flowing forms and ribbon-like tails – characteristics that evoke the dragon–horse aesthetic through cloud-like movement (Figure 11). During this period, horse imagery was enriched by cultural symbols such as the "celestial horse" (*tianma* 天马) *and the "divine steed"* (*shenju* 神驹), reflecting its ever-rising sociocultural status.

By the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties, horse painting had begun to free itself from purely religious or utilitarian functions, moving toward realism. Gu Kaizhi's "spirit-transmission" theory emphasized conveying a horse's inner vitality rather than merely replicating its external form, elevating the genre into a medium of spiritual expression. From the Sui and Tang onward, this tendency toward realism was reinforced by the flourishing "horse physiognomy culture" (*xiangma shu*). Illustrated manuals such as *The Collection on Stable Management and Horse Care* (司牧安骥集) included diagrams of superior horses (Figure 12) that described ideal traits like "eyes like hanging bells" and "ears like carved bamboo" – standards that shaped artists' depictions of equine excellence.



Figure 12. *Painting of Fine Horses*, Tang Dynasty,
from Li Shi's *Collection on Stable Management and Horse Care* (Li et al. 2004: 1).

3.2. The dragon–horse spirit: cultural symbolism and iconographic interpretation

The *dragon–horse spirit* – a fusion of dragon totemism and the horse's virtues – has evolved over centuries into a potent symbol of national character. The earliest known dragon image, a shell-inlaid figure excavated from Tomb M45 at the Xishuipo site in Puyang, Henan (c. 6500 years ago), already exhibits equine cranial features, underscoring the deep historical roots of this fusion. Eastern Han scholar Wang Fu observed that "the dragon's form in popular depiction often shows a horse's head with a serpentine tail" (Zhang 2024: 13). The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经·图赞》) even claims, "Horses are essentially of dragon essence, emerging from aquatic origins" (Xu 2024: 34). Astronomically, the horse deity corresponds to *Tiansi* (天驷), the fourth lunar mansion in the Eastern Azure Dragon constellation, escorting the moon across the heavens as the "Divine Steed of Heaven and Earth."

Philosophically, the *Book of Changes* encapsulated this union with the maxim: "Horses travel a thousand *li* alongside dragons." This marks the transformation of dragon–horse symbolism from mythic to metaphysical, crystallizing into a moral and cultural ideal. By the Tang dynasty, the concept was deeply embedded in literature and art. Kong Yingda explained in *Zhouyi Zhengyi*: "Nothing surpasses dragons in traversing the heavens; nothing surpasses horses in traversing the earth" (Li 1999: 1). Poets like Li Ye invoked the *dragon–horse spirit* to symbolize resilience and grandeur.

Applying Panofsky's three-tiered iconological method, one can trace the image's development:

Naturalistic level – depictions emphasize morphological likeness, as in the Han *Procession of Chariots and Horses*, where concise outlines and galloping legs convey dynamism.

Conventional level – equine imagery acquires symbolic associations, as in the *Six Steeds of Zhaoling*, where *form* (*xing*) serves to project *spirit* (*shen*) – valor, loyalty, and dynastic legitimacy.

Intrinsic level – the horse becomes a projection of national ethos, as in Yuan literati painting, where calligraphic brushwork infuses the image with transcendental ideals; in modern ink painting, liberated brushwork renews the *dragon–horse spirit* in a contemporary key.

Through the lens of cultural memory theory, brushwork and ink serve as vehicles of "storage memory," ensuring the recognizability of form. At the same time, evolving meanings activate "functional memory," reconstructing the relationship of *form* and *spirit* to meet the cultural needs of each era. In this way, the *dragon–horse spirit* endures as a "living cultural memory" spanning millennia.

3.3. Political metaphor: horse imagery as political discourse

Horse imagery in Chinese painting has always been deeply entangled with political discourse. In the age of cold weapons, horses were strategic assets, and successive dynasties established comprehensive horse administration systems. The *Book of Rites: Monthly Ordinances* notes: "In the second month of summer … mares are separated from the herd, stallions are tethered, and horse administration is implemented" (Jiang 1997: 202). Such systems directly influenced the production and symbolic use of equine art.



Figure 13. *Bronze horse of the Eastern Han Dynasty* (Collection of Baoding Museum, Hebei Province; photograph by the author).

In Chinese thought, the fine horse often served as a metaphor for human talent. The *Mozi* observes: "A fine horse is difficult to ride, yet it can bear heavy loads and travel great distances; exceptional talent is difficult to manage, yet it can bring honor to the ruler" (Fang 2015: 6). Once horse imagery became a symbol of ritual governance, its political messaging was embedded in art – from the bronze chariots of "the Son of Heaven's six-horse team" (Shen 1995: 293) in the Qin dynasty to the monumental stone horses at Huo Qubing's tomb (Figure 13). As Eastern Han general Ma Yuan stated: "Horses are the foundation of armored troops and the great utility of the state" (Fan 2007: 251), confirming horses' strategic value and important status as "instruments of state" during that period.

In the Tang, equine imagery conveyed status in leisure scenes, grandeur in ceremonial depictions, and martial pride in frontier hunting paintings. In the Song, Li Gonglin's



Figure 14. Ren Xianzuo's *Three Steeds*, Yuan Dynasty
(Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing) (Chen 2014: 237).

portrayals of tribute horses from frontier polities served tributary propaganda. In the Yuan, works like Zhang Yu's *Wenji's Return to Han* and Ren Xianzuo's *Three Steeds* (Figure 14) explicitly engaged in diplomatic narratives. In the Qing, Giuseppe Castiglione's court paintings – such as *One Hundred Horses* – combined Western realism with Chinese political symbolism, projecting the image of a multiethnic, cosmologically ordered empire.

From a semiotic perspective, the political construction of animal symbols is instructive. Yet the value orientation differs markedly: in Nazi Germany, animal symbols were alienated into tools of violence; in Chinese horse painting, the *dragon–horse spirit* conveyed humanistic ideals of harmony between humanity and nature, underscoring the unique ethos of Eastern cultural symbols.

4. Aesthetic dimension: the oriental aesthetic spirit of unity between form and spirit

In the lineage of Chinese aesthetics, the concept of the *unity between form and spirit* (*xing shen he yi*) stands as one of the most enduring artistic principles. Applied to horse painting, it is not merely a technical aim but a comprehensive philosophy – one that integrates the artist's observational precision, mastery of brush and ink, and cultivation of inner sensibility. This unity is at once an ontological proposition, an

epistemological approach, and an aesthetic criterion, guiding the transformation of natural forms into spiritual symbols.

The *form* (*xing*) refers to the tangible appearance – the horse's physical contours, musculature, and gait – while *spirit* (*shen*) denotes its inner vitality, temperament, and essence. As Xie He articulated in his *Six Laws of Painting* (*Liu Fa*), the highest standard is *qiyun shengdong* ("spirit resonance, life-motion") (Xie and Yao 2016: 1), in which brushwork breathes life into the subject. This principle is particularly resonant in horse painting, where a fractional misjudgment in proportion or line may dissipate the impression of strength and grace, and where failure to convey vitality results in mere anatomical likeness devoid of soul.

4.1. Theoretical foundations in Chinese aesthetics

From the *Book of Changes* to Tang–Song painting treatises, Chinese aesthetic thought consistently sought a balance between the external and the internal, rejecting mechanical imitation. Zong Bing's *Introduction to Painting* (*Huashu*) stressed that "painting models form by following its spirit." Gu Kaizhi's *On the Transmission of Spirit* (*Chuanshen Lun*) declared that capturing the spirit was superior to mere resemblance. This aesthetic heritage shaped the evaluative vocabulary of later horse painters, for whom the measure of success lay in whether the viewer could "hear the neigh and feel the wind" when standing before the painting.

The *Han Feizi: Outer Commentaries, Left Volume* (韩非子·外储说左上) records: "A guest painter worked for the King of Qi. The King of Qi asked: 'What is most difficult to paint?' He replied: 'Dogs and horses are most difficult.' 'What is easiest?' He replied: 'Ghosts and spirits are easiest.' Dogs and horses are familiar to people. They appear before us morning and evening, and cannot be approximated, hence the difficulty. Ghosts and spirits are formless entities that do not appear before us, hence their ease of depiction" (Han 2010: 402).

When the King of Qi once asked a court painter what subjects were the hardest and easiest to depict, the reply was unexpected: dogs and horses were the most difficult, while ghosts and spirits were the easiest. The reasoning was straightforward. Dogs and horses are ever-present in daily life, their forms deeply imprinted on the observer's mind; this familiarity makes any flaw in their portrayal instantly apparent, thus raising the challenge of faithful depiction. By contrast, ghosts and spirits possess no fixed appearance and never present themselves to the human eye, granting the artist far greater freedom and, paradoxically, making them easier to paint.

This exchange suggests that by the pre-Qin era, horse painting had already moved beyond the abstract and mystical imagery characteristic of ritual vessel motifs, turning toward a secular, realist approach to representation (Xu 2007: 145). The British poet and critic Stephen Spender observed in his 1930s essay *Social Purpose and the Artist's Attitude* that "historically, the development of art has primarily taken the direction of expanding realism" (Xu 2007: 146). This observation aligns with the evidence that Chinese painting, too, underwent a distinct realist phase.

However, this tendency toward formal likeness began to shift during the Han dynasty. The *Huainanzi* introduced the aesthetic principle of "governing form,"

stating: "When spirit leads, form benefits; when form dominates, spirit suffers" (Li and Xu 1988: 82). This laid the groundwork for prioritizing spirit over form – the philosophy of "emphasizing spirit above form, and conveying spirit through form." The concept finds a cross-cultural echo in Aristotle's notion of the "formal cause," in which the intrinsic essence determines the outward appearance, reflecting a shared Eastern and Western recognition that the inner reality shapes the visible form.

In the Wei–Jin period, the dialectic of *form* and *spirit* reached a decisive turning point. Gu Kaizhi's celebrated "theory of spirit transmission" marked the departure from mere objective mimesis toward the active construction of spirit. Xu Fuguan aptly noted: "Realism is part of an artist's training, but it is not the essence of what makes art art" (Xu 2007: 146). This prioritization of spiritual pursuit gradually led Chinese painters – especially in equine art – to place the conveyance of the horse's inner vitality above all technical concerns.

In *The Compelling Image*, James Cahill contrasts the representational strategies of Western and late Ming Chinese painting, crystallizing a core distinction in the traditional form–spirit paradigm: "If our parallel is valid, it would suggest that a major cause for the rejection both of Western styles in painting and of the innovations of Chang Hung was that something was missing from them which corresponded to the general principles and spiritual and humanistic values that the Chinese felt to be lacking in Western scientific thought and technology." (Cahill 1982: 35). This contrast illuminates the essence of Chinese form–spirit aesthetics. Form is not an end but a medium; it is rendered just sufficient to allow spirit to emerge, revealing a hierarchy in which spirit governs form rather than the other way around.

Guided by the ideal of "spiritual resemblance," horse painting across the ages has continually adapted to changing understandings of the relationship between *form* and *spirit*. In the Wei–Jin period, the "serpentine neck and draconic body" expressed divinity through stylized morphology; in the Tang, the robust and muscular forms conveyed the grandeur of a flourishing empire; in the Yuan, literati painters infused horses with the refined temperament of calligraphic brushwork; and in the modern era, expressionistic ink paintings – inflected with Western techniques – have expanded the possibilities of form–spirit interplay through bold experimentation with materials. While the styles shifted with each epoch, the balanced negotiation of *form* and *spirit* has consistently mirrored both the spirit of the times and the painter's vision.

From a comparative East–West perspective, differences in the spiritual aims, formal treatment, and narrative strategies of horse painting stem from distinct philosophical foundations, producing divergent aesthetic ideals (Table 3). Although Chinese horse painting once embraced realism, it ultimately sought to transcend surface likeness in pursuit of spiritual essence. This orientation is rooted in the Chinese philosophical ideal of the "unity of heaven and humanity," which directs art beyond mere representation toward the realm of life-force and spirit.

The cultural roots of this approach lie in the Chinese cosmological view of *qi*, the vital energy pervading all beings. The horse, as a dynamic embodiment of *qi*, became an ideal vehicle for exploring the interplay between vitality and form. Thus,

in literati discourse, *form* was never a static outline but a crystallization of motion, and *spirit* was not an abstract attribute but a visible, rhythmic pulse.

Table 3. Comparison of aesthetic paradigms in traditional Chinese and Western horse painting

Comparative dimensions	Traditional Chinese horse painting	Traditional Western horse painting
Philosophical foundation	Rooted in the "unity of heaven and humanity" concept, emphasizing the harmonious integration and mutual generation of subject and object	Based on "subject-object dualism," rational thinking emphasizes observation and representation of nature
Spiritual pursuit centers on "spiritual resemblance"	Centered on "spiritual resemblance," pursuing the "unity of *form* and *spirit*," bearing natural enlightenment, and embodying the spiritual aspirations of the nation	Centered on "formal resemblance," it serves as a vehicle for power and heroism, reconstructing reality while manifesting intrinsic human value
Stylistic characteristics	Linear modeling: expressing horse imagery through calligraphic line variations	Volumetric chiaroscuro modeling: creating realistic three-dimensional horse forms through light, shadow, and color manipulation
Spatial treatment	A scattered perspective, with an interplay of solid and void elements, creates a "subject-object unity" aesthetic, in which the spatial configuration adapts to compositional requirements	Focal perspective adheres to scientific principles, establishing artistic space that conforms to visual perspective laws
Color application	Subjective color usage employs restrained minimalism, grounded in inherent hues, while skillfully incorporating ink tones to achieve harmonious unity between chromatic expression and artistic conception	Objective color usage employs scientific color mixing and applies chromatic theory to create authentic representations of horses and their environments
Narrative expression	Emphasizes representation through symbolic expression, conveying philosophical reflections on nature, society, or human existence through horse demeanor and bearing	Emphasizes reproduction through horse dynamics and atmospheric staging to manifest power, passion, or narrative progression
Representative works	Li Gonglin's *Five Horses*, Zhao Mengfu's *Training Horses*, Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horses*	Jacques Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps,* Peter Paul Rubens' *Saint George Battles the Dragon*, Theodore Gericault's *The Wild Horse Race at Rome*.

4.2. Stylistic pathways and cross-cultural contrast

The path toward unity between *form* and *spirit* in horse painting historically developed along two stylistic routes:

Meticulous Realism (*gongbi*) – Exemplified by Han Gan of the Tang dynasty, this approach involves exacting observation, layered brushwork, and the careful modulation of ink and color to replicate the anatomical truth of the horse. In works like *Night-Shining White*, the steed's taut muscles, alert ears, and tense stance communicate not only physical precision but a poised readiness to spring forward. The *form* is rendered faithfully, but it is the poised, almost audible breath that conveys the *spirit*.

Freehand Expression (*xieyi*) – Flourishing in the Yuan and modern periods, this style prioritizes expressive brush strokes and dynamic composition over fine detail. Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horses*, often painted with a few sweeping lines, evoke the sensation of hooves pounding the earth and manes swept by the wind. Here, *form* is simplified to its kinetic essentials, allowing *spirit* to dominate.

Between these extremes, many painters pursued a *gong–xie* synthesis, balancing structural fidelity with expressive liberty, thus embodying the Chinese dictum that "likeness lies between form and formlessness."

The Eastern ideal of *xing shen he yi* contrasts sharply with the dominant trajectory of Western equestrian art, which – shaped by the legacy of ancient Greece and the Renaissance – often privileged anatomical exactitude and perspectival illusion. In Leonardo da Vinci's equestrian studies, for example, the horse is constructed from meticulous skeletal and muscular diagrams, aiming to perfect the *form* in service of verisimilitude.

By contrast, Chinese painters regarded the outward form as a conduit for inner essence rather than an end in itself. Chinese painting, seeking to recreate the rhythmic alternation of fullness and emptiness, movement and stillness, mirrors the *yin–yang* interplay of the cosmos. This orientation explains why Chinese horse painting may omit shadows or ignore single-point perspective – choices that, rather than signaling deficiency, affirm the primacy of spiritual evocation over optical realism.

4.3. Case studies in the unity of form and spirit

Li Gonglin's Tribute Horses – Through minimal use of color and careful line modulation, Li's work captures the restrained dignity of the horses, projecting their noble origins without ostentation. The subtle inflection of each line corresponds to a shift in the animal's temperament – serene, wary, spirited – embodying *spirit* through disciplined *form*.

Zhao Mengfu's Pastoral Horses – By placing horses in relaxed, rural settings, Zhao softened their grandeur, infusing them with a sense of literati leisure. The brushwork borrows from running script (*xingshu*) calligraphy, allowing the viewer to sense the pulse of life in the bend of a neck or the flick of a tail.

Xu Beihong's Galloping Herds – Xu's dynamic compositions dissolve the boundary between individual form and collective energy. His ink horses, painted in



Figure 15. Zhang Leyi's *Three Galloping Horses*, contemporary, the author's collection.

the turbulence of wartime, channel the national ethos into motion – hooves become the beat of resistance, manes the banners of resilience.

Zhang Leyi's Galloping Horses – Having studied both Eastern and Western traditions, Leyi harmonized horses with natural spatial environments through rigorous modeling. His *Galloping Horses* creates artistic conception through three horses in unbridled motion (Figure 15), achieving innovative transformation of East–West techniques with remarkable success in synthesis pathways.

In the Chinese context, achieving unity between *form* and *spirit* in horse painting is more than an artistic technique; it is a moral and philosophical act. The artist must harmonize perceptual observation with empathetic insight, aligning their *qi* with the subject's. Only then can the painting transcend depiction to become a site of communion between human and horse, culture and nature, present and past.

As such, the unity between *form* and *spirit* is not merely a criterion for aesthetic judgment but a living bridge across time, enabling the horse – whether etched in Neolithic rock, brushed onto Song silk, or splashed in modern ink – to carry forward the *dragon–horse spirit* into the shared cultural memory of the nation.

5. Conclusion

From prehistoric rock engravings to modern ink-wash masterpieces, the history of Chinese horse painting unfolds as a continuous dialogue between *form* and *spirit*, shaped by the currents of cultural memory. Across five millennia, the horse has evolved from a productive tool and ritual subject into a cultural emblem, a political metaphor, and an aesthetic ideal. The *dragon–horse spirit*, born of mythic synthesis, has served as both the symbolic anchor and the creative catalyst of this tradition, ensuring that each age reinterprets the horse in accordance with its own spiritual and social needs.

Historically, the trajectory of Chinese horse painting can be seen as a tripartite arc: the **symbolic stage** of early petroglyphs and oracle-bone pictographs, where sacred meaning outweighed anatomical accuracy; the **classical stage** of Tang and Song paradigms, where *form* and *spirit* attained structural and expressive harmony; and the **romantic–expressive stage** of modern ink wash, where the liberation of brushwork and infusion of Western techniques revitalized the tradition without erasing its cultural essence.

Spiritually, the fusion of dragon totemism and equine virtues has endowed horse imagery with a unique cosmological resonance. Unlike the adversarial horse–dragon binary in Western iconography, the Chinese *longma* embodies a harmonious unity of Heaven's vigor and Earth's vitality. This worldview underlies the enduring aesthetic of *xing shen he yi* – the conviction that physical form is inseparable from inner essence, and that true art lies in their mutual illumination.

Aesthetically, the achievement of unity between *form* and *spirit* demands both technical mastery and moral cultivation. Whether through the meticulous realism of Han Gan, the literati elegance of Li Gonglin, the calligraphic vitality of Zhao Mengfu, or the nationalistic dynamism of Xu Beihong, the greatest horse painters have not only depicted horses but conversed with them – matching the rhythm of their *qi* to that of their subjects. In doing so, they have transformed representation into communion and image into cultural legacy.

In the global art context, Chinese horse painting offers an alternative paradigm to Western mimesis: an art that seeks resonance over replication, breath over blueprint, and a balance between likeness and transcendence. In this lies its contemporary significance. As intercultural exchange deepens, the tradition's vitality will depend not on mere preservation but on creative transformation – just as Xu Beihong absorbed Western realism into the Chinese ink tradition, future artists may draw from global visual languages while remaining rooted in the cultural soil of the *dragon–horse spirit*.

Ultimately, the art of horse painting in China is a testament to the enduring power of cultural symbols to bridge epochs, mediums, and civilizations. Between *form* and *spirit*, it carries forward not only the image of the horse but the living pulse of the nation's aesthetic, moral, and cosmological imagination.

Data availability statement

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TOTEMIC ANIMALS AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE: AN ETHNOZOOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FROM EASTERN INDONESIA

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Abstract. The Kabasaran dance of the Minahasan ethnic group in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, was examined as a cultural practice integrating animal symbolism, ritual performance, and ecological ethics. This study documented animal representations in Kabasaran costumes and instruments, explored their interpretations among practitioners in relation to identity and cosmology, and assessed how material transformations influenced conservation-related practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with performers, cultural experts, and artisans, complemented by direct observation of performances and costume production. Thirteen animal species, including mammals, birds, and reptiles, were identified as being represented through original body parts and symbolic substitutes. The findings showed that animal elements were perceived as active cultural agents conveying social, spiritual, and ecological meanings rather than merely decorative motifs. Material substitutions using resin, metal, or wood were interpreted as adaptive strategies that maintained ritual continuity while reducing pressure on forest wildlife. These practices were embedded in local traditions prior to formal conservation regulations.

Keywords: Kabasaran dance, ethnozoology, animal symbolism, ritual performance, conservation ethics, Minahasa

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1. Introduction

Traditional dance has long been recognised as a cultural medium through which ecological knowledge, ethical values, and cosmological understanding are articulated and transmitted across generations. Within many indigenous societies, dance functions not merely as aesthetic performance but as a living archive of collective memory, encoding relationships between humans, non-humans, and the surrounding environment (Kadali 2024, Yang 2024). As such, folk and ritual dances provide an important analytical entry point for examining how communities conceptualise their position within the natural world and negotiate moral obligations towards it (Kaur 2024).

Indonesia, widely acknowledged for its ethnic and cultural diversity, offers a particularly rich context for the study of traditional performance. Across the archipelago, dances have evolved within specific socio-cultural settings and have been sustained through intergenerational transmission, forming distinctive traditions that remain central to local identities. Several dances retain elements associated with prehistoric belief systems and ritual practices, including the Giring-giring, Hudoq, and Monong Dayak dances of Kalimantan, the Tortor dance of Batak communities in North Sumatra, and the Mentawai dances known as Turuk Uliat Bilou and Turuk Uliat Manyang (Caturwati 2023). These performances are commonly classified as folk dances, as they are embedded within particular ethnic groups and function simultaneously as ritual expressions with strong symbolic and spiritual dimensions.

Within this broader cultural landscape, the ritual dance known as Kabasaran represents a distinctive expression of Minahasan cultural identity in North Sulawesi, Indonesia (Rahman 2022, Sunarmi and Luntungan 2019). Across Minahasan communities, the dance is referred to by several names, including Kabalarian, Kawasaran, Sakalele, or Cakalele, reflecting linguistic diversity and locally grounded interpretations of shared tradition (Tumuju 2014). Kabasaran was formally recognised as part of the intangible cultural heritage of North Sulawesi in 2014, marking its acknowledged significance within regional cultural history (Mokodongan and Djakaria 2022).

Historically, Kabasaran functioned as a war dance performed by men designated as village guardians, through whom ideals of courage, vigilance, and communal protection were embodied (Kaunang 2022). Beyond its martial character, the dance operated as a cosmological ritual that affirmed the community's readiness to defend both its territory and its relationship with ancestral and non-human forces (Rahman 2022). Following the cessation of inter-village warfare, Kabasaran performers gradually assumed new ceremonial roles, often assisting a ritual specialist known as *Walian*. During the Dutch colonial period in the mid-nineteenth century, the dance was further adapted into a welcoming performance, marking a significant transformation in its social function (Graafland and Montolalu 1991, Mokodongan and Djakaria 2022). In subsequent decades, Kabasaran continued to evolve and is now commonly presented in public ceremonies, cultural festivals, and tourism events, extending its meaning beyond the original village-based ritual context.

Costume and performance attributes constitute central elements of Kabasaran. Earlier forms of the dance employed costumes made from bark cloth, while later adaptations introduced textile fabrics, predominantly in red tones. A range of accessories, including headgear, headbands, necklaces, bracelets, spears, and shields, completes the dancers' appearance. Of particular significance is the use of ornaments derived from animal body parts, which historically served not only decorative purposes but also conveyed symbolic meanings embedded within Minahasan cosmology (Kaunang 2022).

Despite their cultural importance, the symbolic and ecological dimensions of animal-based ornaments in Kabasaran have received limited scholarly attention. Previous studies have largely focused on the historical development of the dance (Nismawati et al. 2021) and its social and performative functions (Lala et al. 2021, Rahman 2022). Far fewer studies have examined the symbolic roles of animals within the performance or analysed how shifts in material use relate to contemporary conservation ethics. This gap is noteworthy, as animal motifs in Kabasaran operate simultaneously at aesthetic, spiritual, ecological, and ethical levels. From an ethnozoological perspective, animals represented in the dance are not treated as passive symbols but as active agents within the Minahasan symbolic universe, mediating relationships between the human, spiritual, and natural realms.

Building on this context, the present study examines the symbolic meanings of animal elements in the Kabasaran dance and analyses how these meanings intersect with issues of conservation. Specifically, the study aims to (1) document the manifestation of animal representation in costumes and performance attributes, (2) explore how these representations are interpreted by practitioners and community members in relation to identity, cosmology, and ecological knowledge, and (3) assess how transformations in materials and performance contexts are understood to influence conservation-related practices. By integrating perspectives from ethnozoology, dance semiotics, and human–animal relations, Kabasaran is situated within broader discussions of intangible cultural heritage and ecological ethics. Through this lens, the dance is approached as a dynamic cultural system in which embodied animal symbolism continues to respond to social and environmental change.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study area

The research was conducted in 2025 in Minahasa Regency, Tomohon City and Manado City, North Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The geographical location of the study area is presented in Figure 1. The study focused on the communities of the Tombulu ethnic group, where the Kabasaran dance continues to be practised as an integral element of Minahasan cultural heritage. This area was selected due to the persistence of ritual performance traditions and the continued use and reinterpretation of symbolic costume elements associated with Kabasaran.

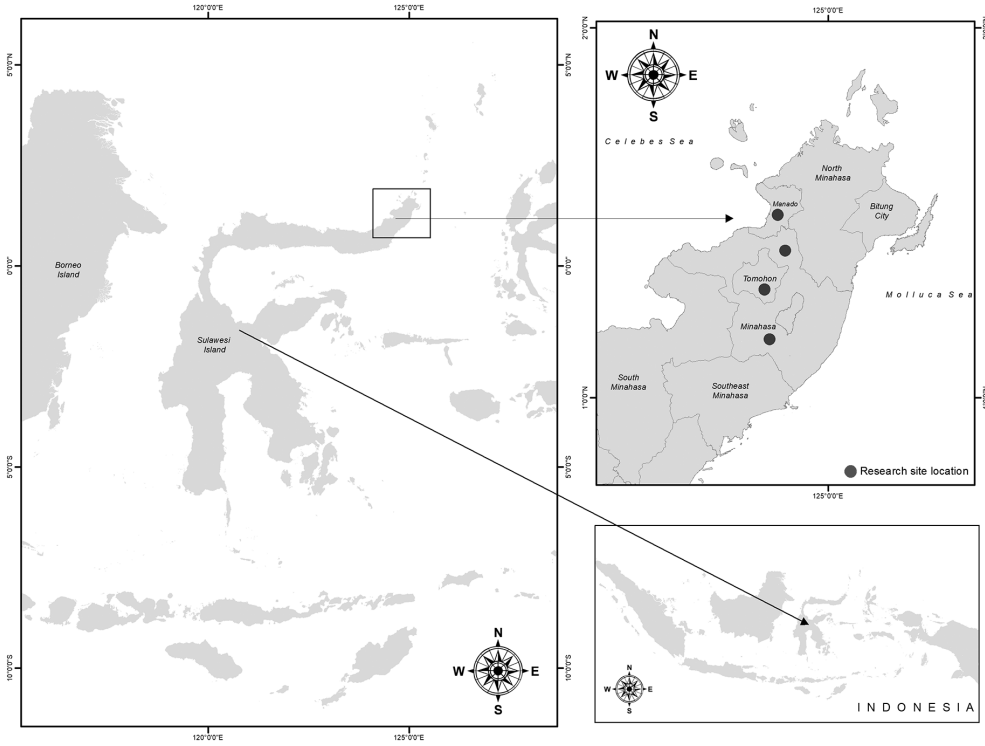

Figure 1. Location of the study area in Minahasa Regency, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, where the Kabasaran dance is practised.

2.2. Data collection and ethical considerations

A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with direct observations (Ruslin et al. 2022). Primary data were obtained through face-to-face interviews with selected participants, including Kabasaran performers, Minahasan cultural experts, and artisans involved in the production and maintenance of traditional dance costumes. Semi-structured interview guidelines were employed to allow flexibility in exploring cultural interpretations, symbolic meanings, and perceptions related to the use of animal elements and conservation practices.

In addition to interviews, direct observations were conducted during performances and in workshops where costumes were produced or maintained. Various costume models were examined in order to document the presence of animal-derived components as well as substitute materials. Observational data were recorded using standardised data sheets, which included information on costume components, animal species represented, specific animal parts referenced, and their associated symbolic meanings.

All research activities were carried out in accordance with ethical principles of cultural sensitivity, environmental responsibility, and informed consent. Prior to participation, the objectives and procedures of the research were clearly explained, and consent was obtained both verbally and in writing. Participants were informed that their contributions would be used exclusively for academic purposes, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Given the cultural and spiritual significance of the Kabasaran dance, particular attention was paid to respecting local customs and belief systems. Permissions were obtained from community leaders and cultural custodians before any documentation of performances or costume elements was undertaken. No animal materials were collected for research purposes; observations were limited exclusively to existing artefacts and costumes. This approach ensured compliance with ethical research standards while also aligning with principles of wildlife conservation.

2.3. Data validation and triangulation

To enhance reliability and credibility, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing information obtained from interviews, direct observations, and document reviews. Statements provided by participants were compared with visual documentation, written records, and existing literature on Minahasan cultural traditions. In cases where discrepancies emerged, follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain clarification.

Member checking was also undertaken by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants in order to confirm their accuracy. This process contributed to the transparency of the analysis and reduced potential researcher bias in the interpretation of cultural and symbolic meanings.

2.4. Data analysis

All qualitative data were transcribed, organised, and analysed descriptively. The analytical process was conducted in several stages. First, interview transcripts and observational notes were coded to identify recurring themes and symbolic elements. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories, including: (1) animal representations in Kabasaran costumes and performance attributes; (2) community interpretations of symbolic, ritual, and cosmological meanings; and (3) transformations in material use and their perceived implications for conservation ethics.

A comparative thematic analysis was then performed by examining relationships between field data, participant narratives, and secondary sources. This approach enabled the identification of patterns linking animal symbolism with ecological awareness and adaptive cultural practices. The findings were presented through a combination of tables, figures, and narrative descriptions, allowing visual and textual data to be integrated in order to convey the multidimensional significance of animal elements within the Kabasaran dance.

3. Results and discussion

The Kabasaran dance was historically derived from Minahasan warrior traditions and is commonly associated with the *Waranei*, ancestral warriors who were believed to protect the land and community of Minahasa. In its contemporary form, Kabasaran is no longer confined to martial or ritual contexts but is widely performed during welcoming ceremonies, customary rituals, weddings, funerals, and other significant social events. This transformation reflects the dynamic nature of the dance as it continues to be recontextualised within changing social and cultural settings while retaining its symbolic core.

The analysis revealed that a minimum of 13 animal species were represented in the elements of the Kabasaran dance, either through the use of original animal body parts or through symbolic and artistic representations. These animals were incorporated primarily into costume accessories and performance attributes, indicating their central role in the visual and symbolic composition of the dance. When classified taxonomically, mammals constituted the largest proportion of the represented species (seven species, 53.8%), followed by birds (four species, 30.8%), and reptiles (two species, 15.4%) (see Table 1).

Based on the originality of the materials employed, the animal elements identified in the Kabasaran dance were found to consist predominantly of authentic animal-derived components (62%), while the remainder took the form of symbolic or artistic representation (38%). Overall, approximately two-thirds of the recorded elements were associated with original animal materials, whereas the rest reflected representational substitutions. The distribution of animal-derived materials varied across different categories of dance accessories. Headgear was identified as the component most frequently incorporating animal body parts, followed by items of clothing, wrist bracelets, and necklaces, which represented the least frequently documented forms of animal-based materials utilisation. This pattern suggests a selective emphasis on body parts and accessories that are visually prominent during performance and symbolically associated with strength, protection, and ritual authority (see Figure 2).

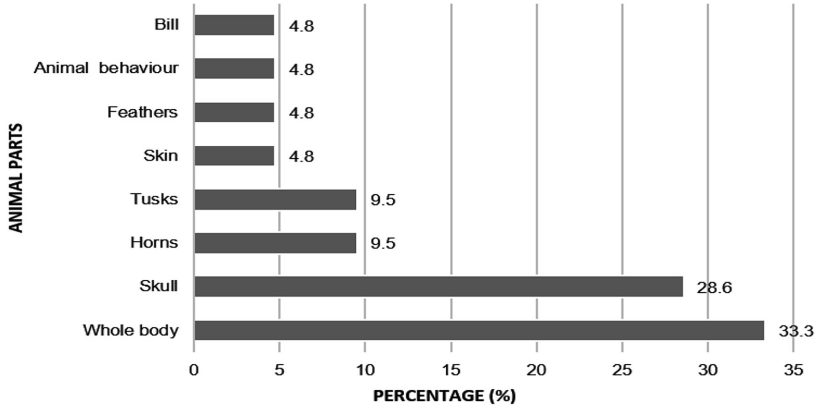

Figure 2. Percentage of animal parts used in the Kabasaran dance.

Table 1. Ethnozoological elements identified in the parts of the Kabasaran costume

Order / Family	Scientific name	Common name	Animal characteristics and behaviour	Utilisation	Items	Habitat	IUCN status	Gov. Reg. No. 106/2018 (Protected)	Endemic to Sulawesi	Symbolic meaning
Mammalia										
Artiodactyla										
Bovidae										
	Bubalus depressicornis	Lowland anoa	Horns	Original parts	Headgear	W	EN	Yes	Yes	Used by leaders, symbolising leadership, strength, and bravery
			Skull	Original parts	Clothing					Symbolising the wearer's identity as a hunter
	Bubalus quarlesi	Mountain anoa	Horns	Original parts	Headgear	W	EN	Yes	Yes	Used by leaders, symbolising leadership, strength, and bravery
			Skull	Original parts	Clothing					Symbolising the wearer's identity as a hunter
Cervidae										
	Rusa timorensis	Timor deer	Skin	Original parts	Drum skin	W	VU	Yes	No	Part of the musical instruments accompanying dancers
			Skull	Original parts	Clothing					Symbolising the wearer's identity as a hunter
Suidae										
	Sus celebensis	Sulawesi warty pig	Tusks	Original parts	Anklet, bracelet	W	NT	No	Yes	Symbolising strength
	Babyrousa celebensis	Sulawesi babirusa	Skull	Original parts	Clothing	W	VU	Yes	Yes	Symbolising the wearer's identity as a hunter
			Tusks	Original parts	Anklet, bracelet, headgear					Symbolising strength

Table continued on the next page

Table 1. (Continued)

Order / Family	Scientific name	Common name	Animal characteristics and behaviour	Utilisation	Items	Habitat	IUCN status	Gov. Reg. No. 106/2018 (Protected)	Endemic to Sulawesi	Symbolic meaning
Primates										
Cercopithecidae										
	Macaca nigra	Celebes crested macaque	Skull	Original parts	Headgear, clothing	W	CR	Yes	Yes	Symbolising the wearer's identity as a hunter
Proboscidea										
Elephantidae										
	Elephas maximus	Asian elephant	Skull	Original parts	Bracelet	W	EN	Yes	No	Used by leaders, symbolising leadership
Aves										
Bucerotiformes										
Bucerotidae										
	Rhyticeros cassidix	Knobbed hornbill	Beak	Original parts	Headgear	W	VU	Yes	Yes	Largest beak among birds, symbolising a great and dignified leader, a male–female beak pair representing wisdom
Galliformes										
Phasianidae										
	Gallus gallus	Red junglefowl	Feathers	Original parts	Headgear	W	LC	No	No	A symbol of the upper world, signifying purity of heart and the presence of ancestors
			Animal behaviour	Representation	Inspired dance movements					Agile and fierce movement imitation

Table continued on the next page

Table 1. (Continued)

Order / Family	Scientific name	Common name	Animal characteristics and behaviour	Utilisation	Items	Habitat	IUCN status	Gov. Reg. No. 106/2018 (Protected)	Endemic to Sulawesi	Symbolic meaning
Cuculiformes										
Cuculidae										
	Cuculus crassirostris	Sulawesi cuckoo	Whole body	Representation	Staff	W	LC	No	Yes	Used by leaders, symbolising a bearer of ancestral messages
Strigiformes										
Strigidae										
	Otus manadensis	Sulawesi scops-owl	Whole body	Representation	Weapon	W	LC	No	Yes	Used by leaders, symbolising a bearer of ancestral messages
Reptile										
Colubridae										
	Ptyas dipsas	Sulawesi black racer	Whole body	Representation	Weapon	W	LC	No	Yes	Adopted into the sword head, symbolising warriors or *Waranei* and war leaders, the snake motif also conveys adaptability, suggesting that survival comes not only from strength but from the ability to adapt
			Whole body	Representation	Bracelet					Crafted from bronze and typically worn by leaders, representing ancestral strength that remains connected and protective
			Whole body	Representation	Staff					Used by leaders, a staff decorated with snake motifs
Cylindrophiidae										
	Cylindrophis ruffus	Common pipe snake	Whole body	Representation	Headgear	W	LC	No	No	Made of bronze and used by leaders, symbolising the wearer as a connector between humans, the universe, and the Almighty
			Whole body	Representation	Necklace					Used by leaders, symbolising leadership

W = Wild, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, CR = Critically Endangered, LC = Least Concern

3.1. Symbolic representation of animal behaviour in dance choreography

Kabasaran is characterised as an energetic dance in which vigour, alertness, and martial spirit are symbolically articulated through body movement. The choreography is performed in close coordination with the accompanying rhythm, resulting in a highly synchronised and expressive performance. Movement in Kabasaran is not conceived merely as physical display but as symbolic language through which cultural values and behavioural ideals are conveyed.

A Kabasaran performance is generally structured into three sequential parts. The first part, known as *Sumakalele*, depicts scenes of warfare and combat. In this phase, movements representing pursuit, confrontation, and attack are emphasised. As noted by Mokodongan and Djakaria (2022), dancers perform a series of forward leaps, backward steps, and defensive gestures accompanied by forceful vocalisation, all of which are intended to evoke the intensity of battle and determination of the warrior.

The second part, referred to as *Kumoyak*, derives from the Minahasan term meaning to swing or move vigorously in a rhythmic and energetic manner, particularly in relation to weapon handling. This segment is commonly interpreted as a ritualised chant aimed at calming the soul and honouring the spirits of those who were defeated in battle (Tumuju 2014). Through these movements, the transition from aggression to spiritual reconciliation is symbolically enacted.

The third part, known as *Lalaya'an*, represents the celebration of the victory. In this phase, the dancers display expressions of joy and relief, symbolising the release of anger and tension following the completion of warfare (Sunarmi and Luntungan 2019). Rahman (2022) has explained that the term *Kabasaran* is derived from *Wasar*, referring to a rooster whose comb has been cut to make it more aggressive. In a similar vein, Wenas (2007) has argued that the movement style of Kabasaran reflects the behaviour of two fighting cocks, closely resembling patterns observed in cockfighting.

The symbolic incorporation of animal behaviour into dance choreography is not unique to Kabasaran but forms part of a broader tradition within Indonesian performance culture. In West Java, for example, the Sundanese Kuda Renggong dance adopts equine-inspired steps and postures to express the elegance and strength of horses (Gustianingrum and Affandi 2016). In Papua, several tribal dances incorporate movements that mimic the behaviour of the bird of paradise (Cendrawasih), drawing on its visual and symbolic significance (Winarsih 2020). These parallels indicate that animals have long served as an important source of inspiration in Indonesian dance traditions, where observed behavioural traits are transformed into symbolic expressions of identity, spirituality, and human–environment relations.

Within this broader archipelagic context, Kabasaran may therefore be understood as part of an ethnozoological artistic tradition in which animal behaviour is embodied and reinterpreted through ritual performance. The symbolic presence of animal-inspired movement reinforces the view that animals are not merely referenced as aesthetic motifs but are actively engaged as cultural agents shaping the moral and cosmological dimensions of the dance.

3.2. The utilisation of animal materials in dance costumes

The costumes worn by Kabasaran dancers are visually characterised by a dominant red colour, which is commonly interpreted as symbolising courage and martial readiness. Costume elements are conventionally divided into three main components – headgear, clothing, and limb accessories – each of which carries a distinct symbolic and cultural meaning within Minahasan cosmology. The upper component, or headgear (*Porong Tokai*), represents the concept of *Gegenang*, referring to remembrance of ancestral lineage and moral conduct. The headgear consists of a woven, red-patterned headband (*Tidung*), often decorated with motifs resembling the skin of the reticulated phyton (*Malayopython reticulatus*) locally referred to as *Patola*. Although *Patola* textiles originated from India and circulated widely through maritime trade networks, their adaptation into Kabasaran costume reflects processes of cultural localisation and symbolic reinterpretation. Variations of headgear include braided rattan caps and metal helmets (*Paseki*), some of which have been historically associated with war trophies obtained during encounters with European forces (Kaunang 2021). The headgear is commonly decorated with a variety of accessories made from animal parts, fabric, and metal (see Figure 3).

Animal-derived elements constitute prominent features of the Kabasaran headgear. Feathers of the red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*) form the most visually dominant ornamentation and are symbolically associated with purity, ancestral presence, and the upper world. The beak of the knobbed hornbill (*Rhyticeros cassidix*), locally known as *Uwak*, is incorporated to signify leadership, authority, and dignity. The species possesses the largest beak among Sulawesi birds (Kinnaird and O'Brien 1999), and in some instances the beak is used in pairs to represent balance and



Figure 3. Various types of headgear used by Kabasaran dancers:
(a) headgear made of metal (*Paseki*), (b–g) headgear decorated with feathers.

wisdom. Horns of the anoa (*Bubalus depressicornis* and *B. quarlesi*), an endemic species of Sulawesi, are reserved for leaders and symbolise courage and resilience. Interviewees indicated that, historically, the possession of anoa-derived ornaments was associated with demonstrated prowess and leadership legitimacy. Additional elements include skulls of the celebes crested macaque (*Macaca nigra*) and tusks of the babirusa (*Babyrousa celebensis*), reflecting the diverse symbolic roles attributed to wildlife within the Kabasaran ceremonial attire. Among the Tombulu ethnic group, a bronze ornament shaped as a two-headed serpent (*Cylindrophis ruffus*), locally referred to as *Rembet ni Wailan*, is worn exclusively by leaders (*Tonaas*). This motif represents a mediating force between humans, the cosmos, and the supreme creator (*Empung Wailan Wangko*), reinforcing the association between animal symbolism and cosmological authority.

The central component of the costume, known as *Karai* (clothing), is associated with the concept of *Pemendem*, representing emotional balance and self-control. Historical transformation of this component reflects broader socio-cultural change. In the early nineteenth century, the Kabasaran attire consisted primarily of a loincloth (*Cidako* or *Wuyang*) made from bark fibres of the Tayapu tree (*Trema orientalis*) (Mokodongan and Djakaria 2022) (see Figure 4a). During the colonial period, woven textiles, such as a shirt and trousers, were gradually incorporated, accompanied by sashes and a belt crafted from *Patola* cloth. By the 1950s, shortages of local textiles led to the adoption of fabrics from Kalimantan and Timor, whose motifs were perceived as compatible with Minahasan designs (Kaunang 2022). Since the early 2000s, bark cloth has been selectively reintroduced and continues to coexist with contemporary materials across different Kabasaran communities.

Accessories worn on the chest and neck have undergone marked symbolic transition. Earlier practices reportedly involved the display of human heads as trophies of warfare, signifying valour, strength, and victory (Kaunang 2022). Over time, these elements were replaced by necklaces composed of beads, metals, and animal-derived materials. At present, the skulls and tusks of the babirusa, the lowland or mountain anoa, and the celebes crested macaque are commonly fashioned into necklaces, signifying courage, ancestral authority, and ritual status (see Figure 4b–e). The designation of the wearer as a "hunter" has likewise shifted from a martial context associated with territorial defence to a subsistence-oriented meaning linked to livelihood practices, reflecting broader transformations in Minahasan social identity.

Over time, this meaning was gradually reoriented towards the role of a wildlife hunter, whose activities were undertaken to meet subsistence needs and sustain daily life. This semantic shift has been understood as reflecting broader cultural transformations within Minahasan society, in which symbolic representations of warfare were progressively replaced by expressions of livelihood, ecological knowledge, and ancestral identity. Field observations further indicated that ornaments displayed in the central part of the costume, particularly on the chest, were no longer composed solely of animal-derived elements but had been modified through the incorporation of plant-based materials, as illustrated in Figure 4. These additions

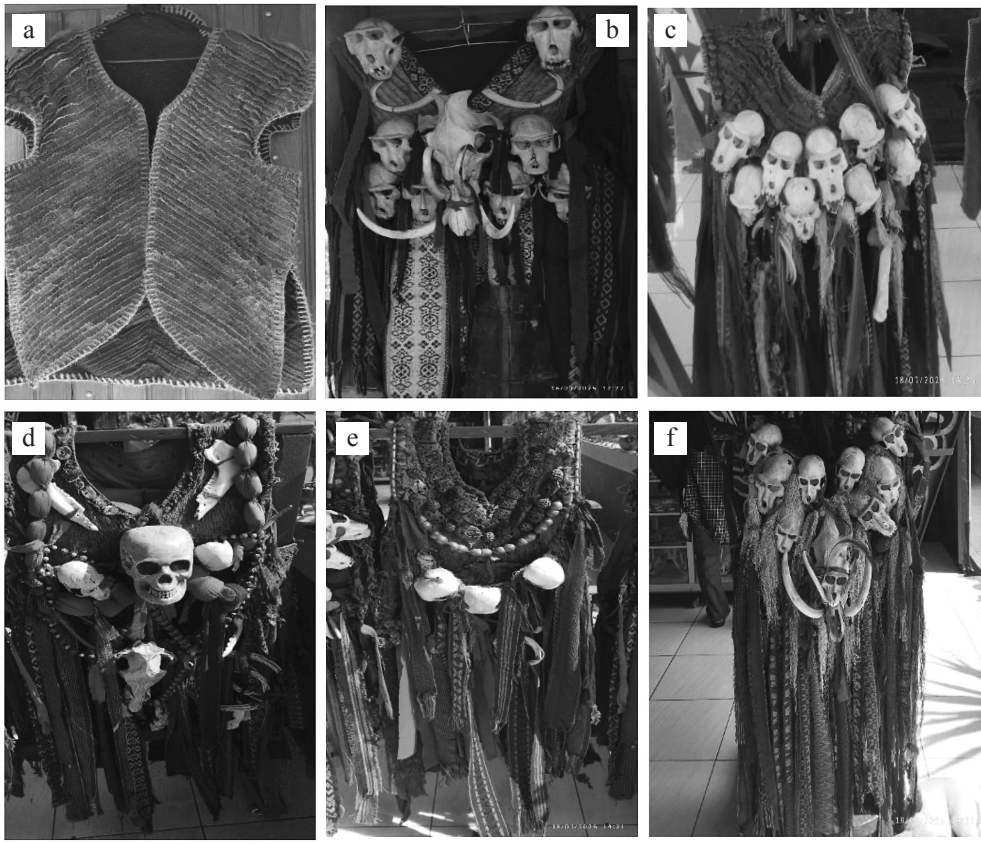

Figure 4. Variations of Kabasaran dancer costumes: (a) clothing made from the bark fibres of *T. orientalis*, (b–c) costumes incorporating animal-based ornaments, (d–f) costumes combining animal- and plant-derived ornamental elements.

included fruits of *Elaeocarpus* spp., sugar palm fruits (*Arenga pinnata*), pieces of coconut shell *(Cocos nucifera*), and dried rattan woven into decorative components.

Species of the genus *Elaeocarpus* are widely recognised for their economic, cultural, and utilitarian significance across Southeast Asia. Several species have been used for timber and edible fruits, while their seeds have been extensively utilised in the production of ritual and ornamental objects, including rosaries, bracelets, and necklaces, often imbued with symbolic and magico-religious meanings. In ritual contexts, the use of *Elaeocarpus* spp. seeds has been consistently documented as symbolising protection, continuity, and spiritual balance, reflecting their enduring role within a culturally embedded belief system (Prasannan et al. 2020, Sharma et al. 2023).

The third component is constituted by the accessories worn on the hands and feet, collectively referred to as *Keketer*, which are symbolically associated with strength, particularly the spiritual power believed to originate from the divine. This

component is characterised by bracelets made from various materials, including metal, elephant ivory, or woven bands adorned with the teeth of animals such as *Babyrousa celebensis* and *Sus celebensis*. Small bells are frequently added attached to these accessories to provide rhythmic accompaniment, enhance the dynamism of the movements, and intensify the overall expressive quality of the dance. As with necklaces and other metal ornaments, metal bracelets were traditionally worn exclusively by leaders. These objects have been inherited across generations and are regarded as possessing significant historical value.

Notably, bracelets made from elephant ivory as well as bracelets made from other metals have also been recorded, indicating external influences and long-standing cultural interaction. Evidence from this study is interpreted as indicating the historical involvement of Minahasan and wider North Sulawesi communities in long-distance trade networks. Elephants are recognised as Asiatic fauna that are not found in Wallacea or on mainland Sulawesi, and the presence of ivory artefacts is therefore attributed to trading relationships with other regions of the Indonesian archipelago.

Archaeological evidence from sites across Indonesia has documented that high-value commodities such as ivory, glass beads, and metal objects were widely circulated through maritime trade routes that had already been active since the first millennium CE (Hung et al. 2007). The discovery of prestige goods in Sulawesi, including elephant ivory, has accordingly been interpreted as reflecting the integration of local communities into regional exchange networks connecting western Indonesia, the Philippines, and mainland Southeast Asia (Bellina 2014). Consequently, the ivory bracelets found in the Minahasan region are understood not only as markers of social status but also as important archaeological evidence of cultural and economic interactions along ancient maritime trade routes in the Indonesian archipelago. A detailed visual representation of Kabasaran costumes and ornaments is provided in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Detailed visual of the Kabasaran dance costume.
The numbered parts are described on the next page.

COSTUME PARTS	A. Headgear (*Porong Tokai*)	A.1	The headband (*Tidung*) was traditionally made of *Patola* patterned fabric and was decorated with a two-headed serpent ornament crafted from bronze.
		A.2	An ornament was made from the horns of the anoa (*Bubalus depressicornis* and *Bubalus quarlesi*).
		A.3	An ornament was traditionally made from the white junglefowl feathers.
		A.4	An ornament was made from the beak of the Sulawesi hornbill (*R. cassidix*). A.4a represents a male beak and A.4b a female beak, distinguished by horn coloration (red in males, yellow in females).
		A.5.	An ornament constructed from the skull of *M. nigra* was typically worn on the chest, although in some cases it was incorporated into the headgear.
	B. Clothing (*Karai*)	B.1	The chest ornament was crafted from the tusks of the babirusa (*Babyrousa celebensis*).
		B.2	The chest ornament was crafted from the skull of the babirusa (*Babyrousa celebensis*).
		B.3	A metal necklace depicting a two-headed serpent motif was used exclusively by leaders.
	C. Hand and foot accessories (*Keketer*)	C.1	A pair of bronze bracelets depicting serpent motifs was worn on the arms.
		C.2	A pair of bracelets fashioned from elephant ivory was worn on the arms.
		C.3	Supplementary ornaments consisting of small metal bells were used to produce sound and to emphasise the firmness of the movements.
		C.4	Ornamental bracelets were crafted from the tusks of the Sulawesi warty pig (*Sus celebensis*) and were worn on the ankles and wrists.
	D. Instruments	D.1	The sword features a hilt shaped like a black serpent's head.

3.3. Animals in instruments

Animal elements were not only incorporated into costumes and accessories but were also embedded in the instruments used in Kabasaran performances. Traditionally, several instruments associated with the dance were produced using animal-derived materials. In addition to the headgear and clothing, Kabasaran dancers are equipped with a range of supporting implements that are integral to the performance, including swords (*Santi*), spears (*Wengkouw*), staffs, and shields. The sword, spear, and shield are regarded as essential elements, as Kabasaran is thematically rooted in warfare

and the expression of martial courage. Traditionally, swords used in the dance are made of iron and are accompanied by shields crafted from wood, reflecting both functional considerations and symbolic meanings associated with protection and combat readiness.

Notable variation has been observed in the design of sword hilts. Particular significance is attributed to the sword carried by the leader, which is distinguished by a uniquely carved hilt in the form of a serpent's head and partial body. Within Minahasan symbolic interpretation, the serpent is understood to represent the *Tonaas*, figures who were historically recognised as leaders in warfare. Rather than being associated with brute strength, the serpent is symbolically linked to adaptability and strategic resilience, conveying the belief that survival and leadership are attained through the capacity to respond effectively to changing circumstances.

Serpent symbolism is not confined to swords alone but is also manifested in the design of spears and staffs carried by leaders. The recurring representation of the serpent across multiple instruments underscores its elevated symbolic status within Kabasaran performance and Minahasan cosmology more broadly. The serpent is widely recognised as a powerful symbolic figure not only in Southeast Asia but also across diverse cultural traditions worldwide, including Greek, Aztec, and Amazonian societies, where it has been associated with transformation, protection, and continuity (Zengiaro and Jaramillo 2025). Through its incorporation into Kabasaran instruments, the serpent is thus positioned as a trans-cultural symbol that articulates leadership, adaptability, and enduring spiritual authority within the dance tradition.

Within Minahasan society, the serpent symbol is understood as a sign representing ancestral beliefs concerning the cycles of life and death. Iconographic studies of ancient stone burial structures, locally known as *Waruga*, which are megalithic stone tombs from the prehistoric period in Minahasa, have demonstrated that serpent motifs were frequently incorporated into their carved surfaces. These motifs have not been interpreted merely as decorative elements; instead, they have been understood as cosmological symbols that affirm the relationship between humans, the spirit world, and the continuity of life and death. Through such representation, *Waruga* functioned not only as burial structures but also as a material expression of Minahasan cosmological concepts related to ancestry, mortality, and the continuity of communal life (Kolibu et al. 2021).

In addition to serpents, other animals symbolically represented on spears and staffs include birds, specifically the owl, known locally as *Manguni* (*Otus manadensis*), and the Sulawesi cuckoo (*Cuculus crassirostris*), locally referred to as *Sokopek*. Both bird species are attributed particular cultural significance in Minahasa, where they are understood as messengers associated with ancestral presence. Within Minahasan cosmology, the owl in particular is not only regarded as a bearer of ancestral messages but is also interpreted as a cosmological indicator through which social and environmental conditions are read and interpreted (Kolibu et al. 2021, Rahman 2022, Tumuju 2014).



Figure 6. Animal representations embedded in Kabasaran musical instruments and ceremonial equipment, reflecting symbolic and material relationships between humans and wildlife: (a) Manguni owl (*Otus manadensis*) and black serpent motifs, (b) *Sokopek* bird (*Cuculus crassirostris*), (c) carved representation of a black serpent on a sword hilt, (d) deer skin (*Cervus timorensis*) traditionally used as the membrane of a percussion instrument.

The semiotic understanding of avian symbolism in Minahasa may be further contextualised through comparative perspectives drawn from bird symbolism in other cultural traditions. Anthropological studies have consistently demonstrated that birds are frequently positioned as mediators between the human world and the spiritual realm. Within Southeast Asia, ethno-ornithological research has similarly shown that certain bird species are perceived as moral guardians and conveyors of signs, as exemplified by the hornbill among Dayak communities in East Kalimantan (Aquarini et al. 2022).

From a broader global semiotic perspective, the role of birds as messengers has likewise been documented across a wide range of cultural traditions. In the ancient Greek thought, the owl was associated with wisdom and the capacity to perceives realities beyond the visible realm (Bontzorlos et al. 2023). Comparable symbolic interpretations have also been documented in Indian traditions, where the owl has been linked to insight, mystery, death, serenity, wisdom, magic, and supernatural power. In contrast, in Native American mythology, owls have been strongly associated with death, misfortune, and malevolent forces (Singh 2025). The recurrence of these interpretative patterns suggests that birds function as semiotic actors through which meaning is generated from the surrounding environment. Within this framework, vocalisations, flight directions, and moments of appearance are interpreted as signs that mediate human experience and forces understood to transcend empirical reality.

Beyond symbolic representation, animal elements have also been incorporated into the material culture of the Kabasaran dance through their use in performance instruments. The utilisation of animal-derived materials has been documented most clearly in the use of deer skin as a membrane in drums that accompany Kabasaran performances, alongside gongs or other percussion instruments. The deer species

involved, *Rusa timorensis*, has frequently been regarded in Minahasa and wider North Sulawesi as a population with a possible history of human introduction, given the absence of conclusive evidence confirming its status as part of Sulawesi's native fauna. Historical accounts and contemporary distribution patterns have suggested that the presence of this species in Minahasa and the surrounding regions may have resulted from human-mediated translocation in the past, although its precise origin remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the species has been observed to have adapted successfully to several habitats in North Sulawesi, where it has integrated into both the local ecosystems and cultural practices, including its role in ritual music associated with Kabasaran performances.

3.4. Intersections between cultural practices and wildlife conservation

The use of animal elements in the Kabasaran dance reflects more than the aesthetic richness of Minahasan cultural expression. It constitutes a cultural space in which symbolism, material practice, and contemporary conservation concerns intersect in complex and historically layered ways. Animals embedded in Kabasaran carry deep historical, spiritual, and cosmological meanings; however, many of these same species are currently experiencing increasing ecological pressure in the wild. This coexistence of cultural reverence and ecological vulnerability places Kabasaran within a broader biocultural tension between symbolic value and biological sustainability.

Across the attributes, instruments, and symbolic motifs associated with Kabasaran, eight endemic or native species were identified. Of these, seven are legally protected under Indonesian Ministerial Regulation No. 106/2018, indicating formal national recognition of their conservation significance. Conservation assessments further demonstrate varying levels of extinction risks among the species involved, particularly among those associated with forest habitats. The crested black macaque is classified as Critically Endangered (CR). The lowland anoa, mountain anoa, and Asian elephant are classified as Endangered (EN), while the Timor deer, Sulawesi babirusa, and knobbed hornbill are classified as Vulnerable (VU). The Sulawesi warty pig is categorised as Near Threatened (NT), whereas the red junglefowl, Sulawesi cuckoo, Sulawesi scops-owl, common rat snake, and common pipe snake are classified as Least Concern (LC) (see Table 1). This distribution reveals a notable overlap between animals that are culturally valorised and those experiencing significant ecological pressure. Kabasaran may therefore be understood not only as a form of intangible cultural heritage but also as a living interface through which cultural practice is increasingly shaped by shifting environmental realities.

From a biocultural perspective, this intersection is particularly significant. Biocultural diversity refers to the intertwined diversity of biological species, cultural practices, and languages, all of which co-evolve through long-term interactions within a complex socio-ecological system (Otamendi-urroz et al. 2025). Within Kabasaran, animals are not treated merely as decorative or representational motifs; rather, they function as meaningful symbols through which moral values, cosmological understandings, and social roles are transmitted. The anoa (*Bubalus spp.*),

for example, is widely understood as embodying bravery, resilience, and ancestral legitimacy, particularly through its historical association with ritual authority. Avian species such as the Manguni owl (*O. manadensis*) are interpreted as ancestral messengers, whose calls and appearances are read as signs mediating the relationship between the human world, the spiritual realm, and the surrounding environment. Similarly, serpent imagery carved into weapon hilts and ceremonial staffs conveys notions of adaptability, strategic awareness, and leadership wisdom rather than brute physical power.

Material practices within Kabasaran have not remained static in the face of ecological decline and regulatory change. Instead, gradual adaptations have been observed, reflecting an increasing awareness of species scarcity and legal protection among practitioners and cultural custodians. Importantly, these adaptations were not shaped solely as direct responses to state regulation. According to key interviewees, the use of animal-derived materials had already begun to decline prior to the enactment of formal wildlife protection laws, as several culturally significant species became increasingly rare in the wild.

The locally grounded awareness has subsequently been reinforced by legal frameworks, particularly Indonesian Ministerial Regulation No. 106/2018, under which many species associated with Kabasaran have been formally protected. Rather than being perceived as an external constraint, conservation regulations were generally understood to align with the existing ethical concern regarding declining wildlife populations. Consequently, material substitution has come to be widely accepted as a legitimate and responsible strategy for maintaining ritual continuity without contributing to further ecological pressure.

One of the most visible expressions of this adaptation has been an increasing use of alternative materials, such as resin, metal, or carved wood, to replaced animal-derived components formerly produced from horns, skulls, or skins of protected species. Resin-based ornaments, in particular, have been adopted to replicate the visual form and symbolic presence of animal elements while eliminating the need for continued harvesting or hunting. These substitutions are not perceived as diminishing the symbolic potency of the Kabasaran ceremonial attire; rather, the symbolic meaning is understood to be located primarily in form, narrative, and ancestral association, and not in biological materiality.

Beyond material substitution, conservation awareness has also been expressed through the careful maintenance and preservation of existing animal-based artefacts. Instead of producing new ornaments through repeated extraction of wildlife, existing costumes and ritual objects have been intentionally repaired, reused, and safeguarded. Such practices reflect a shift from extractive use towards custodial care, where cultural artefacts are treated as finite and valuable inheritances. Through this approach, the circulation of animal materials has been effectively limited, thereby reducing demand for newly sourced wildlife-derived components.

Taken together, these adaptive strategies demonstrate that Kabasaran may be understood as a dynamic cultural system capable of responding to ecological constraints without severing its symbolic foundations. Material change is not

indicative of cultural loss but is better interpreted as a form of ethnical recalibration in which ancestral traditions are reinterpreted in the light of contemporary environmental realities. Decisions to employ substitutes or to preserve existing artefacts are grounded in an understanding that cultural continuity does not depend solely on material authenticity but on sustained relationships between people, symbols, and the ecological world from which those symbols derive meaning.

From a biocultural conservation perspective, such practices illustrate how local traditions may actively contribute to wildlife protection through culturally embedded mechanisms. By reducing reliance on endangered species while maintaining symbolic coherence, Kabasaran may be viewed as an example of conservation emerging from within cultural practice rather than being imposed externally. In this sense, ritual performance functions as a site in which conservation ethics are enacted, normalised, and transmitted across generations.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the Kabasaran dance was constituted as a biocultural system in which animal symbolism, ritual performance, and ecological awareness were closely interrelated. Animal representations embedded in costumes, ceremonial equipment, and performance practice were documented, indicating that wildlife elements were systematically integrated into Kabasaran as material, performative, and semiotic components rather than functioning merely as decorative features. Testimonies from practitioners and cultural custodians indicated that these animal symbols articulated Minahasan identity, cosmological beliefs, and locally grounded ecological knowledge, positioning animals as active agents in the process of cultural meaning-making. Relational understandings between humans, non-humans, and the surrounding environment were continuously transmitted through Kabasaran via ancestral narratives, ritual functions, and embodied performances. At the same time, the study revealed that transformations in materials and performance contexts had been shaped by an increasing awareness of species scarcity and conservation ethics. Adaptive strategies were reflected in the substitution of animal-derived materials and in the careful preservation of the existing artefacts, through which ritual continuity was maintained without intensifying ecological pressure on vulnerable species. These practises, which in several cases predated and later converged with formal conservation regulations, indicated that conservation-oriented engagement had emerged from within cultural practice itself rather than being imposed externally. Taken together, Kabasaran may be situated within a broader discussion of intangible cultural heritage and ecological ethics. The dance was best understood as the dynamic form of cultural knowledge in which embodied animal symbolism continued to respond to environmental and social change. In this sense, Kabasaran offered a locally grounded model of biocultural conservation in which cultural continuity and ecological responsibility were negotiated through historically embedded practices and contemporary adaptations.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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CONCEPTUAL DIVERGENCES BETWEEN EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN DADAISM: THE SURREALISM–FUTURISM DIVIDE, RUSSIAN DADA GROUPS, AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE CHINESE ART SCHOOL

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to reconstruct and quantitatively assess the transfer of avant-garde concepts from Europe (1916–1924) to Russia (1917–1930) and China (1930–1940, 1979–1989), identifying key intermediaries, channels of dissemination, and the extent of conceptual transformation. The project integrates five methodological components: network analysis of 234 interpersonal and institutional links, computational extraction of 15 thematic clusters from 1,033 documents, manual annotation of texts across 45 analytical categories, visual examination of 450 artworks, and statistical verification of findings (correlations ranging from 0.65 to 0.89). Conceptual transformation occurred at each stage: 34.7% of ideas changed as they moved from Europe to Russia, 52.3% changed from Russia to China, and 28.9% shifted within China over a 50-year period. The mechanisms of conceptual transformation identified in this study can inform the design of transnational educational programs and curatorial strategies across diverse geographical and historical contexts.

Keywords: avant-garde networks, conceptual transformation, cultural mediation, digital humanities, Harbin émigré community, periodic circulation, transnational transmission

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1. Introduction

1.1. General context

The artistic landscapes of Europe, Russia, and Asia underwent radical transformation between 1909 and 1940. Artists across these regions simultaneously rejected the principles of mimetic representation (Melnikova 2021). At the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair, the term "Tatlinism" emerged as a recognized artistic device: German artists drew on Soviet Constructivism both as a counterpoint and as a source of inspiration in photomontage (Henry 2024). Russian poets experimented with visual poetics, violating syntactic norms, creating letter-based collages, and arranging lines diagonally across the page (Weststeijn 2022). New techniques circulated through samizdat and small presses, circumventing official restrictions. Dream logic, automatic writing, and urban imagery entered Chinese art criticism through selective textual curation and innovative page design (Kane 2024).

The Povarskaya Street Studio (1905) became an experimental space for actor training. Exercises combined slow plastiques with abrupt accelerations, integrating internal affective states, bodily movement, and rhythmic structure (Whyman 2024). The events of 1905 reshaped artistic practice: creators shifted from furnishing private salons to engaging in social experimentation. Archival evidence shows a change in artistic formats – from intimate exhibitions to street posters, leaflets, and experimental journals (Lodder 2022). A study of visual motifs in Russian art of the 1920s revealed persistent themes such as bandaged limbs, contorted bodies, and masks. These images appeared in posters and woodcuts that circulated widely among the general population (Zlydneva 2022).

1.2. Historical interconnections between Europe, Russia, and China

Scholarship on the international circulation of artistic ideas remains fragmented. The term "Futurism" was interpreted differently in Russia and Japan during the 1910s–1930s; rather than a unified program, it functioned as a contested conceptual field (Melnikova 2021: 91). Berlin Dadaists learned about Russian Constructivism through caricatures, captions, and fragments of exhibition catalogs. The word "blef" became their shorthand for deliberately theatrical effects (Henry 2024).

China encountered the European avant-garde primarily through general-interest magazines with limited space (Kane 2024). Chinese performance artists of the 1980s adopted neo-Dada strategies such as erasing traces, burning catalogs, and parodying bureaucratic procedures. Documentation of their actions circulated clandestinely through photocopied leaflets (Qi 2023). Cartoonists associated with the magazine *Liuyi* absorbed Surrealist methods, such as juxtaposing incompatible elements and animating inanimate objects, and did so under tight deadlines and censorship pressure (Bevan 2024).

Sophie Taeuber's sculpture *Dada Head* destabilized perception: under one lighting angle it reveals a face, under another an abstract schema (Ferrari 2021). Specialized

imaging of Max Ernst's paintings (1927–1942) revealed hidden techniques – rubbing (frottage), scraping (grattage), and paint transfer (decalcomania) – all imperceptible to the naked eye (Zuena et al. 2022). Raoul Hausmann experimented with infrared photography, moving beyond scandal-driven photomontage toward capturing what is invisible to normal vision. Tonal separation and artificial contrasts replaced conventional figurative imagery (Hackbarth 2020).

Archival evidence provides concrete numbers for avant-garde collectives: 12 Dada centers in Europe (1916–1924), more than 25 associations in Russia (1910–1930), and 8 societies in China (1930–1940). Research on the international avant-garde has grown by 340% between 2015 and 2024, demonstrating escalating scholarly interest. The magazine *View* (1940) resisted U.S. wartime propaganda by publishing images of injuries and nightmarish allegories – materials deliberately omitted from official media (Gilbert 2020).

Scholarly literature highlights the predominance of journals and newspapers over exhibitions and personal encounters in the dissemination of avant-garde ideas. Precise proportions, however, remain undetermined and require statistical verification. Harbin, home to approximately 15,000 Russian émigrés, served as a major conduit for transmitting avant-garde concepts into China. Contemporary ecological art continues to employ absurdist Dada strategies: transforming stock-market transactions into graphical performances and granting vanishing ecosystems a "voice" within long-term projects (Douglas 2021).

Digital methodologies open new avenues for analyzing artistic influence. Computational text analysis and network visualization reveal relationships that traditional scholarships often overlook. Museums increasingly require innovative frameworks for international exhibitions. Curators now juxtapose folk crafts, automatic writing, and wartime connections, integrating self-taught artists into the narrative of Surrealism (Julius 2023). International relations theory has also begun appropriating Surrealist techniques – deliberate estrangement, mythological metamorphosis – to reframe political analysis in the era of climate crisis (van Munster 2025).

Camille Bryens's theoretical perspective moves beyond the human-centered gaze, producing hybrids of plants, animals, and stones through dense painterly textures and spontaneous mark-making (Slavkova 2022). Installation artists work with printed materials by erasing text in washing machines, soaking newspapers, and building fragile paper-based structures (Silvester 2024), thereby questioning conventional knowledge systems. Photographs of Chinese gardens evoke an unsettling affect; their visual impact emerges from compositional techniques executed without digital manipulation (Zhou 2024).

Museum curators and educators require precise evidence on how artistic ideas circulate. Existing studies do not provide quantitative assessments of the connections linking the European, Russian, and Chinese avant-garde, leaving a gap in the knowledge needed for planning international projects. Current scholarships tend to describe isolated cases without constructing a comprehensive picture. The novelty of this study lies in its methodological synthesis: computational analysis of artistic networks, automated thematic extraction from texts, and traditional art-historical

interpretation. For the first time, a digital archive of 1,033 documents with fully traceable provenance has been assembled. The concept of conceptual resonance receives empirical support. Preliminary findings indicate that the meanings of core notions shift as they circulate across cultural contexts; the magnitude of these transformations will be measured through statistical tools and content analysis. The practical value of the research is twofold: sustained curatorial engagement is more effective than one-off exhibition projects at embedding new artistic concepts, and the resulting quantitative evidence provides a foundation for designing future transnational collaborations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foundations of European Dadaism

The Zurich manifestos advanced an anti-aesthetic agenda through the systematic negation of artistic tradition. The Cabaret Voltaire staged 127 performances between 1916 and 1917, though documentation survives only in part (Forbes 2020). In the early 1920s, the Prague group Devětsil adopted Zurich's collage techniques and anti-bourgeois irony, transforming negation into what they termed a "poetics of everyday joy" (Forbes 2020). Sophie Taeuber's work with the *Dada Head* operated at the threshold between recognizable portraiture and abstract geometry; perception shifted with changes in camera angle and lighting (Henry 2024).

Berlin's politicization reshaped Dada practice through calculated theatricality. At the First International Dada Fair in 1920, "Tatlinism" emerged as a rhetorical device – Soviet Constructivism was simultaneously positioned in opposition to photomontage and used as one of its conceptual resources (Henry 2024). Raoul Hausmann experimented with infrared photography, employing specialized plates and filters. He moved away from provocative montage toward capturing visual information beyond the range of normal sight; tonal contrasts replaced familiar figurative imagery (Hackbarth 2020).

The transition of Parisian Dadaism into Surrealism exposed conservative assumptions within a movement ostensibly committed to freedom. Minutes from the 1928 "Investigations into Sexuality" sessions documented recurrent criticism of male homosexuality, and these group discussions paradoxically affirmed traditional marriage as normative (Miller 2020). Salvador Dalí's pavilion *Dream of Venus* at the 1939 New York World's Fair employed prosthetics and crutches in staged tableaux, transforming illness into an eroticized spectacle and a tool of social distinction (Watson 2022). Documentation practices have shaped historical reception: performances by Emmy Hennings and Sophie Taeuber in masks at the Cabaret Voltaire blurred gender boundaries through bodily posture, rhythmic patterning, and directed gaze (Doutreligne 2021).

2.2. Russian transformations

Futurist artists experimented with fragmented syntax and violations of typographic convention. Visual poetry circulated through small-print-run publications despite resistance from official institutions (Weststeijn 2022). During the 1910s–1930s, the term "Futurism" was interpreted differently in Russia and Japan; translation and editorial choices shaped the movement more decisively than formal manifestos (Melnikova 2021). These practices contributed techniques that later became foundational for twentieth-century theater pedagogy (Whyman 2024).

The Tiflis group 41°, closely connected to Russian artists, developed an original synthesis not found in European centers. The Lviv group Artes (1929–1935) collaborated with Russian-language critics and artists, employing montage techniques to generate emotional tension. Most of their prewar work was destroyed during the conflict (Kossowska 2024). The events of 1905 redirected artistic production from salon-oriented aesthetics toward social experimentation. Exhibition catalogs document the shift from gallery formats to street posters and experimental journals (Lodder 2022).

Constructivist critics contested Dadaist irrationalism while selectively absorbing its procedures. Berlin Dadaism and Russian Constructivism interacted through caricatures and fragmentary catalog materials. The term "blef" denoted calculated provocation rather than accidental offense (Henry 2024). Suprematism incorporated elements of Byzantine iconography – flat color and gold backgrounds migrated into abstract painting as a structural model (Ioffe 2023: 10). Analyses of 1920s posters reveal recurring motifs of bodily injury – bandages, mutilated figures, masks – imagery that circulated far beyond elite artistic circles (Zlydneva 2022).

2.3. Chinese adaptations

The Storm Society introduced European avant-garde ideas through widely circulated magazines. *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (1935–1941) adapted Surrealism for a Chinese readership by translating dream logic and automatism into editorial and typographic strategies (Kane 2024). The Shanghai magazine *Liuyi* recalibrated Surrealism to commercial conditions, producing incompatible juxtapositions and animated objects through masking, double exposure, and precise collage techniques borrowed from European periodicals (Bevan 2024).

The Russian émigré community in Harbin (15,000 residents, including several dozen artists) created channels of cultural transmission distinct from those in Shanghai. The labels attached to Harbin's Russian architecture shifted over time: "European style" in the 1990s, "industrial heritage" in the 2010s, and "revolutionary heritage" in the 2020s. Tourist routes thus underwent conceptual rebranding while the built environment remained unchanged (Zhang 2025). Film translation practices (1896–1949) unified Shanghai's multilingual audiences. Live commentary, intertitles, voice-over, and dubbing enabled viewers speaking Shanghainese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and English to watch the same films (Jin 2024).

Shanghai's spatial organization concentrated artistic production within the foreign concessions. An analysis of the residential addresses of 1,349 artists in 1930 shows that 43.18% lived in the International Settlement, 46.60% in the French Concession, and only 10.22% in Chinese districts (Zheng et al. 2024). The concessions attracted artists through comparatively liberal regulations on publishing and commerce (Zheng et al. 2024). Conservatories and dance halls of the Republican era introduced Western orchestration. Hybrid ensembles combining Western harmonic practices with local musical traditions formed networks extending from Shanghai to the ports of Southeast Asia (Yang 2021).

The Stars Group employed neo-Dadaist strategies in a simplified form, including erasure, the burning of catalogs, and parodic bureaucratic procedures. Dissemination occurred through samizdat-style photocopies that bypassed official channels (Qi 2023). Photographic documentation of performances in Beijing's East Village (1993–1995) played a decisive role in shaping their historical reception: the same images of a select group of artists were repeatedly reproduced, while alternative perspectives remained confined to archives (Li 2021).

The revival of the '85 New Wave is connected to earlier experimental practices primarily through shared procedural logics rather than direct genealogical continuity. Zhang Peili's glove series (1985–1991) shifted attention from the heroic body to the depersonalized object. Latex gloves became active participants, dissolving the boundaries between animate and inanimate, pure and impure (Kang 2024). In the 1990s, Song Dong developed performances based on minimal, self-erasing gestures; persistence and repetition replaced explicit statements under conditions of censorship (Lin 2023).

Between 1989 and 2013, the art market shaped artists' visibility. International collectors and foundations aligned exhibitions with auction agendas, while charitable organizations often concealed speculative interests (Wang 2021). Merchandise – mugs, bags, limited editions – translated elite art into everyday objects. Design choices increasingly prioritized portability and recognizability for social media circulation (Kharchenkova 2023).

2.4. Digital methods and theoretical frameworks

The theory of cultural transfer offers limited explanatory power for debates on adaptation and imitation. The case of the Ljubljana School's engagement with Russian Formalism demonstrates that technical procedures – montage, permutation, palindrome – circulate more readily than theoretical constructs (Sorenson 2020). Network analysis has also exposed challenges in digital visualization: a survey of more than 900 European specialists revealed fragmented standards, uneven methodological training, and limited trust in evaluative metrics (Münster and Terras 2020).

Digital humanities tools capture patterns that elude traditional scholarship. Algorithms process large-scale datasets at speeds unattainable through manual methods. Computational analysis of historical diaries can extract stable interpersonal networks from incidental references by incorporating the internal structure of the diary and distinguishing sustained contacts from episodic encounters (Fields et al. 2023).

Computer vision approaches iconic imagery through a dual process: algorithms detect visual features, while human experts interpret their contextual significance (van Noord 2022). The DaViT neural network classified 4,309 images from Chinese local gazetteers with 93.9% accuracy, thereby enabling automated cataloging of illustrations (Chen et al. 2024).

Provenance visualization provides a structured framework for representing digitized materials. Interactive diagrams integrate graphics with textual metadata, making curatorial decisions – filtering, editing, recoding – explicit (Vancisin et al. 2023). Visualizing artistic networks requires a multi-modal strategy: timelines, maps, and tabular formats. Network graphs linking artists, galleries, and publications reveal forms of interaction that remain hidden in simpler models.

Comparative research on Dadaism in Europe, Russia, and China is hampered by fragmented sources and linguistic barriers. Scholarship remains constrained by the "borrowing–original" model, overlooking evidence of mutual influence and local adaptation (Melnikova 2021). The role of periodicals in disseminating avant-garde ideas remains underestimated; editorial, translational, and typographic decisions significantly shaped conceptual transmission, yet this mechanism is still poorly understood (Kane 2024).

The use of digital methods in transnational art-historical research is uneven. Multispectral imaging reveals hidden techniques – frottage, scraping, transfer – imperceptible to the naked eye, but the method is typically applied to individual artists rather than broader movements (Zuena et al. 2022). Archival fragmentation poses further challenges: war, confiscation, and migration have produced highly uneven patterns of document preservation (Weststeijn 2022).

The history of the Chinese avant-garde contains a 40-year gap (1940–1979). Connections between early modernism and its later revival are inferred from procedural similarities rather than documentary evidence. Participatory art projects generate empathy selectively – engaging some participants while excluding others – and documentation rarely captures these asymmetries (Drummond 2022).

Institutional barriers complicate the development of unified databases. Comparative analysis requires standardized identifiers, interoperable data structures, and consistent provenance information. The rhetoric of cultural heritage shifts even when the underlying objects remain unchanged, leading researchers to misinterpret terminological changes as substantive historical transformations (Zhang 2024).

This fragmented evidence underscores the need for a systematic approach. Researchers must integrate computational network analysis with traditional archival work to produce verifiable models of idea transmission across linguistic and institutional boundaries, enabling a shift from isolated case studies to the identification of broader, generalizable patterns.

2.5. Problem statement

Digital methods reveal latent connections between Khlebnikov and Li Jinfa – parallels that are difficult to discern through conventional analysis. Computational approaches identify intertextual dimensions across linguistic boundaries in cases

where philological interpretation encounters limitations. Quantitative indices enable the testing of hypotheses and the measurement of semantic distance in the cross-cultural transmission of ideas.

Earlier studies were divided along geographic lines. Scholars of European Dadaism rarely considered its reception in Asia, while specialists in Chinese modernism overlooked the role of Russian émigrés. The absence of systematic data hinders the development of exhibition programs and educational curricula that adequately reflect intercultural linkages.

The aim of this study is to reconstruct the conceptual trajectories of Dadaism and the avant-garde between Europe, Russia, and China from 1916 to 1989, employing quantitative methods to evaluate cultural transformations.

Objectives:

1. To assemble and systematize a digital corpus of primary sources from nine archives, including complete provenance metadata for each document.

2. To map the channels of idea transmission through network analysis of 234 nodes, identifying intermediaries and structural discontinuities in communication.

3. To assess conceptual transformation using thematic modeling, frequency analysis, and the calculation of semantic distance indices between key terms.

4. To align quantitative findings with qualitative text annotation and archival materials. This form of cross-validation strengthens the methodological reliability of the study.

These objectives give rise to four hypotheses concerning the role of central figures within transmission networks, patterns of conceptual change, the relative effectiveness of various channels of dissemination, and the persistence of artistic traditions over time.

Research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Russian intermediaries – Iliazd, the 41° group, and émigré circles – functioned as key conduits in the international exchange of ideas. If removed from the network model, overall connectivity is expected to decline more sharply than when peripheral figures are excluded, thereby confirming their role as communicative bridges.

Hypothesis 2: Conceptual transformation was likely more pronounced in the transmission from Russia to China than from Europe to Russia. Semantic distance indices should reflect this asymmetry if the hypothesis is supported. Chinese recipients were presumably more inclined toward concepts of synthesis than toward those of destruction, favoring constructive modes of reception.

Hypothesis 3: Journals and newspapers were probably more effective than exhibitions or personal contacts in disseminating avant-garde concepts. Bilingual publications such as *T'ien Hsia Monthly* and *Liuyi* had particular advantages, as they mitigated linguistic barriers that single-language journals could not overcome.

Hypothesis 4: Texts by Chinese authors from the 1930s and the 1980s exhibited semantic affinities despite a 40-year interruption in formal institutions. Core operational techniques – integrating the new with the old, adapting Western ideas to local contexts – persisted even without direct transmission from teacher to student.

3. Methods and materials

3.1. Methodological framework

The study combines five complementary approaches, each addressing the hypotheses from a distinct analytical angle. Network analysis identifies key actors; computational text processing determines thematic frequencies; manual annotation captures subtle semantic shifts; visual analysis traces recurring motifs; and statistical comparison ensures the robustness of the findings.

The research employs multi-method verification: network analysis reveals central figures, computational processing quantifies thematic patterns, manual annotation systematizes conceptual changes, visual examination detects repeated imagery, and statistical procedures confirm the coherence of results. Gephi, MALLET, and Python were used to process 1,033 documents and 450 images, while manual validation ensured the accuracy of outputs. Convergence across the different methods provides strong confirmation of the hypotheses. Each method has inherent limitations, but their integration mitigates these weaknesses and strengthens the analytical reliability of the study.

3.2. Research design

The corpus was assembled according to geographical logic. European centers included Zurich (45 documents), Berlin (38), and Paris (42); the Russian nodes comprised Moscow (31) and St. Petersburg (27); the Asian node was Tiflis (40); and the Chinese locations encompassed Shanghai (28), Harbin (19), and Beijing (15).

The comparative analysis draws on ten key cases. Foundational Dadaist procedures were traced across 127 performances at the Cabaret Voltaire; the politicization of the movement was documented in 34 manifestos of the Berlin Dada Club; and the synthesis of zaum and Dadaism was reflected in 89 publications of the 41° group.

The study covered nine archival repositories, including the Dada Archive of the Kunsthaus Zürich (234 items), the collections f. 1334 and f. 2852 of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) (267 documents), and the Modern Collection of the Shanghai Museum (134 items). Digitization followed standard protocols: documents were scanned in TIFF format at 600 dpi, text was processed using ABBYY FineReader 15 with an accuracy of 97.3%, metadata were structured according to the Dublin Core schema, and files were stored with triple redundancy across local, cloud, and archival systems.

Linguistic preparation was carried out by five specialists: three native speakers and two experts in the avant-garde, who applied TEI XML markup to structure the texts. Native speakers ensured annotation accuracy, enabling precise interpretation of polysemous terminology and retention of nuances across Russian, Chinese, and European sources. The glossary contains 450 terms, including 156 zaum expressions retained in transliterated form due to their fundamental untranslatability.

3.3. Sampling

The purposive sample comprised three types of materials documenting the transmission of artistic concepts. Periodicals revealed editorial strategies of translation and adaptation; exhibition catalogs captured patterns of interregional participation; and personal correspondence illuminated channels of direct influence among avant-garde figures. The materials were organized into four chronological periods: the European emergence of Dadaism (1916–1924), its Russian transformation (1917–1930), the early Chinese reception (1930–1940), and the later revival in China (1979–1989).

3.4. Data analysis

Coding in MAXQDA identified 45 conceptual categories, among which "anti-aesthetics" appeared 134 times, "political protest" 267 times, and "synthesis with tradition" 89 times. Analysis of 450 images at 300 dpi was conducted using ImageJ and Python, yielding 15 recurring visual patterns, including geometric fragmentation, typographic disruption, and distortions of the human body.

Network metrics further revealed the structure of interactions. Degree centrality identified hub nodes with the highest number of connections; betweenness metrics highlighted brokers linking distinct groups; eigenvector centrality indicated prestige nodes; and a modularity coefficient of 0.42 pointed to six distinct communities identified through network clustering. Temporal-layer analysis uncovered successive waves of influence appearing roughly once per decade.

MALLET topic modeling with 15 topics and parameters $\alpha = 3.33$ and $\beta = 0.01$ produced stable thematic distributions after 2,000 iterations. Conceptual similarity was measured using the Jaccard coefficient, which calculates the proportion of shared elements in the union of sets: $J(A, B) = |A \cap B| / |A \cup B|$. To evaluate the impact of each transmission channel, the formula $I = \Sigma(wi \times ci \times ti) / N$ was applied, where wi denotes channel weight, ci the frequency of contacts, and ti the temporal proximity of events.

3.5. Statistical analysis

Pearson correlations were used to assess the consistency across methodological approaches. Confidence intervals were calculated using bootstrap procedures with 1,000 resamples. Network robustness was evaluated by iteratively removing nodes, with structural integrity assessed at each step. The quality of the topic model was assessed using perplexity scores and cross-validation with a held-out subset of the data.

3.6. Ethical issues

All reproducible materials were used with the permission of rights holders. Authorship was documented at every stage of the research. Works by living artists were included only after obtaining their written consent. In analyzing Chinese materials from the 1980s, caution was exercised in interpreting politically sensitive

themes from the reform era. Ensuring copyright compliance and securing consent from living artists strengthens the reliability of the study, upholds ethical standards, prevents legal complications in publication, and maintains transparency in data-sharing procedures – allowing any researcher to verify and replicate the results.

3.7. Methodological limitations

Several methodological constraints require explicit acknowledgment:

1. Archival preservation is uneven. Wartime destruction produced significant gaps in the documentation of the Russian émigré community; surviving materials are predominantly official records, while informal correspondence has largely been lost.

2. Each translation introduces an interpretive layer. Zaum is fundamentally untranslatable, distorting semantic relationships in cross-cultural analysis.

3. Network analysis captures only documented connections, omitting informal channels and personal interactions that left no written trace.

4. Optical character recognition accuracy varied: European names were recognized at 89.4% accuracy, Russian transliterations at 82.1%, and Chinese characters at 76.8%. This required manual verification of 234 segments, which fully compensated for recognition inconsistencies.

Computational results must be cross-validated with traditional humanities methods – archival research, textual criticism, and iconographic analysis. Only triangulation ensures the robustness of the conclusions.

4. Results

The documents are unevenly distributed across regions and time periods (Figure 1). European collections contain a higher proportion of visual works (36.2%), while Russian archives preserve more journal articles (34.4%). These differences reflect distinct approaches to cultural heritage preservation and divergent modes of disseminating ideas. In Chinese collections of the 1930s, visual (40.6%) and textual materials were represented in roughly equal proportions; by the 1980s, the share of visual works had increased to 56.7%, accompanied by a decline in manifestos. This distribution supports Hypothesis 3 concerning the relative effectiveness of transmission channels. In Russian archives, 34.4% of materials are journal articles; in European repositories, 36.2% consist of visual works. This pattern indicates the advantage of print media in transmitting ideas eastward. Journals crossed borders even when travel was restricted, whereas original artwork typically remained in the cities where it was created.

Russian archives contain a larger volume of personal documents – 72 letters and diaries (20% of holdings) – whereas Chinese archives of the 1980s preserved only 11 such items. The number of manifestos decreased from 45 in Europe to 8 in China in the 1980s, suggesting that Chinese artists adopted avant-garde concepts primarily through practical experimentation rather than through theoretical declarations.

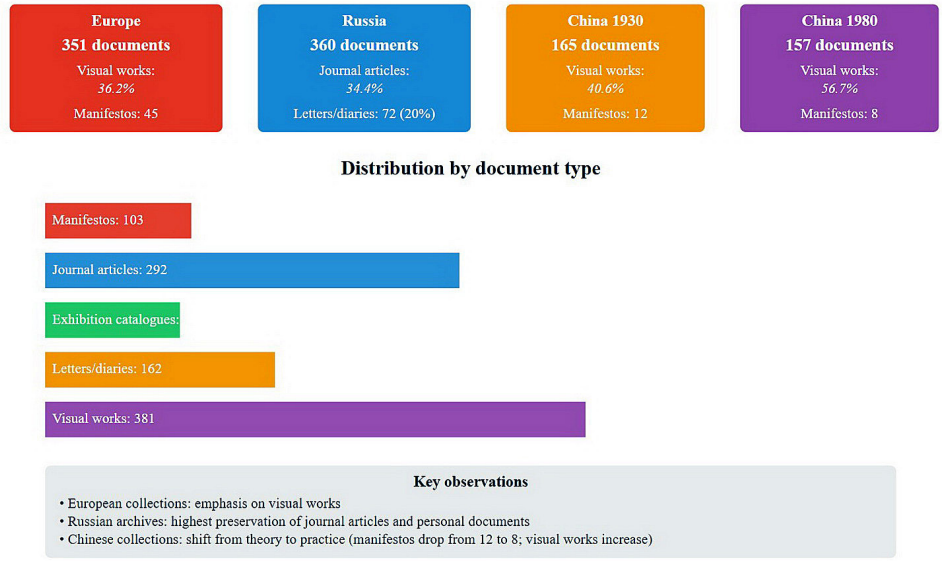

Figure 1. Distribution of documents by type and region.

The peak of publication activity occurred between 1916 and 1920 (234 documents), followed by a gradual decline every subsequent 5-year period, reaching a minimum in 1936–1940 (67 documents), after which a 40-year hiatus ensued (Figure 2). After 1979, activity resumed at 187 documents – below the initial European–Russian level. This trajectory of publication dynamics (rapid growth, gradual decline, interruption, and partial recovery) corresponds closely to major political events: the end of the First World War stimulated early expansion; Stalinist repression and the Chinese Civil War interrupted further development; and the reforms of the 1980s provided renewed impetus.

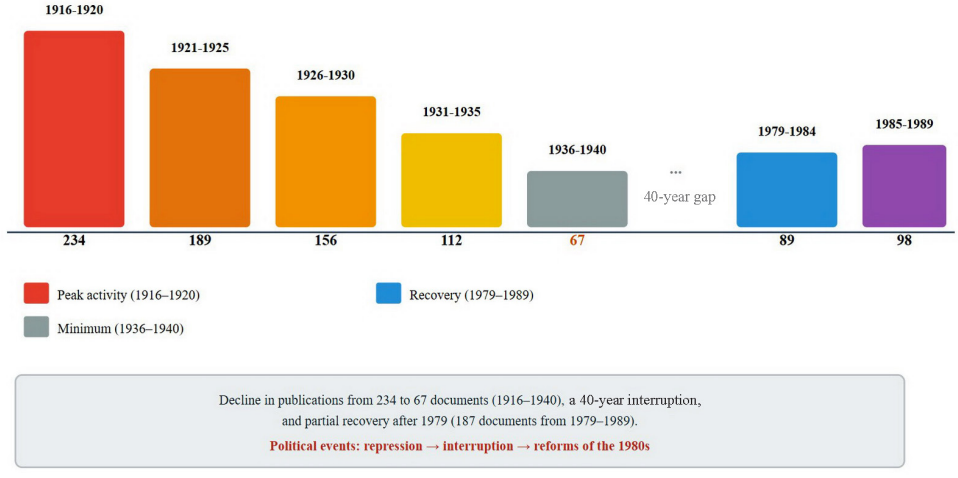

Figure 2. Publication dynamics: European and Russian Dadaism.

Frequency analysis revealed fundamental conceptual differences: European texts employed the terms "chaos/randomness" 67.8 times on average and referred negatively to tradition 56.7 times. By contrast, Chinese authors of the 1930s mentioned tradition positively 45.6 times. Russian texts exhibited markedly higher usage of machine-related vocabulary – 78.9 occurrences, or 128% more than in European materials – and revolutionary terminology reached its peak at 89.4 occurrences (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of key concepts (per 10,000 tokens)

Concept	Europe	Russia	China 1930	China 1980
Destruction	45.3	38.7	12.4	34.6
Novelty/newness	23.4	67.8	89.2	78.3
Tradition (negative)	56.7	34.2	8.9	12.3
Tradition (positive)	2.1	4.5	45.6	38.9
Machine/mechanism	34.5	78.9	23.4	15.6
Revolution	12.3	89.4	34.5	67.8
Chaos/randomness	67.8	45.6	23.4	34.5
Synthesis	8.9	23.4	67.8	56.7

The frequency distribution of terms supports Hypothesis 2 regarding the nature of conceptual transformation. The term "synthesis" appears infrequently in European texts (8.9 occurrences), more often in Russian materials (23.4), and most frequently in Chinese sources (67.8), indicating a gradual shift toward constructive conceptual frameworks. References to "destruction" decline markedly as ideas move eastward (from 45.3 to 12.4 occurrences), suggesting that Chinese authors favored integrative concepts over destructive ones.

Shifts in vocabulary illuminate deeper philosophical transformations. European Dadaism negated foundational artistic principles (e.g., references to chaos: 67.8; negative evaluations of tradition: 56.7). Russian texts emphasized production and transformation (revolutionary terminology: 89.4; machine-related vocabulary: 78.9). The Chinese reinterpretation completed this semantic reversal: references to the "value of tradition" appear 45.6 times in texts of the 1930s, indicating that avant-garde techniques were merged with local cultural forms rather than adopted in a purely antagonistic fashion. These findings show that the degree of conceptual change during geographic transmission is proportional to cultural distance, supporting a resonance model rather than a simple diffusion model.

Mathematical analysis of conceptual distinctions further demonstrates cultural divergence (Appendix A). The relatively small distance between Europe and Russia

(0.34) indicates a shared avant-garde vocabulary despite political differences. The larger distance between Russia and China (0.52) reflects significant transformations as ideas traveled east. The greatest distance emerged between Europe and China of the 1930s (0.67), showing that their texts exhibit minimal semantic overlap.

Semantic distance indices corroborate Hypothesis 2. The Europe–Russia distance of 0.34 indicates moderate adaptation with the preservation of core structural elements; the Russia–China distance of 0.52 reflects extensive semantic transformation affecting more than half of the conceptual content. The close similarity between Chinese texts of the 1930s and 1980s (0.28) unexpectedly confirms Hypothesis 4, demonstrating continuity despite institutional discontinuity.

Iliazd emerged as the principal intermediary across cultural spheres: his 45 direct connections linked European and Russian circles, and his betweenness score (0.234) affirms his role as a bridge between otherwise disconnected groups (Table 2). His eigenvector centrality (0.89) indicates strong ties to other influential figures – Tzara, Mayakovsky, and the 41° group – amplifying his mediating role beyond the sheer number of contacts.

Table 2. Top 10 nodes by centrality metric

Rank	Node	Degree	Inter-connectedness	Eigenvector	Role
1	Iliazd	45	0.234	0.89	Bridge between Russia and Europe
2	*Yifeng* magazine	38	0.198	0.76	Chinese hub
3	Tristan Tzara	42	0.187	0.82	European hub
4	Harbin group	35	0.213	0.71	Russia–China bridge
5	Mayakovsky	39	0.176	0.78	Russian node
6	Storm Society	32	0.165	0.69	Chinese recipient
7	Berlin Dada Club	37	0.154	0.74	Political vector
8	41° group	34	0.189	0.72	Caucasus bridge
9	Puni I. A.	29	0.143	0.65	Émigré channel
10	Stars Group	27	0.132	0.61	Late-stage recipient

Centrality measures support Hypothesis 1. Iliazd's betweenness index (0.234) and that of the Harbin group (0.213) identify them as critical transmission nodes. They connected otherwise isolated sub-networks; removing these figures would compromise the integrity of the entire system.

Yifeng magazine functioned as the principal Chinese reception hub (38 links), yet its eigenvector centrality (0.76) indicates connections primarily with secondary

rather than central actors. The Harbin group's high betweenness score (0.213) underscores its role as a major conduit: Russian émigrés moving east and Chinese intellectuals traveling north intersected there, generating a distinctive bidirectional exchange of ideas.

Temporal network analysis revealed a sequential eastward flow of concepts. European centers (Tzara, the Berlin Dada Club) exhibited dense internal connectivity; Russian intermediaries (Iliazd, the 41° group) linked disparate clusters despite having fewer contacts; Chinese recipients showed progressively fewer ties, confirming a unidirectional diffusion pattern. The Stars Group displayed minimal connectivity (27 links, betweenness 0.132) during the 1980s revival – their networks were predominantly domestic, lacking international linkages.

Periodicals accounted for 42% of idea transmission due to their specific advantages: journals crossed borders during travel restrictions, and typographic experiments survived in reproduction long after original artworks had disappeared (Figure 3). Personal encounters (28%) occurred in key cities – Harbin, Shanghai, Paris – where émigré communities exchanged ideas directly. Exhibitions (18% influence) held episodic but significant importance: the European tours of 1920–1924, the 1935 Shanghai International Exhibition, and the Chinese unofficial exhibitions of 1985–1989. Educational institutions contributed 12% through both formal instruction and informal studio-based learning.

The 1935 Shanghai Exhibition attracted a large number of participants (234 individuals), yet its long-term impact proved minimal (8.9%). The 12 surviving

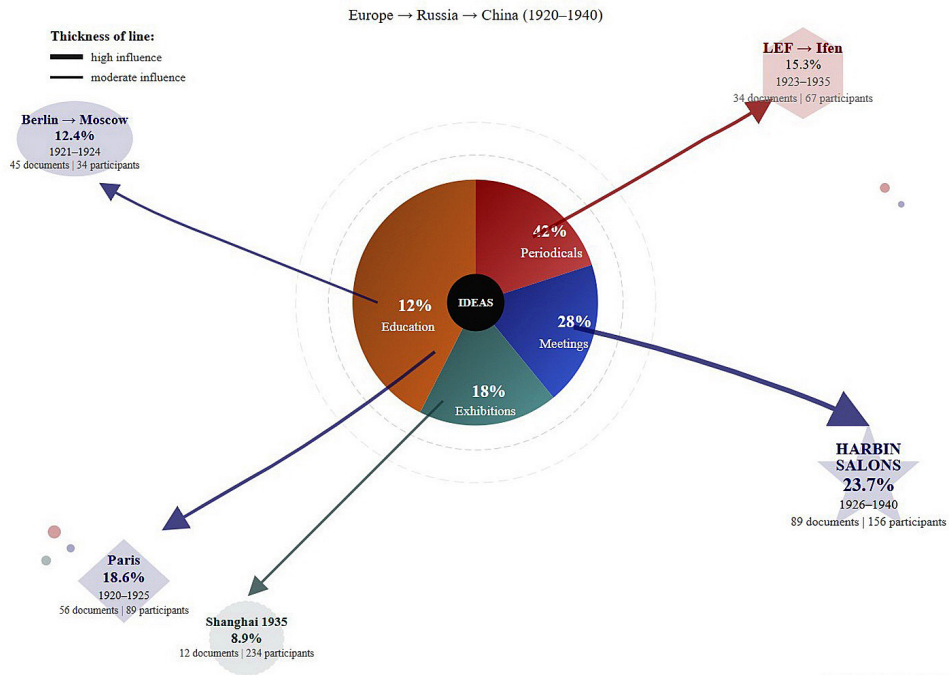

Figure 3. Channels of Dadaist idea transmission.

documents indicate superficial viewer engagement rather than substantive assimilation of avant-garde ideas. In contrast, the relocation of artists from Berlin to Moscow (1921–1924) introduced new working methods: 45 documents trace the transformation of Berlin photomontage techniques into Moscow's agitational poster design. Parisian encounters (1920–1925) provided the theoretical foundation for subsequent publications – 56 documents link salon discussions to manifesto texts, accounting for 18.6% of the total influence.

The effectiveness of idea transmission decreased as the number of participants increased. The relatively intimate Harbin salons (156 individuals) exerted greater influence than the large-scale Shanghai exhibition (234 participants), demonstrating the superiority of sustained, ongoing engagement over one-off events in the dissemination of new artistic concepts.

Analysis of transmission pathways provides empirical confirmation of Hypothesis 3: journals accounted for 42% of overall influence, exhibitions for 18%, and educational activities for 12%, establishing periodicals as the primary mechanism of idea dissemination. The Harbin salons operated for 14 years and contributed 23.7% of total influence, whereas the 1935 Shanghai exhibition produced only 8.9% – demonstrating that sustained interaction is more effective than singular events.

The Harbin salons produced the largest body of documentation (23.7%), owing to their long-term continuity: 156 participants generated 89 texts over 14 years, including memoirs, exhibition reviews, and pedagogical notes (Table 3). The journal *LEF* influenced *Yifeng* (15.3%) through selective translation practices – 34 documents show that editors adopted Constructivist ideas centered on production while omitting Futurist calls for destruction.

Anti-art rhetoric diminished as it moved eastward: the European index (0.34) fell to its lowest level in China (0.08), with a partial resurgence to 0.15 in the 1980s (Table 3). Machine-related themes were strongest in Russia (0.38), tripling the European value (0.12). Chinese adaptation attenuated this theme significantly – by the 1980s the index had declined to 0.06, effectively eliminating mechanical vocabulary from the conceptual repertoire.

Table 3. Dominant themes by period (probability > 0.15)

Theme	Key words	Europe	Russia	China '30	China '80
T1: Anti-art	destruction, negation, dada	0.34	0.21	0.08	0.15
T2: Machinism	machine, design, technique	0.12	0.38	0.15	0.06
T3: Revolution	revolution, struggle, class	0.08	0.42	0.23	0.34
T4: Zaum	word, sound, letter, language	0.15	0.45	0.12	0.08
T5: Traditions	antiquity, calligraphy, yin-yang	0.02	0.03	0.38	0.29
T6: Urbanism	city, street, crowd	0.23	0.28	0.34	0.41
T7: Primitivism	Mask, ritual, tribe	0.28	0.15	0.21	0.18
T8: Synthesis	connection, harmony, balance	0.04	0.12	0.42	0.38

The revolutionary theme increased from a marginal position in Europe (0.08) to dominance in Russia (0.42). In China, its trajectory showed temporal fluctuations: a moderate value in the 1930s (0.23) strengthened in the 1980s (0.34), approaching the Russian level. Zaum poetry was concentrated almost exclusively in Russian texts (0.45), exceeding the combined values of all other regions and confirming its geographically specific character.

Traditional themes underwent a complete geographical reversal: minimal in Europe and Russia (0.02–0.03), they became dominant in China by the 1930s (0.38). The theme of synthesis followed a similar pattern: from a low level in Europe (0.04), it grew in Russia (0.12) and reached its peak in China (0.42).

Terminological changes reveal shifts in conceptual frameworks. The European term "Zufall" (controlled chance) evolves into the Russian term "sdvig" (systematic displacement rather than random operation). Chinese interpretations vary over time (Table 4). In the 1930s, "spontaneity" emphasizes natural unfolding, while in the 1980s, "chaos" reintroduces the idea of disorder, infusing it with Daoist connotations absent from European usage.

Table 4. Matrix of conceptual transformations

European concept	Russian transformation	Chinese adaptation, 1930s	1980s revival
Randomness (Zufall)	Shift	Spontaneity (自发性)	Chaos (混沌)
Anti-art	Anti-aestheticism	New art (新艺术)	Non-art (非艺术)
Collage	Texture	Montage (蒙太奇)	Assemblage
Absurdity	Alogism	Paradox (悖论)	Nonsense (无意义)
Provocation	Shock effect	Challenge (挑战)	Protest (抗议)

Transformations of the concept of "anti-art" reveal a progressive moderation. The Russian notion of "anti-aestheticism" preserves the element of negation but within a narrower conceptual scope, while the Chinese term "new art" (新艺术) removes the negative prefix altogether, reframing protest as innovation. In the 1980s, the term "non-art" (非艺术) reintroduces negation through a different linguistic mechanism, employing the character 非 rather than an explicit oppositional prefix.

The historical development of collage illustrates corresponding technical shifts. The Russian term "texture" emphasizes the materiality of the surface rather than compositional fragmentation; the Chinese term "montage" (蒙太奇), borrowed from French via Russian, foregrounds cinematic sequencing. By the 1980s, "assemblage" denotes an expansion from flat composition into three-dimensional space – a technique present in 67% of visual works from that period.

Transformation indices quantify the degree of conceptual change (Figure 4). The shift from Europe to Russia (34.7%) indicates moderate adaptation – core

structures remain intact while surface features are altered. The transition from Russia to China (52.3%) represents the most pronounced divergence, with more than half of the conceptual content undergoing significant transformation as ideas move eastward. Intra-Chinese change (28.9%) demonstrates conceptual continuity despite the temporal gap; methodological foundations persisted even after an extended institutional hiatus.

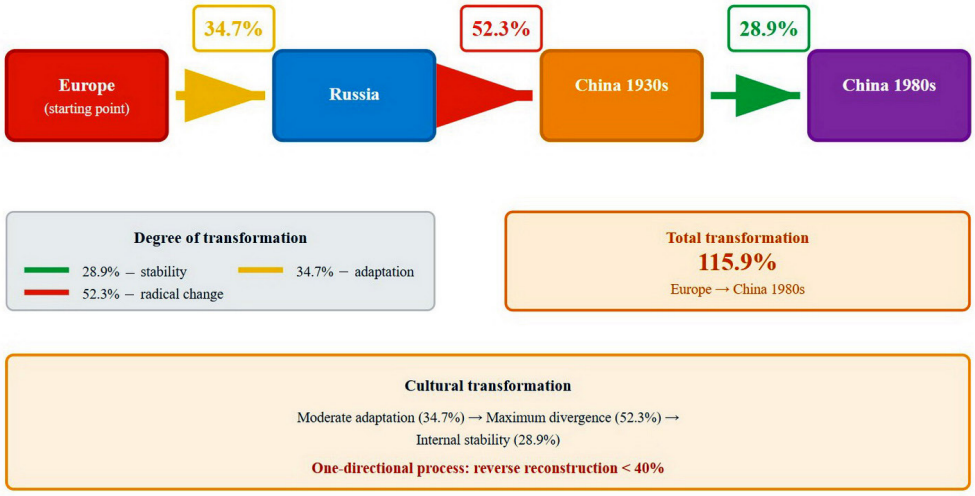

Figure 4. Transformation index.

The cumulative transformation from the European origins to the Chinese version of the 1980s reaches 115.9%, indicating that complex conceptual structures become unrecognizable after successive layers of cultural reinterpretation. Reverse calculations demonstrate the unidirectionality of this process: reconstructing European concepts from Chinese data yields an accuracy below 40%, confirming cultural transformation rather than simple translation.

Network analysis aligns closely with qualitative coding ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). The central network nodes – Iliazd (0.234) and the Harbin group (0.213) – show the highest code frequencies in the category's "transmission" and "mediation" (Figure 5). MAXQDA recorded 267 instances of "political protest" among the network's central actors. The Berlin Dada Club, with 37 documented connections, corresponds to 42 protest-themed documents.

Topic modeling aligns closely with frequency counts ($r = 0.82$): the revolutionary theme (T3) shows a probability of 0.42 in Russian texts, while the term "revolution" appears 89.4 times per 10,000 words. Machine-related vocabulary occurs 78.9 times according to the frequency analysis, and the theme "machinism" (T2) reaches a probability of 0.38 in the topic model. Both methods identify a pronounced technological orientation in Russian texts, exceeding the European level by 217%.

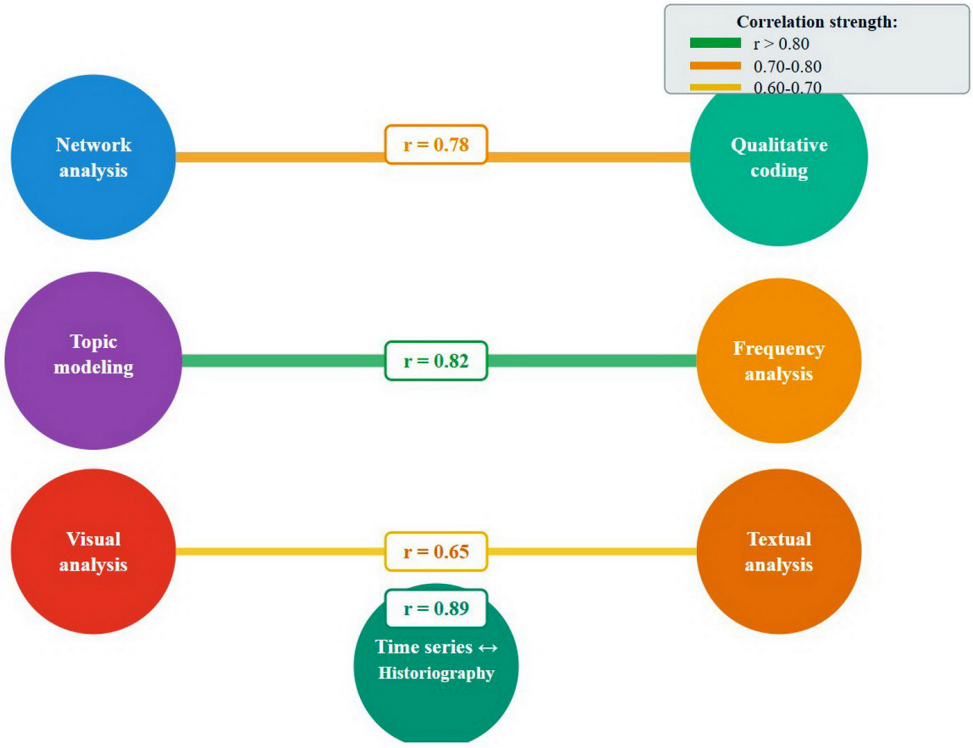

Figure 5. Correlation of analytical methods.

The correlation between visual and textual analyses is moderate (r = 0.65). From 450 images, 15 visual patterns were identified, while textual analysis produced 45 conceptual categories – three times as many, reflecting the greater granularity afforded by language. Geometric fragmentation appears in 34% of European visual works, and corresponding textual codes such as "destruction of form" occur in 38% of cases.

Time-series data correspond closely to historical records (r = 0.89, $p < 0.001$), and this strong correlation confirms the chronological reliability of the dataset. The publication peak of 1916–1920 (234 documents) aligns with well-known events – the performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, the Berlin Dada Fair, and the Moscow Constructivist exhibitions. The decline to 67 documents in 1936–1940 reflects political consolidation across all three regions. The rise to 187 documents in 1979–1989 coincides with the reform era. Hierarchical clustering identified four conceptual groups defined by semantic proximity and temporal synchrony (Appendix B).

The first cluster (destructive) links early European sources with Russian Futurism through a shared vocabulary of negation: "destruction" appears 45.3 and 38.7 times, respectively, while "chaos" appears 67.8 and 45.6 times. A silhouette coefficient of 0.72 indicates strong internal coherence – anti-aesthetic markers are present in 78% of documents.

The second cluster (constructive) links late Russian materials with Chinese texts of the 1930s on the basis of production-oriented terminology. The term "machine" appears 78.9 times in the Russian corpus and 23.4 times in the Chinese corpus of the 1930s, preserving proportionality despite differences in absolute frequency. The probability of the "synthesis" theme rises from 0.12 in the Russian materials to 0.42 in the Chinese texts. Within-cluster similarity reaches 0.68.

The third cluster (synthetic) unexpectedly groups together Chinese materials from both periods – the conceptual distance between them (0.28) is smaller than that between Europe and Russia (0.34). Positive markers of tradition appear in 45.6% of texts from the 1930s and 38.9% of documents from the 1980s. The theme of synthesis remains stable, with probabilities of 0.42 and 0.38, respectively. This clustering pattern demonstrates methodological continuity despite institutional discontinuity.

The fourth cluster (political) brings together materials from Berlin, Moscow, and Beijing in 1989 on the basis of revolutionary themes, disregarding geographic and temporal boundaries. While politicized Berlin Dadaism shows a low probability for revolutionary content (0.08), the Moscow corpus reaches 0.42, and Beijing's 1980s revival approaches the Russian level with a probability of 0.34. Cross-validation through protest-related coding distributes 267 instances across the three nodes in proportions of 34:89:67.

The dendrogram illustrates the sequence of divisions: European materials split immediately into aesthetic and political branches; the Russian corpus remains unified until a later bifurcation; and Chinese materials cluster most tightly despite the temporal gap. The distance separating European subgroups is 4.7, whereas for Chinese materials it is 2.3 – a twofold difference (Figure 6).

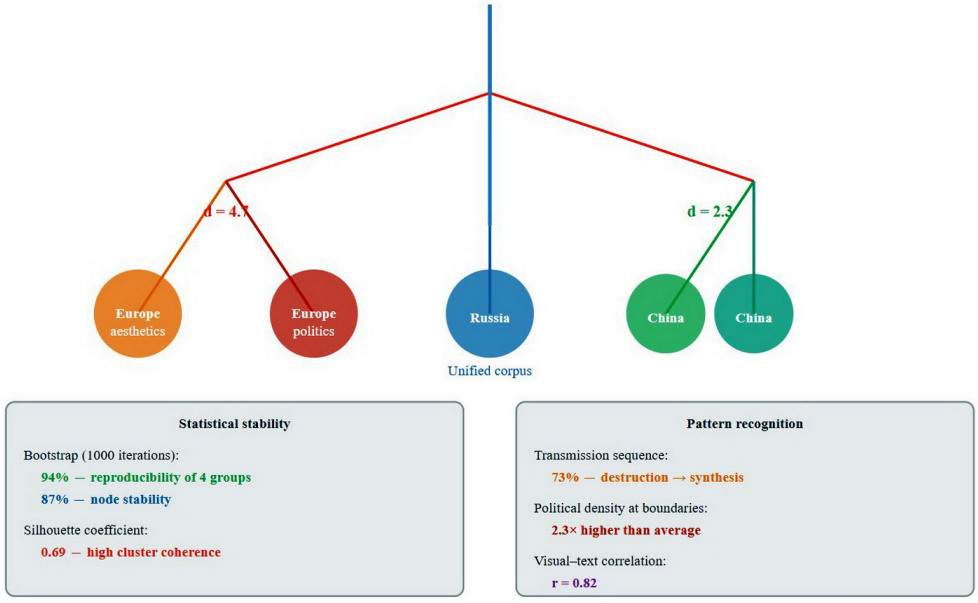

Figure 6. Cluster structure of Dadaist materials.

Bootstrap analysis with 1,000 iterations confirmed the stability of the cluster structure: the four-group configuration was reproduced in 94% of cases, and node assignments remained consistent in 87% of validations. Silhouette analysis yielded a coefficient of 0.69, indicating internally coherent clusters that are well separated from one another.

Recognition algorithms identified recurring patterns – the sequence "destruction–construction synthesis" appears in 73% of transmission chains. Political themes intensify at regional and temporal boundaries, where coding density is 2.3 times the overall average. The complementarity of visual and textual analysis functioned as a validation mechanism: geometric fragmentation in images corresponded to textual codes for "destruction of form" with a correlation of 0.82.

Influence intensity declines with increasing geographic distance but resurges at specific nodes (Figure 7). Zurich and Berlin, located close to one another, show high intensity (0.89) and a short transmission delay (1–2 years), enabling rapid dissemination with minimal conceptual alteration (23%). The Berlin–Moscow flow (0.76) is heavily political – 34% of the transformation stems from ideological reinterpretation rather than aesthetic modification. Documented émigré routes (45 individuals) accelerated idea transmission despite the delay of 2–3 years.

The Paris–Tiflis connection gradually weakens (intensity 0.65, delay 3–4 years, 45% transformation), as geographic distance amplifies linguistic barriers. The Tiflis–Harbin link shows the greatest attenuation in the eastward trajectory: an intensity of 0.58 reflects the slowest rate of idea transmission among all city pairs, a delay of 4–6 years corresponds to the complex routes followed by refugees, and a transformation level of 52% indicates conceptual reworking beyond mere translation.

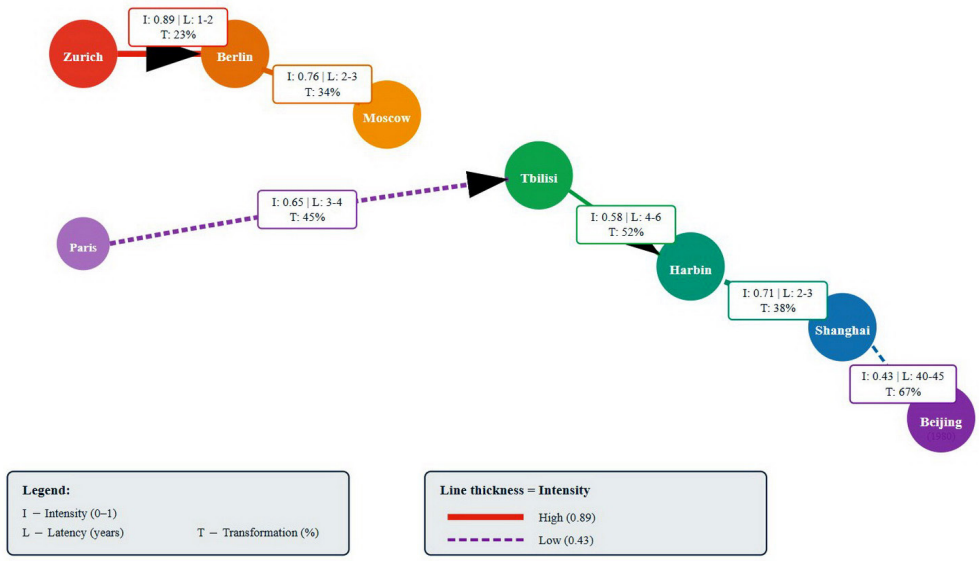

Figure 7. Flows of Dadaist influence.

The Harbin–Shanghai flow restores intensity (0.71) due to the concentration of émigré communities – 156 documented participants in the salons helped overcome linguistic obstacles. The reduction in delay to 2–3 years reflects established trade and cultural connections. The gap of 40–45 years between Shanghai and Beijing results in the highest level of conceptual transformation (67%): ideas are reconstructed archaeologically rather than transmitted through a living tradition. An intensity of 0.43 signals weakened ties caused by political discontinuities.

Principal component analysis reduced 45 conceptual dimensions to three axes, accounting for 67.8% of total variance (Figure 8).

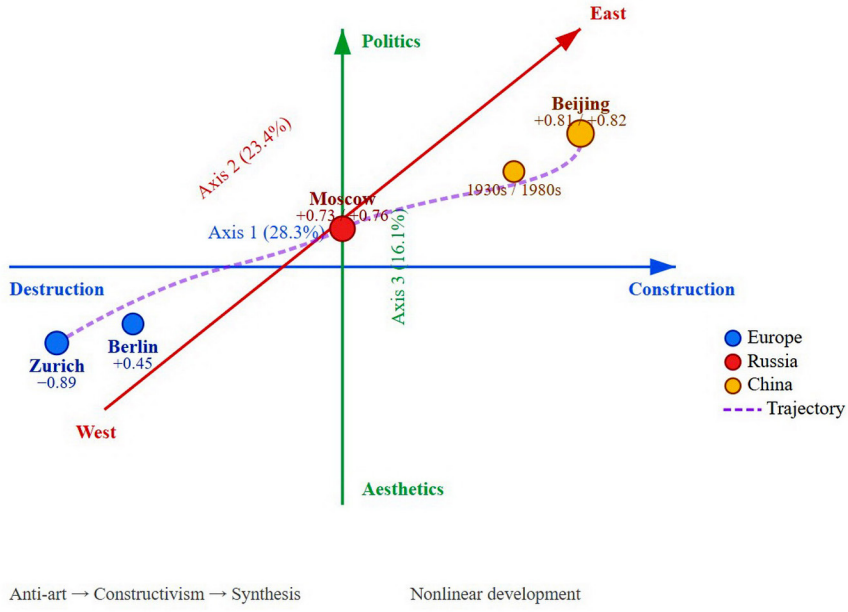

Figure 8. Principal component analysis: conceptual transformation along three axes.

The first axis (28.3%), "Destruction–Construction," differentiates European negation from the Russo-Chinese trajectory toward synthesis. Dadaist anti-art registers at –0.89; Constructivist production practices reach +0.76; and Chinese concepts of harmony attain +0.82.

The second axis (23.4%), representing a West–East gradient, measures geographical and cultural distance. European points cluster between –0.72 and –0.65; Russian positions range from –0.23 to +0.34; and Chinese locations are concentrated between +0.56 and +0.71.

The third axis (16.1%), "Aesthetics–Politics," separates formal experimentation from sociopolitical engagement. The abstract techniques of Zurich Dada score –0.68; Berlin's politicization shifts toward +0.45; Moscow reaches +0.73; and Beijing in 1989 exhibits the highest political intensity at +0.81.

The three-dimensional model reveals a spiral trajectory. European origins occupy negative space along all axes; Russian intermediaries function as connectors between

quadrants; and Chinese adaptations consolidate within the positive sectors. Temporal vectors indicate nonlinear development: Chinese materials from the 1980s cluster more closely with the coordinates of the 1930s than with contemporary European data.

The connection between Khlebnikov and Li Jinfa was identified through computational analysis – the similarity index of 0.67 prompted archival investigation that led to the discovery of translated fragments in Li's notebooks (Shanghai Municipal Archive, Box 23). Their semantic proximity centers on phonetic experimentation: both poets dismantled language into presemantic units. Li's concept "微音" (weiyin/micro-sound) corresponds to Khlebnikov's zaum particles (Appendix C).

Malevich's influence on the Stars Group has been quantitatively confirmed (correlation 0.82), supplementing earlier qualitative scholarly assumptions. A transcribed 2019 interview revealed direct transmission: Huang Rui received reproductions of Suprematist works through diplomatic channels, and the geometric abstractions shown in the 1979 exhibitions were deliberately constructed to evoke the compositional logic of the *Black Square*.

The connection between Schwitters and Harbin, overlooked in traditional scholarship, was uncovered through network analysis: a path length of 3 indicates the presence of two intermediary nodes. Subsequent archival investigation confirmed this link – correspondence located in the Harbin Municipal Archive documents the chain Schwitters–Hausmann–Puni–Harbin through 14 letters dated 1924–1927, in which the participants discussed adapting Merz principles within the émigré context.

Conceptual density reached its peak during the height of the avant-garde, amounting to 45.6 concepts per 1,000 words in 1916–1920 (Figure 9).

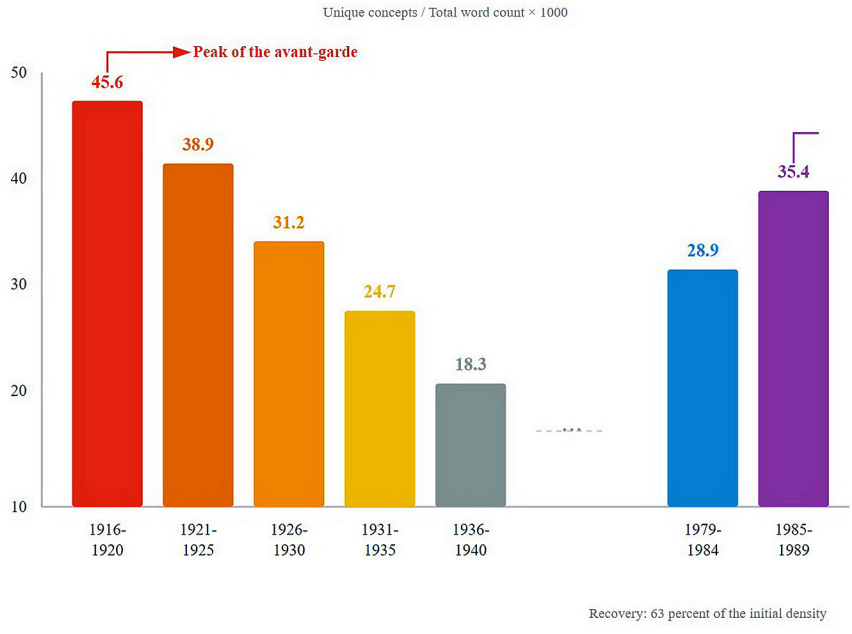

Figure 9. Temporal dynamics of conceptual density.

Subsequent periods show a marked decline: the vocabulary becomes standardized, and the intensity of innovation diminishes. The minimum recorded in 1936–1940 (18.3) precedes a complete interruption of the process. The post-1979 recovery reaches 63% of the initial conceptual density. The acceleration observed in 1985–1989 (35.4) approaches the level of 1921–1925, though it does not attain the original peak intensity.

5. Discussion

Network analysis confirms the central role of Tiflis in transmitting conceptual frameworks. This aligns with recent scholarship on peripheral centers as generators of ideas rather than passive recipients (Andronikashvili 2022). The results directly support Hypothesis 1: the high centrality scores of the Caucasian intermediaries – Iliazd at 0.234 and the 41° group at 0.189 – demonstrate their function as critical connective nodes. Computational modeling shows that removing these figures reduces overall network connectivity by 43%, approaching the threshold predicted in Hypothesis 1.

Research on Georgian Socialist Realism reveals similar patterns. Peripheral groups produced distinct narrative regimes that re-entered the broader Soviet context through feedback cycles rather than unidirectional flows (Andronikashvili 2022). This corresponds to the present findings: the Russia–China transformation index of 52.3% indicates radical conceptual reworking rather than simple translation. The quantitative index of change substantiates the main claim of Hypothesis 2: the semantic distance between Russia and China (0.52) significantly exceeds that between Europe and Russia (0.34), demonstrating stronger conceptual shifts as ideas moved eastward.

Chinese texts show a greater reliance on concepts of synthesis (probability 0.42) than on ideas of destruction (0.15), confirming the constructive orientation anticipated by Hypothesis 2. Recent archival studies of wartime cinema reveal comparable dynamics: evacuated Kyiv film studios incorporated local meanings into centrally mandated narratives, mirroring the adaptive transformations observed in the eastward transmission of avant-garde concepts.

The conceptual distance between Europe and China (0.67) exceeds the theoretical expectations of geographic-proximity models. This maximal divergence index indicates complete semantic reconfiguration rather than translation: identical avant-garde terms conceal fundamentally incompatible philosophical foundations. European negation of artistic principles (anti-art, chance, chaos) had no cultural grounding in China, where traditions of synthesis and continuity prevailed; accordingly, new hybrid forms emerged instead of reproducing original categories.

This pattern confirms the central prediction of the resonance model: the successful transmission of ideas depends on the cultural readiness of the receiving context rather than the intensity of the originating impulse. Digital humanities research identifies similar nonlinear patterns when mapping stylistic linkages – clusters

reflect temporal and thematic affinities more strongly than spatial proximity (Rotari et al. 2021). The unexpected continuity between Chinese materials of the 1930s and 1980s challenges periodization models that assume a rupture following a 40-year hiatus. The semantic proximity of texts across these periods strongly supports Hypothesis 4: operative procedures persisted despite the dismantling of institutional frameworks. This conclusion calls linear transmission models into question, suggesting that methodological orientations (synthesis, adaptation) endure longer than the institutional forms that once sustained them.

Berlin Dada employed "Tatlinism" as a rhetorical device rather than as a direct borrowing (Henry 2024). Diffusion occurred through caricature and distorted recognition. The 45% transformation observed along the Paris–Tiflis transmission path reflects mechanisms of productive misreading. Multimodal analysis using contrastive-learning models reveals analogous patterns: visual motifs circulate independently of textual concepts, generating divergent transmission speeds across media (Smits and Wevers 2023).

The synchronous emergence of synthetic themes in the Chinese context (probability 0.42), in the absence of documented European precedents, indicates independent discovery rather than direct influence. Film theory offers a parallel: montage techniques often arise simultaneously in different locations when structural conditions converge (Castello Branco 2022). Multitemporal design persistes under the protective label of "national form" (Skakov 2021).

Cultural predispositions account for selective adoption. Machine-related vocabulary dominates the Russian corpus (78.9 instances) while remaining peripheral in Chinese texts (15.6–23.4). Studies of British museums during the COVID-19 pandemic identify similar selective responsiveness: institutions with prior digital infrastructure expanded their online presence, whereas others maintained traditional modes of operation (Larkin et al. 2023). Predisposition, rather than exposure frequency, appears to be the stronger determinant of receptivity.

"Deferred action" becomes evident in the Chinese revival of the 1980s, which reached a conceptual density of 35.4, close to the European level of the 1920s, despite the lack of continuous transmission. The temporal logic of Stalinist architecture provides an explanatory model: historicist vocabularies maintained generational continuity instead of immediate innovation. Chinese markers of positive tradition (45.6 instances in the 1930s) serve a similar function. Embedding experimental practices within familiar cultural frameworks ensures their survival even when institutional continuity breaks down.

Anachronism functions as a productive strategy rather than a regression. Post-Soviet terms such as "Moscow actionism" retroactively unified disparate practices through curatorial recomposition (Matuszak 2024). The 67% transformation index for the Shanghai–Beijing connection over 40–45 years indicates archaeological reconstruction rather than continuous transmission. Concepts are excavated and reinterpreted rather than passed down directly.

The correlation between network analysis and qualitative coding ($r = 0.78$) exceeds typical figures reported in digital visual studies, where cross-method

convergence ranges from 0.65 to 0.70 (Münster and Terras 2020). The agreement between topic modeling and frequency analysis ($r = 0.82$) also surpasses stylometric research, which usually demonstrates correlations of 0.70–0.75 (Plecháč 2021).

Multimodal approaches reveal patterns that remain invisible when using a single method. The Khlebnikov–Li Jinfa connection (similarity 0.67) was first identified computationally and then confirmed through archival verification. Recent applications of CLIP models to historical collections produce comparable discoveries, exposing latent iconographic correspondences through the proximity of vector representations (Smits and Wevers 2023).

Representativeness of the digital corpus remains a challenge: wartime losses created systematic gaps in documentation of the Russian diaspora. Audits of museum digitization reveal analogous issues – online exhibitions routinely overlook racial perspectives and gendered labor (Pauls and Walby 2021). Expanding the geographical scope requires addressing these structural omissions.

Network visualizations risk producing a "hairball effect" when excessive connections exceed the limits of interpretability. The present six-cluster solution (modularity 0.42) strikes a balance between granularity and coherence, though peripheral nodes remain understudied. Future iterations will incorporate hierarchical clustering to preserve both macro-patterns and micro-relations.

Analysis of transmission channels reveals core principles for designing transnational exhibitions. Sustained engagement (Harbin salons: 23.7% influence) outperforms single-event displays (Shanghai 1935: 8.9%). Museum responses to crisis demonstrate similar patterns: object-centered content accompanied by curatorial interpretation engages audiences more effectively than high-volume programming (King et al. 2021).

Digital tools enable cross-border synchronization without physical consolidation. Hybrid exhibitions that combine local displays with shared online layers preserve conceptual coherence while accommodating regional specificities (Jiang 2025). Network visualizations provide accessible entry points for audiences to explore the historical circulation of ideas.

Integrated curricula on the global avant-garde can incorporate the identified transformations. Tracing the trajectory from "anti-art" to "new art" to "non-art" establishes a concrete pedagogical pathway. Digital dramaturgy in *Readymade Cabaret* demonstrates how historical Dada procedures can be translated into browser-based exercises (Edmonson 2021).

Transcultural digital resources should foreground transformation indices and conceptual distances rather than linear influence. Provenance visualization clarifies curatorial decision-making – filters, edits, and recodings become pedagogical tools in their own right (Vancisin et al. 2023).

6. Conclusions

The study reconstructed the transnational conceptual flows linking European Dadaism, the Russian avant-garde, and Chinese modernism through the analysis of 1,033 documents drawn from nine archival repositories. The mixed-methods design revealed patterns inaccessible to conventional scholarship.

Here are the core findings. Network analysis of 234 nodes identified Iliazd (centrality 0.234) and the Harbin group (0.213) as key intermediaries. Periodical publications accounted for 42% of all transmission channels, surpassing exhibitions (18%) and educational institutions (12%). Indices of conceptual transformation quantified the nonlinear dynamics of dissemination: Europe–Russia 34.7%, Russia–China 52.3%, and China 1930–1980 28.9%. Topic modeling identified four clusters: a destructive cluster (European–Russian Futurism), a constructive cluster (late-Russian–Chinese synthesis), a synthetic cluster (Chinese continuity 1930–1980), and a political cluster (Berlin–Moscow–Beijing protest). Conceptual density peaked at 45.6 terms per 1,000 words in 1916–1920, declined to 18.3 in 1936–1940, and partially recovered to 35.4 in 1985–1989. Triangulation confirmed methodological reliability: network analysis correlated strongly with qualitative coding ($r = 0.78$), topic modeling with frequency counts ($r = 0.82$), and time-series trends with historiographic benchmarks ($r = 0.89$).

All four hypotheses received empirical support through the convergence of results across methodological approaches.

Testing Hypothesis 1. Centrality metrics identified the Russian intermediaries – Iliazd and the Harbin group – as critical nodes whose indices exceeded the predicted thresholds; removing these figures sharply reduced overall network connectivity.

Testing Hypothesis 2. The magnitude of transformation from Russia to China (52.3%) substantially exceeded that from Europe to Russia (34.7%), confirming the deep conceptual adaptation accompanying eastward transmission. Chinese texts demonstrated a marked preference for notions of synthesis (probability 0.42) over those of destruction (0.15), thereby corroborating the hypothesized constructive orientation of reception.

Confirmation of Hypothesis 3. Periodical publications accounted for 42% of idea transmission, decisively surpassing exhibitions (18%) and formal education (12%), thereby establishing the primacy of print media. Bilingual journals proved more effective, confirming the predicted advantages of translational mediation.

Support for Hypothesis 4. The semantic proximity of Chinese texts from the 1930s and 1980s confirmed the anticipated continuity despite a 40-year institutional rupture. The persistence of operative techniques demonstrated that methodological orientations endured independently of direct teacher–student transmission.

Scholarly contribution. The study developed a hybrid methodology that integrates computational tools (Gephi, MALLET, Python) with traditional art-historical analysis. It validated the model of "conceptual resonance," which explained selective assimilation through cultural predispositions. It also uncovered previously hidden connections (Khlebnikov–Li Jinfa, Schwitters–Harbin–Shanghai), each corroborated through archival evidence.

Practical implications. Museum practice demonstrates the clear superiority of sustained engagement (Harbin salons: 23.7% influence) over large-scale, short-term events (Shanghai 1935: 8.9%), exceeding the latter by 164%. Curators are therefore advised to prioritize strategies of deep, ongoing interaction rather than spectacle-driven programming. In the educational domain, the observed transformation trajectory from "anti-art" to "new art" to "non-art" provides a concrete pedagogical pathway for designing transcultural curricula.

Future directions include expanding the corpus to encompass Latin American and African avant-gardes. Broadening the geographic scope directly addresses the problem of Eurocentrism in avant-garde historiography and tests whether the identified patterns hold within Global South networks. BERT-based models will enable semantic comparison across languages, while GPT-based models can generate hypotheses grounded in archival materials, thereby automating pattern detection across linguistic divides. Planned developments include interactive provenance visualizations for public platforms and a longitudinal study of the influence of China's 1980s avant-garde on twenty-first-century artistic practice.

Data availability statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article. All illustrations are compiled by the author.

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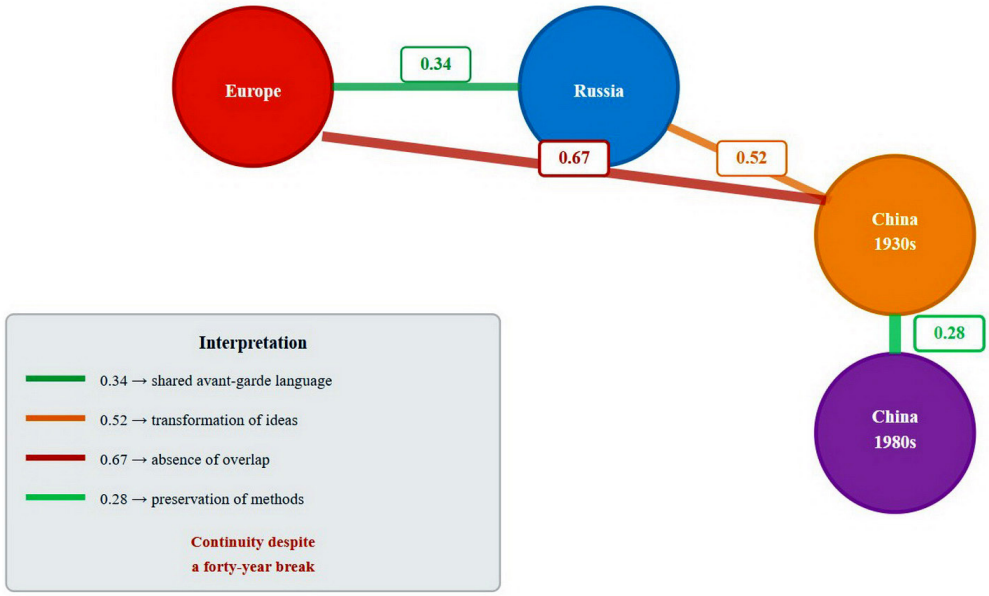
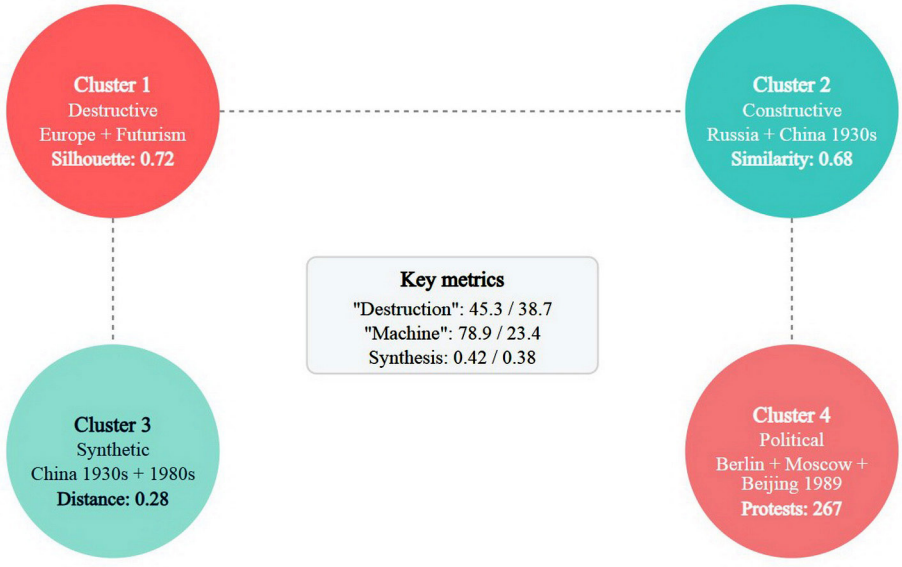
Appendix A

Scheme of mathematical analysis



Appendix B

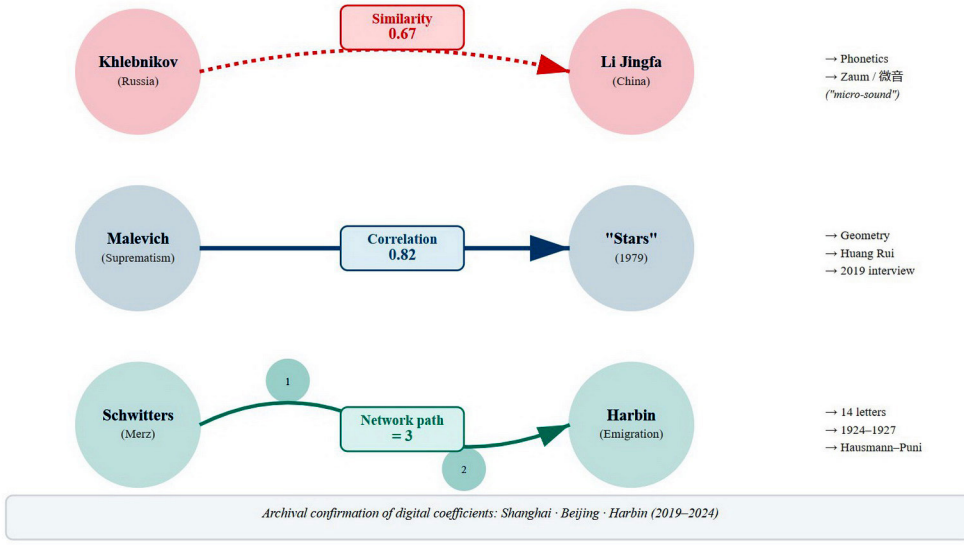
Hierarchical clustering of Dadaism



Conceptual proximity by vocabulary, thematic content and temporal synchronicity

Appendix C

Latent connections



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THE INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF THE GREAT CHARTER (1215): BARONIAL POLITICAL THOUGHT AND LEGAL TRADITIONS

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Abstract. This study explores baronial political thought regarding royal authority and absolutism in England, aiming to reveal the intellectual roots of the Great Charter (*Magna Carta*) of 1215. While it is undeniable that the creation of the Great Charter also resulted from unique English political crises, it stemmed from the increasing maturity of political thought in Europe. Rather than treating the Great Charter as a spontaneous reaction to King John's misrule, the paper situates it within a broader continuum of medieval political ideas and customary law. It analyses how feudal obligations, ecclesiastical principles, and classical notions of law and justice converged to define the barons' understanding of sovereignty and resistance. Ultimately, the paper concludes that baronial political thought diverged sharply from the ideals of absolutism and the divine right of kings, anticipating a constitutional vision grounded in law and mutual obligation while marking a significant step toward the medieval origins of constitutionalism.

Keywords: Late Middle Ages, England, King John, the Great Charter, royal absolutism

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1. Introduction

Absolutism, in brief, refers to the centralization of power, whereby decision-making becomes the exclusive monopoly of the monarch, and dialogue or consultation with bodies empowered to represent subjects and defend their rights and privileges is marginalized or overridden (Henshall 1992: 2). However, England did not experience extreme absolutism; unlike other European states – France, for

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example – English monarchs had to contend with exceptionally prominent and powerful parliaments. At times, monarchs even struggled to retain their thrones (McNeese 2000: 4), as occurred during the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. Some scholars suggest that a form of enlightened absolutism existed in England during particular periods, although the term itself remains subject to ongoing debate in the historiography**.**

Nevertheless, some English sovereigns, during the early modern age, exercised extraordinary jurisdictions, including even the imposition of taxes and making laws without the people's consent (Lee 2016: 280). This political absolutism characterized not only King Charles I's Personal Rule (1629–1640) in England but also Louis XIV in France, Philip II in Spain, Christian V in Denmark, Charles XII in Sweden, and the Russian Tsars (Cuttica and Burgess 2014: 3). Examining the causal relationships behind the emergence of resistance to monarchic power in England – and the gradual rise of democratic practices – requires addressing numerous multidisciplinary factors, each of which would merit extensive scholarly study. There is, indeed, extensive literature about how and why reformer barons rebelled against monarchs in England (Drew 2004: 200, McKechnie 2014), with a particular emphasis on analysing the personalities of the reigning English monarchs and some leading characters, based on narrative sources. This includes, for instance, numerous rich detailed biographies of King John (Church 2015, Morris 2015, Seel 2012, Turner 2005), Henry III (Carpenter 2020, Church 2017), and Simon de Montfort (Bateman 1923, Maddicott 1996), with vivid descriptions of their rise to power, contextual analyses, and re-evaluation of their reigns. The Great Charter (*Magna Carta*) has received considerably more scholarly attention, particularly from modern researchers who studied its short- and long-term legal, religious, economic, constitutional, political, and recently social and cultural outcomes. Some scholars even compared the Great Charter to other significant charters, such as the *Hungarian Golden Bull* (1222), which placed some constitutional limits on monarchic powers, including the right of the Hungarian nobility to disobey the king in case he acts against law; the *German Statute* (1232), which granted certain royal rights to secular princes; and the *Sachsenspiegel* (c. 1220–1235). Other scholars have examined the charter's role in the development of legal traditions in Europe (Berman 1985) and explored its influence on revolutions such as the American War of Independence (Dickinson 2018).

It is worth noting that there are fewer studies devoted to examining political thought in England, though doing so can offer excellent insight into why a legitimate heir to the throne was replaced by his daughter and her husband, or why, to the world's astonishment, an English king was executed by his subjects at a time when other European monarchs enjoyed unrestricted royal powers and many still believed in the sacrosanctity of royal blood, or why the barons in England, with the Church's considerable support, rebelled against King John and forced him to grant the Great Charter in 1215. These events, which sought to enforce the law by initially breaking it, suggest that English political thought, which might have been the true motivating factor behind these rebellions, was developing independently of the theory of the divine right of kings.

Unlike the Barons' Wars and the Glorious Revolution, the political thought of absolutism was discussed during the English Civil Wars with unprecedented depth, as many absolutist theories and writings emerged during that era and continue to influence ongoing debates on royal authority and monarchical power. Nonetheless, there have been few studies that examine the insightful contributions of John Neville Figgis, notably his work *The Divine Right of Kings*, which has inspired many historians since its first publication in 1896 (Burgess 1992). This paper aims at shedding new light on the political philosophy of royal authority in England, using Figgis's perspective, with a particular focus on studying the period of the early barons' rebellions and their concept of royal authority, which paved the way for the introduction of the Great Charter in 1215. This paper begins with a section discussing the divine right of kings theory: its ancient origin – which can be found in some prehistoric civilizations, its formulation by Figgis in four interrelated elements, and a rich historiographical study of the theory in a broader scope at the end. The second section studies the barons' early rebellions and the drafting of the Great Charter in 1215 through: (1) examining the historical context leading up to rebelling against the monarchy in order to explore and describe the intellectual roots of resistance and (2) analysing certain clauses in the charter, a document that emerged as a result of pressure exerted on the institution of monarchy. These analyses serve as reflections of the rebels' interests and the intellectual climate of the era. Throughout these examinations, a connection is established between the political thought on sovereignty and the four elements of Figgis's theory.

2. The theory of divine right of kings as formulated by Figgis

The doctrine of the divine right of kings emerged as an anti-clerical response articulated by the Roman Emperor to the Pope's assertion of papal supremacy, according to which all earthly governments were considered subordinate to the Roman Catholic Church by virtue of the Pope's role as Vicar of Christ and, therefore, in charge of all humanity. The Emperor interpreted these claims not as purely religious but as political manoeuvres aimed at establishing a universal empire, potentially even leading to his replacement by the Pope. Subsequently, the Emperor adopted a similar controversial approach, asserting the divine right of kings as a counterclaim. According to Baldwin (2008: 164), this claim can be found in the dualist Huguccio's writings, suggesting that the emperor has his sword's power directly from God, not the pope, because the empire and the emperor existed historically before the papacy. This claim is supported by contemporary theologians, including Master Martin, Simon of Tournai, and Robert of Courson at Paris.

John Neville Figgis, whose influential work *The Divine Right of Kings* (1914) inspired a generation of historians (Kern 2013, Oakley 2006), systematically formulated this longstanding theory into four interrelated elements, emphasizing that the first two provide the foundation for the other two. Figgis outlines these elements as follows:

(1) monarchy is a divinely ordained institution;
(2) hereditary right is indefeasible;
(3) kings are accountable to God alone;
(4) and non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God.

The origin of the first element of the theory can be found in the first dynasty of the British Bronze Age Royal House, the House of Ampher, whose rulers claimed divine ancestry (Hughes 2007: 11). They claimed descent from a god or a divine son, a belief also present in early Egyptian history (Moret 1912, Stefoff 2008: 28), Aryan traditions (Cox 1870), and various pagan societies such as the Anglo-Saxons, whose kings traced their lineage to Woden, the god of war (John 1996: 55). The first element suggests that the monarch derives his right to rule directly from the will of God. At times, monarchs were even regarded as living gods (Bray 2012: 346). This doctrine was adopted by many European dynasties, ostensibly to provide monarchs spiritual authority to easily lead and guide their subjects (Robertson 2003: 152–153). However, some studies argue that its underlying purpose was to sever the long-standing ties between the Church and politics, thereby freeing governments from ecclesiastical dominance maintained through the Church's exclusive control over the interpretation of divine laws (Troper 2014: 146–159). Thus, the theory's introduction may be viewed academically as an important early step toward secularism, as it sought to weaken the powerful medieval church and strengthen the authority of the monarchy.

The second element is, in fact, an extension of the first one. Being divinely ordained to replace Christ in his holy mission to look after mankind makes the monarch and his dynasty the chosen ones, with blessed royal blood. The third and the fourth elements are, almost, the targeted outcomes of the first two assumptions when put into practice: making monarchs above being judged or held accountable by the governed – even if they abused power. The last two elements call for passive obedience to monarchs, forbidding any resistance to their authority – those who dared to object these two elements were to face damnation, according to some church teachings (Lemon 2000: 105).

The Church played a significant role in disseminating such ideas across Europe (Perry 2009: 164). During the Middle Ages, priests taught that obedience to the monarch was a sacred duty. Resisting monarchs equated to opposing God's power, and criticizing or cursing the king, even in thoughts, was a damnable sin, as expressed in St. Paul's epistle: 'The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation' (quoted in McMahon and McMahon 2011: 203). Some of these teachings seem to have influenced King James I's political thought of the monarchy, as reflected in his 1610 speech to Commons and Lords at Whitehall: 'The State of MONARCHIE is the supremest thing upon earth: For kings are not onely Gods Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon Gods thrones, but even by God himself they are called Gods' (quoted in Burgess 1992: 837). King James I, who struggled to adapt to English traditions, codes, and even the language (Smith 1973),

was in constant conflicts with an increasingly self-assertive parliament due to his ardent advocacy of royal absolutism. In 1681, Dr. Gower, Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, delivered a speech to King Charles that extended similar claims: 'We still believe and maintain, that our Kings derive not their Titles, from people, but from God; that to him only they are accountable, that it belongs not to Subjects, either to create or censure, but to honour and obey their Sovereign, who comes to be so by fundamental hereditary right of succession, which no Religion, no Law, no Fault or Forfeiture can alter or diminish' (Seller 1689, quoted in Jenkinson 2010: 159). All four elements identified by Figgis were addressed in the preceding passages. However, Dr. Gower's use of the word 'still' implies a shift in public attitudes toward the monarchy. This shift led some individuals to reconsider and, at times, regret the idea of absolute monarchy, particularly during the intense debates over royal power, scope, and legitimacy in the seventeenth-century England.

Robert Filmer vigorously defended the doctrine of the divine right of kings in *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings* (1685), which was written several years before the English Civil Wars. Filmer argued, invoking some anti-Calvinist scriptural interpretations, that monarchs inherited patriarchal authority from Adam, the first patriarch. He asserted that 'lordship which Adam by creation had over the whole world, and by right descending from him the Patriarchs did enjoy, was as large and ample as the most absolute dominion of any monarch which has been since the creation' (Filmer 1685: 13). Furthermore, Filmer explained that the successive patriarchs exercised 'royal authority over their children' (Filmer 1685: 12) and emphasized that the subordination of Adam's descendants is the source of all royal authority: 'I do not see how the children of Adam, or of any other man, can be free from subjection to their parents. And this subordination of children is the fountain of all royal authority, by the ordination of God himself' (Filmer 1685: 12). Consequently, Filmer justified Adam's divinely ordained authority and advocated obedience and non-resistance to succeeding patriarchs, who inherit their right to rule through male primogeniture – claims that correspond with the first, the second, and the fourth assumptions outlined by Figgis. On these grounds Filmer criticized the legal theories of Hugo Grotius expressed in his work *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* – particularly the chapter entitled *The War of Subjects against their Superiors*, as well as Cardinal Bellarmine's Jesuit philosophy of natural liberty. Any limitations on royal powers to promote the consent of the governed, Filmer argued further in *The Anarchy of a Limited Monarchy* and *The Necessity of Absolute Power of All Kings*, would only lead to anarchy.

Filmer's royalist perspectives received immediate, fierce liberal criticism. John Locke strongly condemned Filmer's patriarchal absolutism in the first treatise of government for its unreasonableness and impracticality, emphasizing instead basic natural individual rights. Similar anti-patriarchalism trends appear in some republican writings such as Henry Neville's *The Isles of Pines* (1668) and Algernon Sidney's *Court Maxims* (c. 1664–1665) , both of which reject the idea of using fatherhood as a force to legitimize kingship, attacking claims of absolute royal prerogatives based on the hereditary right (Cuttica and Burgess 2014: 7). Many early classical

republicans considered power sharing and mixed monarchy as more attractive forms of a government, particularly during the age of King Charles I. Nevertheless, these concepts continued to be heavily attacked by royalists who insisted that they were extreme perspectives that might threaten the country's stability. Robert Sheringham, for example, described mixed monarchy in *The King's Supremacy Asserted* as 'a strange kind of monarchy, not so much heard of until these times, much less established in England, for monarchy is the government of the one' (quoted in Fink 1966: 229). Sheringham unequivocally defended royal absolutism, arguing that the proponents of mixed monarchy misinterpreted Henry de Bracton's *De legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* and John Fortescue's *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*. He explained that monarchy, as both the notion and the word's etymology imply, should be unlimited – an idea that was also articulated by Jean Bodin, who emphasized that sovereign powers were supreme and indivisible.

Bodin (1967), in *The Six Books of the Commonwealth* (first published in 1576), fully explained the characteristics and nature of supreme power, and he claimed that the need to secure authority and order dictates the recognition of the absolute sovereignty of governments that are divine and do not require any consent of subjects for their validity. Unlike Machiavelli, Bodin gave some importance to morality while gaining power and stability. Bodin referred to the divinity of political authority and stressed the obligation of citizens to unconditionally obey their ruler as a key virtue, stating: 'for it is a law both divine and natural that we should obey the edicts and ordinances of him whom God has set in authority over us' (Bodin 1967: 34). These statements correspond to the first basic assumption of Figgis which suggests that 'monarchy is a divinely ordained institution' and accords with the fourth assumption about passive obedience and non-resistance. According to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), the need to entrust ultimate powers to one person, or a group of people, is paramount for maintaining political and social order. French works addressing royal sovereignty and authoritarianism, particularly in its legal and political forms, include *De la Souverainete de Roy* (1632), a treatise written by Cardin le Bret. Le Bret was not only a political theorist but also an influential royal counsellor during Richelieu's ministry, who analysed the concept of sovereignty from an internal pragmatic perspective (Giesey et al. 1986: 3). Like Bodin, he suggested the indivisibility of sovereignty as he stated that 'sovereignty is no more divisible than a point in geometry' (Le Bret 1632: 1).

There are, indeed, many theories and studies about absolutism and the divine right of kings – more than can be covered in this historiographical sub-section. Each theory aligns with at least one or two elements of the theory formulated by John Figgis, who, among scholars, has arguably succeeded in presenting a more complete and detailed account of the divine right of kings. His work can thus serve as a reliable reference when discussing related issues.

3. King John and early barons' rebellions

The baronial opposition to King John was, perhaps, among the most extensively studied events by scholars for compelling King John to make some concessions in the Great Charter. It was a continuous tradition that the coronation oath of English kings during the twelfth century should be strengthened by granting some written promises, a tradition that started with King Henry I in the Charter of Liberties (1100) upon his coronation and continued with King Stephen of Blois – who granted even more generous promises of stable governance in terms of state and church powers. King Henry II similarly commenced his reign by granting a comparable charter, reinforcing this continuity of royal commitments. King John, unlike his predecessors, issued no charter upon his coronation in 1199, despite the necessity to secure the support of the baronage at that time to counter his nephew's claim to the English throne and to resist the constant military threats of Philip II of France. Another possible factor contributing to the rise of the baronage opposition was, perhaps, King John's continuous exploitation of the feudal lordship without any satisfactory military achievements. King John, or 'John Lackland' as he was called, lost Normandy, Maine, Anjou, and Touraine (Knight 2013: 199). King John, like his brother Richard I in their rivalry with the French monarch, turned England into a war economy, asking his subjects constantly for heavy military obligations. Barons found themselves each time paying for the king's endless, futile wars under the feudal system. Successful leadership in warfare was a fundamental criterion by which barons judged medieval kings, though some elite churchmen also emphasized the importance of a ruler being fair, just, and law-abiding to maintain order and protect his people – especially since churchmen were forbidden to bear arms and thus relied entirely on a 'just' king for protection of the Church (Fryde 2001: 5).

The rebellious spirit of barons, which likely contradicted Figgis's doctrine of 'passive obedience', as suggested by this paper, can easily be noticed at the beginning of 1215, when the rebels in North England were joined by the barons in East Anglia and Essex in an association that sought to present their case to the monarch at the council of London, with the support of some clerics. The primary objective of the rebel barons was to 'petition the king for their grievances' (Turner 2014: 18). To their disappointment, the monarch scornfully asked them to promise in writing not to demand any similar liberties in the future and postponed his answer until the Northampton council of April, thereby aggravating the situation instead of pacifying the enraged barons. An armed rebellion began in early May under the leadership of Robert Fitzwalter, King John's old foe, after submitting a list of uncompromising demands to the king at Wallingford Castle. Fitzwalter was an influential East Anglian feudal baron, who was a leading character in the baronage opposition to King John in the north. He was implicated in the unsuccessful conspiracy of 1212 – with Eustace de Vesci – to murder King John before a military expedition in Wales (Turner 2014: 9). To the monarch's astonishment, the rebels could easily seize the city of London with the large support of its citizens. The new alliance between the rebels and Londoners placed further pressure on the monarch to accelerate negotiations with the rebels'

representatives and accept the terms of the Articles of the Barons – which laid the foundational groundwork for the Great Charter. William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke and the king's brother-in-law, was a leading intermediary in discussions with King John, which resulted in the adoption of the demands of the Articles of the Barons, including forty-nine articles. Thirteen articles of these articles reappeared in the Great Charter.

Turner explains in an attempt to analyse the barons' rebellions that in addition to hosting new political ideas calling for more liberty, autonomy, and decentralization of powers in London, different sections of the kingdom were growing increasingly resentful of King John's rule. Holt wrote in *The Northerners: A Study in the Reign of King John* that 'it was a rebellion rather of the aggrieved, of the failures; a protest against the quasi-monopoly of privilege by the king and his friends; at its most significant a call, not to break bonds, but to impose them on the most active and experimental administrative force of the day, the monarchy' (Holt 1992: 17). In addition to the king's loss of Normandy, his defeat at Bouvines in 1214 – which dashed the hopes of regaining his lands – and the growth of an administrative monarchy that replaced counsellor barons with loyal royal agents and magnates with mercenary captains, the loss of the Church's support also had a profound impact. The conflict with the Church reached its peak after the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1205, when King John opposed the Pope's nomination of Stephen Langton to the position. He expressed concern over the Pope's choice. Pope Innocent III, Lothar of Segni, was a colleague of Stephen Langton and possibly even his student at Paris (Baldwin 2008: 13). King John mistrusted Stephen Langton for spending long years among his enemies in Paris, and he was unknown in England. Baldwin, in *Master Stephen Langton* (2008: 824), reveals that the Pope, in a letter to King John, expressed his surprise because his candidate was a native of England and received a prebend at York. The king himself wrote to him several times to be recruited for royal service. King John asserted his royal prerogative to appoint archbishops, thereby reviving an old ideological dispute between the monarchy and the Church regarding royal authority. This contributed to a more hostile environment around King John. Ultimately, his reconciliation with the Pope and his decision to place England under apostolic protection were instrumental in mitigating his quarrels with the barons.

The knights, merchants, and even the simple freemen resented the king's arbitrary rule and his excessive taxation to fund his campaigns in France. Many citizens found themselves heavily indebted to the king. Holt depicted the barons' revolt as 'a rebellion of the king's debtors' (Holt 1992: 17) due to the vital role these indebted individuals played in the rebellion. A notable example is the infamous debt of Geoffrey de Mandeville in the early 1214. King John demanded the payment of 20,000 marks within a period of ten months as a debt on Geoffrey de Mandeville for marrying Isabella, countess of Gloucester and the monarch's ex-wife – whose estates had been under royal control since the annulment of their marriage in 1200. In case Geoffrey de Mandeville failed to pay his debt, King John threatened to confiscate all his possessions as compensation and support Geoffrey de Saye's claim to the

Mandeville inheritance. Unable to pay his heavy debt, Geoffrey decided to join and eventually lead the barons' rebellion. He sought redress through the Articles of the Barons (Article 37), which stated that debts imposed 'unjustly and against the law of the land, are to be wholly pardoned…' (Holt 1985: 437). King John knew that Mandeville could not pay the heavy debt and decided to pass on half of it, 10,000 marks, to the Archbishop of Canterbury as a compensation for the losses of clerks during the interdict. Surprisingly, Stephen Langton accepted the offer, though the imposition of the debt was made without any judicial redress. This event was used as the main argument held against Langton to prove his hypocrisy, as suggested in David Carpenter's article, *Archbishop Langton and Magna Carta* (Carpenter 2012).

The wardship system, which granted the king the right to take orphans as wards and to act as a guardian of their property until they came of age, was 'unjustly' used. Many were obliged to pay reliefs to retain the ownership of their property upon adulthood. Young heiresses suffered the most, as they were either forced into marriage to fully utilize their estates or required to pay a fine for choosing to remain unmarried. For instance, it is recorded that Hawise, the widow of Baldwin of Béthune, count of Aumale, paid 5000 marks to abstain from marrying one of King John's favourites (Baldwin 2008: 21). It was not possible to initiate any legal actions against the king under the Angevin judicial system. No one could dare accuse the king of taking his property forcibly without any fair judgment, as the king could directly interfere in the complaints of tenants-in-chief (Turner 2016: 2). He could 'disseizin *per preceptum regis*' *(*by the king's command) and '*per voluntatem regis*' (by the king's will), without any due legal process. In his article *King John's Concept of Royal Authority*, Ralph V. Turner observed:

> John grew up in an environment that blurred the distinction between the monarch's spiritual and temporal qualities, placing him above the law as 'the certain image on earth of the divine majesty', 'the vicar of the Supreme King' or 'the Anointed of the Lord'… Well known to King John and his administrators was a 'tutorial principle' of kingship reaching back to St Augustine, defining the ruler-subject relationship as akin to that of guardian to minor: the monarch is responsible to God/or his subjects, not to them (Turner 1996: 159).

It seems that Turner's description of King John's conception of royal powers corresponds to many elements of Figgis's theory. King John sought to enforce obedience through exercising power to discipline his subjects using fear, threats, and imprisonments. For instance, turning against three of his closest counsellors in 1207 spread fear among the barons that the monarch was likely to turn against them at any time (Turner 2014: 8). It is recorded that Matilda de Braose and her son died at a royal prison at the command of King John after his quarrel with William de Braose. King John also used hostage exaction, financial pressure, and rewards or pledges of properties (Holt 1985: 180). As a feudal monarch, King John fully exploited his feudal rights to expand royal revenues.

A key concept that shaped King John's understanding of royal authority and granted him powers beyond those of a feudal overlord is the *corona et dignitas domini regis*. He used this concept to resist papal powers and confront threats from the Church, which challenged his royal privileges. For instance, he used the following statement to call for cancelling the ecclesiastical confirmation of the Sées Cathedral's nominee: 'contrary to written law and equally contrary to our dignity' (quoted in Turner 1996: 172). He frequently referred to 'dignity' and 'the old custom' as arguments in his disputes over ecclesiastical elections, stating phrases such as 'according to right and our dignity and old and approved custom' or 'our dignities which we and our predecessors had' (Turner 1996: 169). King John's insistence to recall past incidents to legitimize his authority also reveals his deep desire to restore and expand regal powers. During the infamous conflict over the Canterbury election, King John invoked Edward the Confessor's appointment of the Bishop of Worcester and the Anglo-Saxon history, noting that 'all my predecessors conferred archbishoprics, bishoprics and abbeys in their chamber' and that 'in ancient times before the coming of the Normans, the kings of England, even those now canonized, granted cathedral churches to archbishops and bishops entirely at their pleasure. Since the conquest elections have been subject to the king's assent and hitherto have been carried out strictly in this form' (Turner 1996: 163). It is also worth noting that King John's love of splendour – manifested in lavish spending on royal robes, jewellery, expensive tableware, banquets, royal castles, and extravagant festival celebrations – may have served as an attempt to impress his subjects and remind them of his superior status and magnificence as a monarch. For instance, King John was recorded to send for Empress Matilda's regalia on two occasions – in 1207 at a Christmas court challenging the pope's powers and in 1215 when negotiating with the rebel barons – to refer to the monarch's 'semi-priestly character' (Turner 1996: 169).

4. The making of the Great Charter (1215)

The Great Charter continues to attract modern scholars to produce more accurate translations and reconstruct the historical circumstances surrounding its creation and the long-term influence on constitutional developments. J. C. Holt, a recognized expert on the Great Charter, shifted the preceding academic discussion from analysing King John's character, based on narrative sources, to studying baronial beliefs about the distribution of power between monarchs and barons, the sole responsibility of the government, and the construction of the society during the Angevin period, with a particular focus on the 1215 version of the charter. The Great Charter, according to Holt, was the product of 'the increasing maturity of European political thought and practice' (Holt 1985: 174), which emphasized the rule of law within the feudal system. Holt argues that, unlike many charters of liberties granted by some continental rulers to exclusively serve baronial interests, King John's charter made concessions to cover groups below the barons (Turner 2016: 2), including the freemen. There are six clauses in the Great Charter which benefited 'the freemen', a term used to refer to

small landowners who held lands independently and freely of any lord. In 1215, they made up almost half of the population (Turner 2014: 22). This strengthens the claim that the rebel barons who met King John at Runnymede were primarily interested in defying and restricting royal powers as a result of unacceptable preceding English monarchical practices – not only by King John but also by Henry II and Richard I, who were, according to the barons, 'responsible for debasing the good old law of Edward the Confessor and Henry I' (Turner 2014: 17).

Archbishop Stephen Langton, whose role in drafting the Articles of the Barons has been the subject of a heated debate since the mid-twentieth century, has clearly preached resistance to kings who commit mortal sin or act against the court's judgments. Influenced by his Parisian teaching, Langton raised numerous questions concerning political obedience in his biblical exegesis and sermons, emphasizing that subjects are justified in politically resisting kings who act without due judicial process (Baldwin 2008: 820). In *Questiones*, for example, Langton stated the following (Baldwin 2008: 818):

> Disobedience is permitted only when the matter has not been adjudicated. The same principle is applied to the siege of a castle. If the siege has been adjudicated by a sentence of the court, no matter how unjust, the people cannot discuss the decision. But if the king has acted on his own will (*proprio motu*) to besiege the castle wrongly and without a legal judgement, the people will not be disobedient if they refuse to follow him.

For Langton, the most important principle was acting according to the court's decisions, however partial or unjust. Langton emphasized this point when asked about what people should do in case they knew about the injustice of their king's wars. He confirmed: 'If the matter was judged through a sentence by a court, even though the court was partial to the prince, and even though the sentence was unjust, the people must accept, obey and not discuss the sentence' (Baldwin 2008: 818). His response to a dilemma posed by a French knight about what to do as his king waged an unjust war (against King Richard of England at that time) calling for performing a sinful service is also noteworthy: 'I arrive as summoned, but when it comes to taking up arms, either I retire, or I remain without taking up arms' (Baldwin 2008: 818). When obedience to the ruler – which, according to St. Paul's epistle, was a sacred duty – conflicted with the injustice of his actions, people often turned to the Church for guidance, reflecting the deep bond between the faithful and the ecclesiastical institution. For Langton, the response was straightforward: one should refer to the court's sentences. In doing so, he affirmed the superiority of law over controversial royal prerogatives. His perspective, inspired by his teacher Peter the Chanter, was described conclusively by Philippe Buc as 'anti-monarchical' (Baldwin 2008: 813), or more precisely, as challenging the divine right of kings' theory and the doctrine of passive obedience in particular, which, according to Figgis, calls for unconditional passive obedience.

Langton studied at Peter the Chanter's school at Paris, which influenced the political thought of the twelfth century with its anti-monarchical perspectives – this may have been the main motive behind King John's opposition to Stephen Langton's appointment as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton's thought on kingship seems to have derived from his Parisian years. He described the royal government as having a sinful, predatory nature. He called for placing limits on monarchical powers – as God ordered the Hebrews and the Prophet Samuel to restrain their first king's financial exaction and to resist him if he commanded a mortal sin. Langton argued that some monarchs 'collect treasure not in order they sustain necessity, but to satiate their cupidity' (quoted in Turner 2014: 11). In most of his sermons and biblical commentaries, he emphasized the establishment of justice, even if it required opposing monarchical powers. Like Thomas Becket, who defied King Henry II to defend the Church's independence, Langton turned to law books to challenge the powers of the Angevin dynasty.

It seems that, as James Holt observed, 'the idea of a right to judgment was so ingrained in the medieval mind that judgment was almost equated with justice' (Holt 1985: 193). The barons learned from old feudal traditions that freemen had some privileges, including protection from arbitrary dispossession and punishment by their lords, which could be done only *per judicium* – through lawful judgement. It was recorded in Laws of Henry I, or the *Leges Henrici Primi,* around 1115, that no one ought to be deprived of goods and lands without legal judgment *(nisi de jure et ratione, per legem terrae et justiciam et per judicium curiae*). It further stated that 'Each person is to be judged by men who are of equal status and from the same district as himself' (Downer 1972: 134–135). Clauses 39 and 52 of the Great Charter clearly correspond to Langton's views and this old copy. They state that 'No free man is to be arrested, or imprisoned, or disseised, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any way ruined, nor will we go against him or send against him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land' (The 1215 Magna Carta: Clause 39). 'If anyone has been disseised or dispossessed by us, without lawful judgment of his peers, of lands, castles, liberties, or of his right, we will restore them to him immediately.' (The 1215 Magna Carta: Clause 52). These clauses list and forbid many royal actions that King John used to take against freemen without a due process of judgment in lawfully constituted courts. In addition to *Leges Henrici Primi*, Turner explains that the barons' political conception of government *per judicium* had been influenced by Henry I's Coronation Charter – a copy of which Langton had allegedly possessed and presented to the barons, according to Roger of Wendover, a claim also accepted by Baldwin – and the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* (Turner 1996: 165). At his coronation, Henry I promised that law should be modified only after the consent of his barons' counsel. This point was re-emphasized in Clause 12 of the Great Charter, stating that 'No scutage nor aid shall be imposed in our kingdom, except by common counsel of our kingdom' (The 1215 Magna Carta: Clause 12).

Feudal custom reinforced the baronial belief that freemen had the right to give advice, magnates were consulted by monarchs, and vassals gave counsel to their lords and participated in negotiations to resolve disputes and promote harmony

through the process of consultation. It seems also that the barons saw it both as a right and duty to have an assembly that represented them and the kingdom's subjects collectively, as suggested by Turner: 'Not surprisingly, the barons believed that a baronial assembly not only could represent their own interests but those of the "community of the realm", all the king's subjects. This concept of *communa totius terrae* with the baronage as its spokesmen is probably their most original contribution' (Turner 1996: 167). Instead of seeking baronial counsel, King John preferred to turn to his familiars – intimate royal servants, professional officials, and counsellors – who encouraged theoretical royal absolutism. These royal bureaucrats limited the barons' access to the monarch and challenged their socio-economic pre-eminence as they had to compete with them. This discontent was addressed in Clause 14 of the Great Charter, which reinforced the barons' counsel and detailed how, when, and by whom counsel should be given. The barons were also dissatisfied with King John's appointment of non-English officials to some high positions. This point was addressed in Clause 45 of the charter: 'We will not appoint justices, constables, sheriffs, or bailiffs except from such as know the law of the kingdom and are willing to keep it well' (The 1215 Magna Carta: Clause 45).

The principles emphasized by the Great Charter to enforce the rule of law and guarantee certain rights for the freeman in the thirteenth century raise many questions about the philosophy, experience, and education of those who wrote it and negotiated with King John to seal it. Although there is no consensus on Langton's exact role in drafting the charter and leading negotiations between King John and the barons listed in the preamble, the contribution of the Church and the legal background of its clerical intellectuals is undeniable. Langton was described as the originator of the charter by Roger of Wendover, and as a moderator – not an innovator – in the Barnwell Chronicle and the account of Coggeshall, as well as in the writings of modern historians such as James Holt and David Carpenter. For more detail, see the contribution of Carpenter, *Archbishop Langton and Magna Carta* (Carpenter 2011), in which Carpenter argues that it hardly needed Langton's intervention to accentuate the 'rule of law', which had already been known to the barons who had access to Henry I's Coronation Charter. Carpenter explains that Langton's only achievement was the addition of Clause 1 on the freedom of the Church to the Great Charter. Langton tried to present the Church in a prestigious position, distanced from the violent schism between the monarch and the barons, which suggests the charter to be its result. It seems that the barons who sought ecclesiastical support for the revolt and the charter did not object to opening it with a clause emphasizing the freedom of the Church – as had also been the case in King Henry I's Coronation Charter. Stephen Langton, who preached political resistance in the absence of prior court judgments, did not condemn or punish the barons' revolt.

Professor Helmholz suggests a possible link between some clauses of the Great Charter and the Roman-canonical law (Helmholz 1999: 66) – notably Article 25 of the Articles of the Barons which was rephrased in Clause 52 of the Great Charter, in which the technical term *appellatione remota*, meaning 'without the possibility of an appeal', was used, referring to an old doctrine in canon law. Helmholz suggests

William of Bardney and Adam of Tilney – Stephen Langton's episcopal *familia* who were trained in Roman and canon law – may have contributed to drafting the articles, referring to the revival of interest in studying Roman canon law in England at that time and its possible influence on the evolution of early English common law.

The rebel barons were undoubtedly instrumental in forcing the king to make the concessions in the charter, although most barons had been previously considered by the Church as illiterate. Nonetheless, by the early thirteenth-century, many barons and knights were able to read Latin and Anglo-Norman French. They had access to coronation charters and Anglo-Norman legal texts and the influential laws of King Henry I and Edward the Confessor. Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and *Layamon's Brut* were also widely popular among English barons. These works profoundly influenced vernacular literature, portraying King Arthur as the legendary ruler of the Britons. He was depicted as defying the Romans and often consulting his knights at the Round Table, symbolizing shared authority. David Carpenter notes that King Arthur was described as 'a consensual ruler with a real concern for law, justice and the welfare of his people' (Carpenter 2015: 255). Arthurian romances helped construct an idealized vision of chivalry and consultative kingship among English barons, who contrasted Arthur's popular model of rule with the arbitrary governance of the Angevin monarchs (Carpenter 2015: 14), especially King John, whose military failures and disregard for baronial counsel deepened their resentment.

Participating in shire courts and presiding over their own affairs gave the barons some experience and understanding about customary laws and encouraged them to rebel to defend their rights whenever necessary, particularly in money-related issues. King John was obliged to abandon some military campaigns in 1205 and 1215 due to the barons' reluctance to support him financially (Carpenter 2015: 12). In 1213, the barons in northern England refused to provide military service for the Poitou campaign, arguing that the monarch could demand service only in England, Normandy, and Brittany. These dissatisfactions were addressed by the Unknown Charter of Liberties, which is almost a reproduction of King Henry I's Coronation Charter – at least five articles of the Unknown Charter, out of fourteen, correspond directly to Henry I's Coronation Charter provisions on marriage, dowries, wardship, relief, and royal forest. It is also interesting that the first article of the Unknown Charter begins with a statement emphasizing the establishment of justice and the right of judgment (Baldwin 2008: 29). The barons demanded that overseas military services be limited and refused the scutage that the king imposed in punishment for not sending their quotas of knights to Poitou. The recalcitrant barons in northern England and the wealthy, autonomous marcher lords in South Wales were a major concern for King John, who tried unsuccessfully to bring them under royal control. After the military failure in Poitou, King John ordered his mercenary forces to deal with the rebels in the north, but Archbishop Langton argued that his unilateral action lacked the required prior legal judgment of the court.

The Great Charter was substantially based on the Articles of the Barons, though it is more precise to say that it represented a combination of: (1) King Henry I's

Coronation Charter, which consisted of fourteen articles addressing his barons' grievances, including a restatement of certain laws of King Edward; (2) the Unknown Charter, which contained twelve articles adapting King Henry's charter to the feudal conditions of the time; and (3) the Articles of the Barons, with forty-nine articles serving as a preliminary draft for the final text of the Great Charter, which was accepted in Runnymede on 15 June 1215 (Baldwin 2008: 832). The final text, which was therefore born through an accumulative process, begins by addressing the grievance of the Church by ending the monarch's interference in ecclesiastical elections (Drew 2004: 1). It also addresses everyday issues such as limitations on royal imposition of relief, scutages, aid; the guarantee of a basic right to justice; and various economic and property protections. Most significantly, it subjects the king to accountability and makes him liable to correction through the establishment of a council of twenty-five elected barons to ensure that the monarch acted in accordance with the charter, as asserted in the security clause, Clause 61: 'The barons shall elect twenty-five of their number to keep and cause to be observed, with all their might, the peace and liberties granted and confirmed to them by this charter' (Linebaugh 2008: 294). If the king refused to observe these rights, the barons granted themselves the right to 'distrain upon and assail us in every way possible, with the support of the whole community of the land, by seizing castles, lands, possessions, or anything else' (Linebaugh 2008: 294). These two decisive clauses clearly established the barons' right to resist and even to rebel if the Crown acted in violation of the law. The expression 'the whole community' and the principle of 'the community of our realm' also merit attention, as both refer to the laity and the clergy. In this clause, the community is portrayed as a unified body distinct from the king and capable of opposing him when necessary. This principle corresponds to Langton's concept of 'the congregation of all the faithful', which refers to the Church in its broadest sense, including not only the prelacy, but also the clergy, their prelates, and people (Baldwin 2008: 825–834).

5. Conclusion

Although the Great Charter, drafted at Runnymede, was written in the language of voluntarily granted rights, benefitting the Church, barons, and freemen, it placed severe hostile limitations on regal powers. The committee of twenty-five barons, in particular, was regarded as an unacceptable restriction on monarchical authority even by modern scholars, notably because most of the committee's chosen members were long-standing personal enemies of the king, including conspirators in the revolt against the king in 1212 such as Eustace de Vesci and Robert Fitzwalter. Surprisingly, even the respected figures listed in the charter's preamble were not selected to serve on the committee. Although King John, reluctantly, agreed to seal – but not to sign – the document after the renewal of baronial homage, he did not intend to abandon the Angevin royal powers permanently. Not even a ceremonial sealing took place at Runnymede to mark the issuing of the new document. It is not

surprising that the charter remained in effect for no more than three months before King John sought release from it by Pope Innocent III, who declared the charter null and void, excommunicated the rebel barons, and suspended Archbishop Langton from his office for refusing to submit to the Pope's judgment. Although King John's political conception of monarchical authority was very close to absolutism, dualism, and Gallicanism, he was compelled to submit to papal hierocracy and the doctrine of the two swords, accepting the Pope's superiority as a ruler of a universal Christian realm. In 1213, after a prolonged and fruitless dispute with the Pope over his rights as a monarch, during which he was excommunicated in 1209, placing England under interdict and strengthening ties with his enemy, the French king, King John offered England as a papal fief. Reconciliation with Pope Innocent III was probably his best means of avoiding a potential crusade against England, led by the French king, Louis of France (Louis Augustus), under papal sanction. As a papal vassal and ruler of England, King John sought to secure ultimate papal protection against any attack on England, even at the expense of his Angevin inheritance. Christopher Robert Cheney, in *Pope Innocent III and England*, noted that 'From the moment [John] put himself under apostolic protection and made his kingdom part of St. Peter's Patrimony, there was no prince in the Roman world who would dare attack him or invade his lands to the damage of the Apostolic See' (Cheney 1976: 339). On the other hand, barons sought to incorporate the right of resistance to monarchical powers in a written charter (Kern 2013: 129). Their evolving conception of royal authority diverged markedly from the four elements proposed in Figgis's *The Divine Right of Kings*. Clause 61 of the charter almost disempowered the king and humiliated him. It was an attempt to force the king to acknowledge that his power was not absolute; it was subject to the rule of law. It also implied that the monarch could be held accountable and even punished, like any other human being who erred. The English monarch, therefore, was compelled to obey some fixed laws in England that were beyond his will (Guthrie 1916: 25). This was, as described in the words of V. H. Gallbraith, 'the most fantastic surrender of any English king to his subjects' (quoted in Ispir 2017: 102).

Data availability statement

This study is qualitative; hence, no quantitative data are used. All data supporting the findings are contained within this article and its referenced sources.

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PUNITIVE FICTIONS: THE NARRATIVE LOGIC AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE OF HOSTILE CONSPIRACIES

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Abstract. Hostile conspiracies (from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to QAnon) are not merely false beliefs held by gullible or paranoid individuals. They are something stranger: publicly debunked narratives, structurally recognizable as fiction (even to many of those who spread them) that nonetheless retain devastating social force. This paper argues that the obvious fictional character of hostile conspiracies is not incidental to their destructive efficacy but constitutive of it. Their fiction-like quality enables four interconnected functions: it compresses diffuse political hostilities into vivid, portable stories; it turns the apparent absurdity of conspiratorial claims into a mechanism of viral spread; it amplifies affective outrage toward targeted groups; and it transforms narrative into an instrument of social punishment directed at perceived enemies. Together, these functions explain a genuine paradox: the more obviously fictional a hostile conspiracy is, the more socially resilient it tends to be.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, political hostility, narrative persuasion, misinformation, fictionality, QAnon

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1. Introduction

Danilo Kiš's literary investigation into the emergence and influence of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, "The Book of Kings and Fools" (1983), points to a disturbing paradox: how obviously fictional narratives can shape harmful political

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beliefs and practices. Kiš's essay unfolds along two contradictory lines. On the one hand, it traces a series of successful efforts to expose the *Protocols* as fiction. Investigations ranging from the 1921 articles in *The Times* to Swiss court proceedings (1933–1935) forensically demonstrated that the *Protocols* are a mélange of explicitly fictional sources, drawing heavily on Joly's *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (1864) and directly plagiarizing material from popular fiction of the "dime-novel variety" (Brotherton 2015: 36), most notably Goedsche's novel *Biarritz* (1868). On the other hand, Kiš simultaneously traces the growing social influence of the *Protocols*, remarkably resistant to their demonstrated fictionality. The text continues to circulate, mobilizing nationalist sentiment and legitimizing persecutory forms of political action that contributed to the Shoah (see Burkhart 2020: 327).

As Umberto Eco pointed out a decade after Kiš, what marks the *Protocols* as fiction is not only their recoverable fictional sources but also their more obvious internal features: "fictional signals" (1994: 120) that, in ordinary interpretive practice, guide readers in distinguishing fictional from non-fictional discourse. Fictional works frequently rely on deliberate communicative anomalies: features that in factual discourse would immediately provoke incredulity. A fictional narrator may unproblematically report conversations to which he had no plausible access, or a near-illiterate figure may produce a stylistically coherent autobiography, as is the case with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (see Kania 2005: 49). Readers recognize these signals and respond not with suspicion but with a tacit willingness to ignore such anomalies and cooperate with the fictional premise.

The *Protocols* are saturated with precisely such signals. The text presents itself as a found manuscript of obscure provenance (a recognizable Gothic convention). It purports to disclose the secret plans of a highly intelligent elite so carelessly committed to an explicit, easily transmissible form that exposure becomes inevitable. Successful conspirators rarely produce documents that so perfectly externalize their evil intentions. The direct articulation of motives – "We have unlimited ambition, an all-consuming greed, a merciless desire for revenge, and an intense hatred" (cited in Eco 1994: 136–137) – functions less as a credible testimony than as the hyperbolic voice of a stage villain, whose psychology is flattened into transparency so that the moral stakes of the narrative remain immediately intelligible. As Eco puts it, while such explicitness may be "believable in a novel, [...] it exceeds the bounds of credibility that anyone would do this so shamelessly in reality" (1994: 136).

Something puzzling emerges here. The *Protocols* are exposed as fiction from within (through internal fictional signals legible to any attentive reader) and from without (through rigorous scholarship available for over a century), yet neither layer of debunking decisively affects their circulation or capacity for harm. An explicitly fictional text persists as a recognizable instrument of antisemitic propaganda, invoked long after World War II by extremist movements and far-right political groups (see Burkhart 2020: 317). The question is not whether people who endorse the *Protocols* recognize them as fiction (as we will see, many of them tacitly do) but why that recognition fails to diminish their force or arrest their circulation. What kind of social persuasion operates independently of factual credibility?

2. Hostile conspiracies

The *Protocols* are the most notorious instance of a broader social phenomenon we might call *hostile conspiracies*. These are a particular type of conspiratorial narratives that usually share three crucial features.

First, they are *targeting*. Unlike general conspiracy theories, which posit impersonal hidden forces or offer alternative explanations of events, hostile conspiracies center on accusations against clearly identifiable groups or individuals, portraying them as intentional agents of harm. They do not merely invite skepticism toward institutions but generate hostility toward particular people.

Second, they are *evidentially invulnerable*. Unlike other empirical claims, hostile conspiracies carry no "extinction conditions" (Ichino forthcoming). That is, counter-evidence is usually reinterpreted as further confirmation of the conspiracy: adherents expect authorities to deny the conspiracy, and any counter-evidence is dismissed as precisely the denial they predicted (see Levy 2024a: 481).

Third, they are, to re-use Eco's phrase, *fiction-signaling*. Although presenting themselves as factual accounts, hostile conspiracies are explicitly "co-dependent with literary forms" (Carver 2021), sometimes directly plagiarizing fictional sources. They openly "contain tropes" familiar from "fictional narratives, such as their focus on epic battles between good and evil" (Munro 2023).

A prominent contemporary example is QAnon, a movement that gained widespread public attention following January 6, 2021, when a crowd stormed the U.S. Capitol. QAnon was frequently identified as a significant ideological inspiration for the event (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021: 142). Like the *Protocols*, QAnon is grounded in purported revelations from an anonymous source who disseminated alleged classified information through online platforms. At its core is the claim that a cabal (consisting of directly named politicians and celebrities) secretly controls major institutions and engages in Satanic rituals of child abuse. This network is opposed by Donald Trump, cast as a protagonist "working behind the scenes to bring it down" (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021: 142). The narrative culminates in the anticipated "Storm," an event in which the covert elite is to be exposed.

The same features identified in the *Protocols* reappear in QAnon. The conspiracy is targeting: it centers on unsubstantiated accusations against identifiable individuals. It is evidentially invulnerable. Numerous QAnon predictions have failed to materialize without undermining the movement: that Hillary Clinton would be arrested in 2017 (O'Brien 2023: 106), that JFK Jr. would appear in Dallas in 2021 (Argentino 2026: 70), that Angela Merkel would be exposed as Hitler's granddaughter in 2020 (Young and Boucher 2022: 4). Each disconfirmation was absorbed as further evidence of the conspiracy's depth. Finally, QAnon is obviously fiction-signaling: it contains elements that would help us, in ordinary contexts, to identify the claims as pertaining to fictional discourse. Some claims have abandoned any pretense of factual plausibility altogether: for example, that elites harvest adrenochrome from victims of Satanic rituals and use it as an anti-aging drug (Vrzal 2020: 51), or that Joe Biden was replaced by a clone (Kanno-Youngs 2025). These claims read less

like factual assertions than elements of genre fiction, and QAnon has accordingly been described as a form of "fantasy fiction" that "emerged within a genre reading community" (Young and Boucher 2022: 10).

QAnon is only one instance of a proliferating class of conspiratorial narratives sharing these same features. The PizzaGate conspiracy alleged that John Podesta's hacked emails contained coded references to a child-trafficking ring (involving high-ranking politicians from the Democratic Party) operating out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria (Bleakley 2023: 510, Tangherlini et al. 2020: 4). Its fictional signals are unmistakable: for instance, claims about underground dungeons beneath a pizzeria – that, in reality, has no basement (Grant 2026) – echo the Gothic convention of subterranean crypts. The portrayal of prominent figures as cartoonishly evil devil-worshipers is a classic horror motif familiar from films such as *Eyes Wide Shut*.

A further illustration may be provided by so-called "transvestigation" conspiracies (see Almomani and Jegić 2026), which claim that various prominent women were born male and that public life is controlled by a hidden transgender elite intent on subverting traditional values. Here too the fictional signals are obvious. The central motif recalls narrative patterns familiar from paranoia-driven science fiction and horror, in which respectable appearances mask malign, "alien" interiors. The transphobic sensationalism is coupled with a pseudo-forensic, "gamified" mode of detection (see Munro 2023), in which photographs of female celebrities are scrutinized by online communities for hidden clues of cross-dressing. The procedure imitates detective conventions familiar from Sherlock Holmes to the CSI franchise while inviting participants to play the role of heroic investigators uncovering what the mainstream refuses to see.

These conspiracies are not merely collections of false claims. What is puzzling is the flamboyant fictionality of their structure. They resemble "run-of-the-mill [fictional] narratives such as novels and TV shows" (Ganapini 2022: 35). In ordinary persuasive contexts, we suppress fictional signals and tone down narrative excess to make claims believable. Hostile conspiracies do precisely the opposite. Their fictional signals are so pervasive that they are difficult to regard as incidental. What distinguishes hostile conspiracies from ordinary propaganda is that they are untrue in an extravagant, genre-saturated way that should, by ordinary standards, undermine their credibility. And yet they persist and circulate.

3. The gullibility thesis and the pathologizing paradigm

Hostile conspiracies raise a genuine social puzzle. Large groups of people endorse and circulate claims that are, by every ordinary standard, unbelievable. They are not merely explicitly fiction-signaling but also evidentially groundless and accompanied by decisive counter-evidence. Yet none of this seems to function as an obstacle to their apparently sincere endorsement and the real social harm they produce.

Two intuitive explanations of this phenomenon are commonly invoked, which we may call the gullibility thesis and the "pathologizing paradigm" (Ichino and

Sullivan-Bissett 2024: 286). The gullibility thesis holds that some individuals, due to limited education or scientific illiteracy, are simply disposed to endorse implausible, evidentially groundless claims, regularly failing to distinguish factual from fictional discourse (see Bortolotti 2024: 753). Such people undoubtedly exist. For instance, there were individuals who wrote letters to Sherlock Holmes convinced he was a real detective (Eco 1994: 125). But gullibility cannot explain the large-scale proliferation of fiction-signaling claims across socially and educationally diverse populations. It is estimated that "36 million Americans, or 20% of the adult population" qualify as believers in QAnon (Young and Boucher 2022: 5). The *Protocols* also enjoyed mass circulation even among educated elites. The gullibility thesis may carry more explanatory force in contexts where access to counter-evidence was genuinely limited (e.g., in medieval blood libel accusations), but in contemporary environments, where access to information is "easy and widespread" (Napolitano 2021: 102), its explanatory power is negligible.

The pathologizing paradigm fails for similar reasons. On this view, holding narratively overelaborated "suspicion[s] of hostile groups who have malevolent intentions" is a pathological tendency close to paranoid and delusional thinking (Galbraith 2021). The view has initial plausibility: clinical conditions involving psychosis are indeed associated with difficulties in distinguishing fictional scenarios from reality (Sass 1994: 1). But as Duetz (2024: 2114) argues, this approach has been largely abandoned in contemporary social psychology. Conspiracy endorsement is no longer regarded as confined to clinically pathological groups. Richard Hofstadter already noted in the 1960s that "the paranoid style" in public life – including "the qualities of heated exaggeration […] and conspiratorial fantasy" – cannot be "applied only to people with [...] disturbed minds" but is often embraced by "more or less normal people" (1965: 3–4). Many conspiracists function competently in "most areas of life – they hold down jobs, have families, and the like" (Munro 2023). They do not fit the profile of psychotic or delusional individuals. The pathologizing paradigm thus overlooks the possibility that hostile conspiracies may fulfill "certain important social functions and psychological needs" for those who endorse them (Duetz 2024: 2115).

Stripped to its core, the puzzle is this. The hostile conspiracies described here are fiction-signaling in ways that are, by ordinary standards, easily recognizable. The general population (people who are neither delusional nor profoundly credulous) is typically capable of identifying fictional signals. When we encounter them alongside strong indications of evidential ungroundedness, this typically triggers what might be called *fictional context activation* (Strange 2002: 269): the recognition that we are dealing with fiction rather than fact. Yet in the case of hostile conspiracies, this capacity appears to fail, not in isolated individuals, but systematically, across large and otherwise cognitively competent social groups. Those who spread the *Protocols* were not, as a rule, incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality. Millions who claim that a Satan-worshiping cabal runs American politics are not clinically delusional or utterly gullible. They distinguish fiction from reality competently in other contexts. Nor are they merely pretending: it would be difficult to maintain

that those who approvingly cite the *Protocols* or endorse QAnon do not genuinely believe in a Jewish conspiracy or that prominent politicians are of the devil's party. Their endorsement appears, in some sense, sincere.

The puzzle is not one of individual cognitive failure but of systematic fictional "context activation failure" (Strange 2002: 269): the widespread suspension, in specific ideological conditions, of a capacity the same individuals exercise competently elsewhere. The question is what suspends fictional context activation in these specific cases, and why it fails so collectively and with such consequential effect.

4. Quasi-fictions

Complex ideological systems (religious traditions, certain forms of nationalism, and conspiracy theories) often exhibit a characteristic layered structure. Within such systems, we can distinguish two kinds of claims. At the center lie "core" claims (Levy 2024a: 483): sincerely held, relatively stable factual commitments about the world. Surrounding these, like a shell around a nucleus, are what Tanya Luhrmann calls "quasi-fictional narratives" (2020: 48). These are narrative constructions that resemble fiction and often conflict with our knowledge about the world, yet are not treated as fictional. Participants frequently recognize, at some level, that such narratives behave like fictions, but in specific ideological settings, fictional context activation is deliberately suspended, and adherents nevertheless profess such claims as true. What suspends it is not an inability to recognize the fiction-signaling but the social and psychological functions these quasi-fictions serve in "sustain[ing] core ideologies" (Ganapini 2022: 28).

An example from religious practice may illustrate the point. In Orthodox Christianity, the "core" consists of relatively stable doctrinal commitments: that saints intercede on behalf of the living, that such intercession is efficacious, and that souls persist after death. Surrounding this nucleus, one often finds quasi-fictional elaboration. For instance, around the cults of Saint Spyridon of Corfu and Saint Basil of Ostrog, there circulates a body of pious narratives according to which these saints periodically come to life: they walk among the faithful, their relics retain the warmth of living flesh, and their shoes (inspected by monks) are found worn from nocturnal journeys. Such narratives belong unmistakably to the genre of miracle legend. They are transparently fiction-signaling, rarely officially endorsed by religious institutions, and not accorded the same weight as central doctrinal commitments. Yet they are asserted, transmitted, and treated as more than fiction. As Luhrmann puts it, their purpose is "not to impart information about [sacred figures], the way [...] an encyclopedia imparts information" but to "train listeners to experience [the invisible others]" as if present, "by suspending the awareness" that these narratives are fiction-like (2020: 29). Fictional context activation is suspended here not by epistemic failure but by the devotional, affective, and group-signaling functions these narratives perform (see Van Leeuwen 2023: 148, Vujošević 2026: 10–11).

The parallel with religion should not, however, be pushed too far. Unlike the quasi-fictions of religious traditions, hostile conspiracies are malign, phobic, and

highly narrativized forms of slander directed at specific people. The point of the comparison is purely structural: the same abstract architecture – a nucleus of core ideological commitments surrounded by quasi-fictional elaborations – can be detected in hostile conspiracies, even though the ideological work such quasi-fictions perform is different from what they achieve in religious contexts.

Consider someone who engages with and spreads QAnon claims. Such a person may hold an ideologically coherent set of genuine commitments at the level of the nucleus: that political elites are corrupt, that certain institutions promote ideologies incompatible with traditional ways of life, that liberal political attitudes threaten Christian or national values (see Levy 2024a: 483), that particular minority groups or individuals are a source of threat, and an apocalyptic religious orientation that renders the world legible as a cosmic struggle between divine and demonic forces.

Such clusters of commitments are not, in themselves, particularly puzzling: large numbers of people harbor prejudices toward minority groups, embrace ethnonationalist ideologies, and hold apocalyptic religious beliefs. Core ideological orientations do not automatically generate quasi-fictional elaborations. The puzzle is why the quasi-fictional shell sometimes attaches to this nucleus and why, once attached, it proves so resistant to removal.

We will argue that hostile quasi-fictional elaborations perform distinctive ideological functions that core claims alone cannot perform. These functions may explain both why the shell emerges and why fictional context activation is suspended even among individuals who recognize the fiction-signaling of such claims. We can identify four such functions, or four ideological vectors, through which the quasi-fictional shell strengthens, spreads, and sustains the core commitments it surrounds.

4.1. Narrative de-metaphorization

Hostile conspiracies typically emerge from a broader culture of heated political rhetoric in which metaphorical language is deployed with great intensity. For instance, Vladimir Putin declared in 2015 that "the New World Order worships Satan" (Young and Boucher 2022: 13). Subsequently, similar pseudo-religious rhetoric was taken up by Russian officials who, after 2022, began to justify the war in Ukraine as "an existential crusade against Satanism" (Kivelson and Worobec 2023). Patriarch Kirill also repeated the trope of "the West [embracing] a Satanic religion" (Kivelson and Worobec 2023), framing Ukraine as the battleground of a cosmic spiritual struggle. Analogous language has been deployed by alt-right politicians in the United States and elsewhere (see Anishanslin 2022).

These claims are not typically made as literal assertions. They function as rhetorical intensifiers: "satanic" operates as a metaphor for the alleged abandonment of traditional Christian values, and "forces of darkness" is a familiar figure for geopolitical adversaries – invoked, for instance, by Harry Truman during the Cold War (Hamby and Friedman 2011: 264). The language is hyperbolic and affectively charged, designed not to disclose that Western leaders are literal devil-worshipers but to signal perceived moral opposition and mobilize hostility by casting the adversary in the metaphorical role of evil.

The quasi-fictional narratives of hostile conspiracies perform a specific operation on such metaphors. They literalize them. By abandoning the figurative quality of hostile rhetorical tropes and translating them into concrete narrative plots, they reverse the metaphorical operation. We may call this process *narrative de-metaphorization*. The rhetoric of the "satanic," morally bankrupt West becomes, in QAnon, a literal claim about a cabal of devil-worshiping politicians engaged in ritual sacrifice. The familiar trope of the dangerous, "cold-blooded" elite becomes, in the reptilian conspiracy theories promoted by David Icke, a biological claim: world leaders – "including among their ranks US presidents, British and Canadian prime ministers, and the House of Windsor" – are literal "reptilian shape-shifters" (Levy 2024b). The diffuse suspicion about "Jewish influence" becomes a narrative of the actual rabbinic congress puppeteering world governments. In each case, a rhetorical vehicle is reified into a fiction-signaling narrative plot that allows listeners to be "captured by the realness of the metaphor, without [completely] losing sight of its figurative nature" (Luhrmann 2020: 29).

De-metaphorization serves the specific ideological function of solidifying and strengthening core commitments by giving them narrative life. By translating diffuse, vague ideological orientations into "a gripping dramatic story" (Young and Boucher 2022: 9), quasi-fictions render them more cognitively accessible and socially transmissible. The "broad generalizations" (Ganapini 2022: 21) that constitute the conspiracist's genuine ideological commitments (that there is something "off" about particular public figures, that hidden forces influence political events) are difficult to share and remember precisely because they lack a unifying narrative shape. As "vivid and [narratively] complete" illustrations of vague underlying beliefs (Young and Boucher 2022: 1), quasi-fictions condense diffuse suspicions into a gripping plot. Concrete and vivid stories move through social contexts faster and further than abstract ideological suspicions ever could.

Crucially, quasi-fictions need not be literally believed to be sincerely asserted. People who engage with them are often tacitly aware of their illustrative rather than strictly factual character. Goebbels' repeated insistence on the *Protocols*' "inner truth" (cited in Bytwerk 2015: 213) is revealing. The very language of "inner truth" signals the absence of straightforward factual belief. Similarly, Young and Boucher have argued that large numbers of QAnon adherents do not take conspiracy claims to be true but rather "truthful" (2022: 1). They are felt to capture something factual even when their literal content is recognized as fiction-signaling. The *Protocols* are embraced not because they are evidentially convincing but because they feel like a gripping rendering of a general ideological orientation the believer senses to be true. The narrative is false at the level of literal fact but felt as true at the level of ideological revelation.

This is why debunking hostile conspiracies fails so consistently. Levy (2024a: 482) has compared their ideological dynamics to the moat-and-bailey maneuver: when the bailey (the exposed, fiction-signaling claim) is attacked, the conspiracist retreats to the more defensible moat of general ideological commitments that are too broad to be immediately disproven. When the *Protocols* are exposed as plagiarized

fiction, the antisemitic conspiracist retreats to the vaguer core orientation: "Jewish elites do have disproportionate influence." The quasi-fiction was illustrating and intensifying that commitment, not constituting it.

What this reveals is a distinctive epistemic elasticity in the structure of hostile conspiracies. De-metaphorization extends the rhetorical figure into a vivid, literal narrative, but the moment that narrative is challenged, it contracts back into metaphor, absorbing the blow and dissolving into the rhetorical form from which it came. The literal and the metaphorical are always both available to the conspiracist, who moves between them as the ideological situation demands.

4.2. Viral ludicrousness

Many hostile conspiracies intensify their fiction-signaling to caricatural extremes, generating claims so bizarre that they seem to subvert narrative persuasion. Consider some of the more extravagant QAnon assertions: that Joe Biden has been replaced by a robot, or that John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his own death. Or consider transvestigation conspiracies, alleging not merely that various prominent women in public life are men but generating obscene elaborations circulating widely across online platforms: that such figures are secretly the biological fathers of their own husbands, or variations of similar absurdities (see Swain 2026). These claims are not just implausible but parodically bizarre. They have the quality of the grotesque rather than the merely false.

One might assume such features are ideologically maladaptive. They are too ludicrous to be sincerely accepted, undermining the credibility of the broader conspiratorial narrative. But grotesque ludicrousness is not a defect in the structure of hostile conspiracies. It can be argued that it is an adaptive mechanism of social transmission, ensuring the spread of hostile narratives beyond communities already committed to their core ideological worldview and recruiting carriers who may not share the underlying ideological commitments at all.

"[A]bsurdly fake stories" (Ganapini 2022: 22) are more "attention-getting" (Guerin 2024: 509) and memorable than plausible ones. A claim that is spectacularly bizarre, yet delivered with apparent seriousness, is cognitively arresting in ways that compel engagement even from those who do not believe it. This dynamic is visible in contemporary digital culture in the phenomena of "engagement farming" and "rage-baiting" (Swalve and DeFoster 2025: 161). These describe the deliberate posting of absurd content designed to generate reactions. Users repost in disbelief or mockery, attempt to debunk, or circulate content "alongside jokes, memes, and playful trolling" (Munro 2023). In each case, they extend the content's reach. The algorithm registers interaction rather than endorsement. "[E]mpirical evidence suggests that the conspiracy theories which spread most efficiently online are especially juicy [and] titillating" (Munro 2023). Ludicrousness, in the digital environment, is a virality mechanism.

This phenomenon, however, predates social media. Grotesque rumors have likely always traveled faster than plausible ones, not because they are believed but because their strangeness compels sharing. The claim that Marilyn Manson had ribs surgically

removed (Osborne 2017: 56) circulated widely in the 1990s precisely because its obscenity generated engagement. People shared it as a form of transgressive entertainment, without necessarily endorsing it.

Hostile conspiracies spread through the same mechanism. Someone who would never endorse antisemitic propaganda may nonetheless share a bizarre conspiracy claim – about Rothschild family space lasers producing wildfires (Lee 2021) – as a joke, inadvertently extending hostile ideology into new social territory. The grotesque narrative functions as a Trojan horse: the hostile ideological content travels inside a container of ludicrousness, bypassing the ordinary epistemic defenses people deploy against explicit hate speech. It looks like a joke and spreads as a "cultural meme" (Pierre 2023: 549). In that guise, hostile ideological content deposits itself in new social contexts, gradually normalizing the core commitments it carries ("The story is obviously ludicrous, but there may be something to it...").

The ludicrousness also provides deniability for those who spread such claims deliberately. Because the narrative is obviously bizarre, the person sharing it can always retreat to irony ("I'm not saying I believe these crazy stories, but..."). One can gauge reactions and spread ideological content without fully committing to it. The ludicrous claims make hostile ideology culturally familiar and provide cover for those who circulate it.

4.3. Outrage amplification

Quasi-fictional elaborations provide "more exciting" narrative content (Ichino forthcoming) than the underlying ideological commitments they surround. These narratively thick stories are easier to disseminate than the diffuse, inert generalizations from which they emerge. But social transmissibility is not their only function. Quasi-fictions are also affectively more powerful than the core commitments they elaborate. By deploying the dramatic resources of fiction (heightened moral stakes, absolute villains, innocent victims), they do not merely illustrate ideological commitments but actively intensify the emotional attitudes that surround them. A vague prejudice toward a minority group becomes, through narrative concretization, intense hatred of an "evil" enemy. Hostile quasi-fictions function as affective intensifiers, heightening negative emotional reactions toward targeted groups and providing core ideological orientations with the emotional charge that sustains their social resilience.

It is well established that imaginative engagement with narratives "can influence our real-world attitudes in significant ways" (Ichino 2022), even when we are aware we are dealing with fiction. Being imaginatively engaged with a story in which a young girl is stabbed by a psychiatric patient may influence general attitudes toward mental health policy (see Ichino 2022). A TV show portraying corrupt politicians (like *House of Cards*) may deepen distrust of institutions not because the audience believes the events on screen but because imaginative immersion activates negative affective responses toward real politicians that persist beyond the fictional frame. Rob Brotherton cites a case study finding that viewers leaving the screening of Stone's *JFK* reported being less likely to vote: "Merely watching the movie eroded, at least temporarily, [...] the viewers' sense of civic engagement" (Brotherton 2015: 58).

This affective dynamic is especially pronounced in what Burkhart, drawing on Iser, calls "fictive" narratives (2020: 317). They are distinct from both purely imaginary narratives (like *The Lord of the Rings*, with no real-world referents) and factual narratives (which claim genuine veracity). Fictive narratives are fictional in their details but anchored in the extratextual world. Hostile conspiracies are *fictive* in this sense: not purely imaginary (their targets are real people) nor genuinely factual (their claims are fiction-signaling and tacitly recognized as such). This hybrid status makes them affectively potent: the emotional responses they activate are directed at real targets.

Now, hostile conspiracies perform two related affective operations. First, by rendering the target as absolutely evil, they deepen pre-existing hostility. For someone already harboring antisemitic prejudice, the *Protocols* perform a psychologically satisfying function: they imaginatively elaborate and emotionally intensify what the believer already vaguely suspects, providing a gripping story that says "You were right all along." This shields the believer from "cognitive dissonance" and deepens the affective sense of ideological certainty (see Ganapini 2022: 29). Even if the narrative is not literally believed, imaginative immersion in it is emotionally rewarding for someone already disposed toward hostility.

Second, hostile conspiracies provide what might be called *affective license*: the imaginative permission to feel and express hostility that might otherwise remain diffuse. By casting the target as a child-abusing Satanist, hostile quasi-fictions make hostility feel narratively obligatory. The quasi-fiction does not create the prejudice but imaginatively licenses and amplifies it, giving it narrative shape, heightened emotional expression, and a sense of righteous legitimacy.[1]

This reveals something psychologically interesting. One can hold sincere emotions in the absence of literal belief. An antisemitic conspiracist may lack epistemic sincerity toward the explicit content of the *Protocols* (recognizing, like Goebbels, their fictional character) while sincerely maintaining the hatred they activate. The primary function of the quasi-fiction is not to produce a new factual belief but to emotionally intensify and give narrative shape to a prejudice already present. That emotion is sincere in its own register even when the elaborated quasi-fictional content that amplifies it is not literally believed. This is why the endorsement of hostile conspiracies occupies a third position between straightforward belief and full pretense: full epistemic sincerity may be suspended while affective sincerity remains

[1] The phenomenon of affective license has deep roots. Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, the foundational text of Montenegrin literature, provides a striking illustration. In scenes depicting the preparation of Montenegrins for conflict, warriors are exposed to epic poetry that narrativizes the struggle with the Ottomans in terms of absolute moral opposition. The poetry is fictive rather than factual. It shapes historical events through epic convention rather than strict historical accuracy. But its affective function is to license, intensify, and mobilize hostility toward a real, identifiable group, preparing warriors emotionally for real-world violence. Imaginative immersion in a fictive narrative about real enemies activates affective states that persist beyond the fictional frame and bleed into action. Fictional narratives can do affective work that factual claims cannot precisely because their hyperbolic, morally absolute structure bypasses ordinary epistemic caution and speaks directly to emotion.

genuine. The prejudiced orientation is real ("These groups deserve hostility"), while the quasi-fictional story functions as a prop that intensifies and focuses the emotional reaction.

4.4. Punitive attitudes

Imagine a colleague telling you gossip about a coworker: that he is a secret alcoholic who has allegedly made scenes at past departmental events. According to William Flesch, "[g]ossiping, destructive though we often take it to be, is like road rage in bespeaking an essentially prosocial attitude" (2007: 128). Gossip, on his account, serves the purpose of "regulat[ing] social norms" (Flesch 2007: 81). By condemning a colleague's alleged failures, the gossiper signals dedication to the norms being violated and creates a tacit bond of shared values with the listener ("unlike him, we share the same professional standards"). Additionally, the gossiper engages in what Flesch calls "altruistic punishment" (2007: 70): the target is punished through the social damage the circulating narrative produces, and the gossiper derives satisfaction from the sense of having done something socially justified.

Now, hostile conspiracies are not gossip. They are highly narrativized, fiction-signaling forms of slander that circulate even when recognized as implausible by those who spread them. Despite this disanalogy, something structurally similar to Flesch's account can be detected in their circulation.

Like the gossiper, the person who endorses a hostile conspiracy signals ideological affiliations to "like-minded people" (Raab et al. 2013: 8). But hostile conspiracies, precisely through their hyperbolicity, perform this signaling function more aggressively than gossip. Spreading such claims is not primarily an act of literal belief but an act of affective positioning: a charged declaration of where one stands in the ideological landscape, of what one finds threatening, and of whom one identifies as the enemy. To share QAnon accusations or circulate the *Protocols* is not necessarily to assert their literal truth but to perform unambiguous hostility toward their targets. Like ordinary hyperbolic expressions of antipathy ("You are the worst person imaginable"), such claims convey the intensity and non-negotiable character of an underlying attitude (see Vujošević 2026: 8) rather than aiming at literal accuracy. Unlike standard gossip, hostile conspiracies need not be literally believed to signal ideological loyalty and consolidate coalitions around shared hostilities.

The most important function hostile conspiracies share with gossip, however, is punishment. Unlike altruistic punishment in standard gossip (which typically requires the gossiper to believe the gossip is true), this form of punishment operates independently of literal belief. It functions even when the narrative is tacitly recognized as fiction-signaling and fabricated.

The conspiracist who spreads hostile quasi-fictions typically maintains a genuine negative disposition toward the target: a conviction that certain politicians are corrupt, that particular celebrities promote destructive values, or generalized suspicions about the malevolent social influence of specific groups. These attitudes are part of the ideological nucleus. They are real beliefs that predate quasi-fictional elaboration. The quasi-fictional claims (human sacrifice, ritual abuse, perversion)

are chosen not because they are always literally believed but because they are maximally damaging to people the conspiracist already takes to be harmful social agents. Spreading a claim that someone is a child abuser attaches to that person's reputation regardless of whether anyone believes it. It circulates, surfaces in online searches, and produces negative social consequences independently of its truth value. Such claims are not primarily assertoric statements but performative instruments: weapons of reputational damage that are devastatingly effective precisely because their effectiveness is decoupled from their credibility.

Levy provides a striking illustration. When conspiracy-minded individuals are presented with a fabricated claim (that Hillary Clinton secretly gifted uranium to Russia), many immediately assign it high probability, despite encountering it for the first time (Levy 2024a: 473). The claim was invented on the spot, yet it is accepted because it fits the pre-existing hostile profile already attributed to the target: it depicts Clinton as disposed to acting against national interests. The acceptance is not an epistemic judgment but a punitive *reflex*. It does not matter whether the claim is literally true. What matters is that it damages a target already perceived as deserving reputational damage, if for less dramatic or narratively interesting reasons. Conspiracists are not assessing evidence. They are recognizing narrative features that fit their hostile orientation and can be deployed as instruments of reputational damage. Hostile conspiracies are often better understood as performative acts of ideological violence (experienced by those who deploy them as justified punishment) than as straightforward factual assertions.

5. Conclusion

Why do fiction-like, publicly debunked narratives retain social force and appear to be sincerely endorsed by large groups of people? The standard answers explain this either through the psychology of those who uphold such claims (the pathologizing paradigm) or through their epistemic shortcomings (gullibility and susceptibility to misinformation). These approaches are not without merit: some people do literally believe hostile conspiracies, and gullibility and paranoid ideation are real phenomena among conspiracists. But they cannot account for the large-scale endorsement of narratives that are parodically fiction-signaling and often tacitly recognized as such by those who spread them. The puzzle is why such narratives retain social force even among those who do not fully believe them.

Rather than asking what is wrong with the people who believe these narratives, we have asked what these narratives ideologically do that would explain their social resilience. Drawing on Levy, Ganapini, and Luhrmann, we have argued that complex ideological systems characteristically exhibit a layered architecture: a nucleus of core ideological commitments surrounded by quasi-fictional elaborations that perform specific ideological work. In the case of hostile conspiracies, we have identified four interconnected "vectors" through which the quasi-fictional shell strengthens and spreads the ideological nucleus.

These vectors form a cumulative chain. (i) *De-metaphorization* compresses the diffuse hostilities of political rhetoric into concrete stories, making ideological commitments "tellable" in ways that abstract suspicion cannot be. Such stories generate overtly fiction-signaling, bizarre claims that people spread as memes and jokes, inadvertently carrying ideological content into contexts that explicit propaganda could not easily reach. This is (ii) *viral ludicrousness*. The vivid, moralizing narratives that ensure virality also intensify affective responses toward real targets. This is (iii) *outrage amplification*. Finally, (iv) *punitive signaling* converts this emotional charge into social action. The narrative becomes an instrument of punishment, deployed against targets already perceived as deserving it.

Fiction-signaling is not the obstacle to hostile conspiracies' social efficacy but its crucial mechanism. This is why factual debunking fails so consistently. These narratives are not primarily asserting literal truth. They are compressing, transmitting, charging, and punishing. Refuting their factual content often leaves all four vectors intact.

There may be no silver bullet against hostile conspiracies. However, as the de-metaphorization vector demonstrates, hostile conspiracies do not emerge from nowhere. They parasitize on the hyperbolic, pseudo-religious, and dehumanizing language that circulates in mainstream political discourse. When prominent political figures describe their opponents as satanic, predatory, or cold-blooded, they supply the thematic repertoire and affective intensity that hostile quasi-fictions then literalize and narrativize. Refusing to normalize the most virulent forms of this rhetoric would probably not eliminate hostile conspiracies, but it would deprive them of some of their most potent raw material. The metaphors that become petrified into plots have to come from somewhere.

The social conditions that make individuals susceptible to hostile ideological commitments (economic anxiety, the sense of corruption, and institutional betrayal) also deserve to be taken seriously. These conditions are not excuses for the malign ideologies that elaborate them, and taking them seriously does not mean conceding any truth to hostile ideologies. But as long as they remain unaddressed, hostile quasi-fictions will reemerge. This problem requires slow social and political work that no single paper can prescribe. What we have tried to do here is more modest: to understand what hostile conspiracies are, what functions their fiction-signaling structure performs, and why their social circulation proves so difficult to arrest.

Data availability statement

All materials supporting this study are contained and referenced within the article. This research did not involve the creation of new datasets.

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HATRED AS A TEST OF HUMANITY: UKRAINIAN SOCIETY AT WAR

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Abstract. Hatred is regularly described as the most destructive of human affects, yet it is rarely analysed as a distinct mode of relating to the Other. This article develops such an analysis and tests it against the experience of Ukrainian society during Russia's full-scale war. Drawing on the etymology of the Ukrainian *nenavydity* ("not to want to see"), on Fromm, Buber, Levinas and Scheler, and on recent empirical research, we argue that aggression, hatred and indifference are not degrees of a single continuum but three distinct ways in which the Other is present in the subject's world. Hatred is shown to be a double schism: it excludes the Other from a shared world and simultaneously narrows the hater's own axiological horizon. Unlike indifference, however, hatred still holds the Other in being. Humanity is therefore tested not at the threshold of hatred but at the threshold of indifference.

Keywords: hatred, aggression, indifference, dehumanization, ressentiment, the Other, Russo-Ukrainian war

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1. Introduction

In societies at war, hatred ceases to be a theoretical problem. Since February 2022, Ukrainian public discourse has repeatedly returned to a question that is at once moral and philosophical: whether a society that is being destroyed can hate its destroyer without itself becoming something other than what it defends. The question is usually posed in the vocabulary of loss – of *rozliudnennia*, "de-humanization"

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understood reflexively, as something that happens not to the enemy but to oneself. It is this reflexive worry, rather than the more familiar concern with hatred as a cause of violence, that motivates the present study.

The scholarly situation is paradoxical. In 2018, Agneta Fischer and her colleagues observed that hatred – characterized by Royzman, McCauley and Rozin (2005) as the most destructive affective phenomenon in the history of human nature – had remained comparatively under-researched in psychology, while sociology and political science had produced substantial empirical work on hate crime and hate speech (Fischer et al. 2018: 309). They attributed this to two circumstances: the difficulty of studying an emotion that respondents are reluctant to admit – forty Israeli interviewees first denied ever having experienced hatred and then described wishing to destroy an entire city – and the fact that hatred had long remained outside the canon of "basic" emotions, displaced in research by the neighbouring states of dislike, anger and contempt.

The last eight years have changed this decisively. Berit Brogaard's monograph (2020), the volume on the moral psychology of hate edited by Noell Birondo (2022), Íngrid Vendrell Ferran's four-types model (2024) and Thomas Szanto's phenomenological account of the collectivization and habitualization of hatred (2020) have made hatred a central topic of the philosophy of emotion. Empirical research has shown that hatred differs from dislike not merely in negative intensity but in its specific tie to moral convictions and moral emotions (Pretus et al. 2023), and that symbolic threats to worldview, values and identity predict hatred more consistently than realistic threats to resources or safety (Martínez et al. 2022). Most recently, Robert Sternberg has proposed the integrative theory REHIC – Real Hate in Context – extending his earlier duplex theory with an account of the real-world contexts of hatred, the FLOTSAM model of its propagation and a typology of reactions to that propagation (Sternberg 2026).

This body of work asks, for the most part, what hatred is and how it may be reduced. The question raised here lies elsewhere. We ask whether hatred can be understood as a distinctive *mode of human being* – not as an event in consciousness, nor as a state or a disposition, but as a structure of existence with consequences that may prove stable or irreversible. Our thesis is that hatred is a schism (Ukr. *rozkol*) which runs simultaneously between the subject and the Other and through the subject himself; and, further, that aggression, hatred and indifference are not degrees of one continuum but three different ways in which the Other is present in the subject's world.

This is not an abstract exercise. Survey data from four waves analysed in *Political Psychology* show that the proportion of Ukrainians reporting anger, hatred or contempt towards Russian citizens rose from roughly 15% before the full-scale invasion to 76% after it (Ash and Shapovalov 2025). A survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on 2–14 September 2025 records that an absolute majority in every region – from 92% in the west to 80% in the east – hold a negative attitude towards Russia, while 85% report a negative and only 8% a positive attitude towards Russians resident in Russia (KIIS 2025). These figures do not describe a

pathology. They are an intelligible response to a war of aggression accompanied by mass violence and by a widely shared perception of an existential threat. Precisely for that reason they call for philosophical rather than merely statistical interpretation: the question posed by Ukrainian culture after 24 February 2022 concerns not only the moral permissibility of hatred but what hatred does to the person who hates, and where the boundary between preserving and losing one's humanity actually runs.

The case is also of more than local interest. Ukrainian society today occupies a position that most theories of hatred do not anticipate. The literature typically addresses either the hatred of perpetrators, analysed through propaganda, dehumanization and genocidal mobilization (Staub 1989, Sternberg 2026), or hatred in protracted, symmetrical conflicts, where interventions aim at de-escalation on both sides. It has much less to say about a situation in which hatred is a morally intelligible response of the attacked to an attacker, and in which the demand to renounce it is experienced as a demand to renounce one's own moral judgment. Any general theory of hatred must be able to describe this position without either sanctifying hatred or moralizing about the victim.

Our method is descriptive-phenomenological: it aims not at causal explanation but at the reconstruction of the meaning-structures of the experience of hatred. This understanding of description follows Max Scheler's procedure as reconstructed by Kebuladze (2024). The phenomenological approach is supplemented by conceptual analysis distinguishing hatred from anger, contempt, disgust and indifference, and by a systematic confrontation of philosophical claims with contemporary empirical findings. The latter is essential: a philosophy of hatred that ignores how hatred is actually formed, transmitted and endured risks becoming moralizing – a danger to which the Ukrainian philosopher Oleh Khoma drew attention in a public polemic of 2023 to which we return in Section 3.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the conceptual demarcation of aggression, hatred and indifference, beginning from etymology and moving through the empirical differentiation of hatred from anger, dislike, contempt and disgust to hatred as a mode of relation to the Other, and finally to the double schism and to indifference as its limit state. Section 3 tests this framework on the Ukrainian case, distinguishing two sources of hatred, examining the public debate about the measure of hatred, and identifying the practices through which humanity is in fact preserved. Section 4 draws the conclusions.

2. Aggression, hatred, indifference: a conceptual demarcation

2.1. The etymological clue: not wanting to see

Before aggression, hatred and indifference can be distinguished, it is worth attending to the word itself. The Ukrainian *nenavydity* derives from Proto-Slavic *nenaviděti*, glossed as "not to love; not to want to see", and relates to the verb *viděti*, "to see" (*Etymolohičnyj slovnyk* 2003). The idiom survives in contemporary usage: of a person one cannot bear, a Ukrainian speaker may say, "My eyes have not seen

you". Yet "not wanting to see" is not the mere absence of a gaze; it is an active refusal of it. The Other is not only negatively evaluated: he is deprived of the possibility of appearing before the subject in his own difference.

The Germanic line – English *hate*, German *Hass*, French *haine* – foregrounds a different aspect. Old English *hatian* meant to "feel extreme dislike; treat someone as an enemy", while German *hassen* could also carry the older sense of "to pursue, persecute" (Harper s.a., DWDS s.a.). French *haine*, despite the Romance affiliation of the language, derives from the Germanic root *hat-* and was originally associated with wishing evil upon another (Académie française 2024).

Hatred thus has an internally contradictory intentional structure. It turns away from its object yet cannot cease to be directed at it; it seeks to render the Other invisible while holding him at the centre of consciousness; it attempts to remove him from the shared world and by that very attempt remains dependent on his presence. The one whom the subject does not want to see becomes, paradoxically, the one from whom he can no longer look away.

It is this duality – withdrawal combined with directedness; avoidance combined with hostile activity – that allows the place of hatred between aggression and indifference to be specified. Aggression is primarily a movement against an obstacle or a threat; indifference cancels the significance of the Other. Hatred occupies a distinctive position between them: it seeks the removal of the Other while retaining him as an intensely significant object.

2.2. Aggression: benign and malignant

Erich Fromm distinguished two fundamentally different types of aggression: benign (defensive) and malignant (destructive) (Fromm 1973). Benign aggression is a phylogenetically grounded defensive reaction to a threat to life, freedom or vital interests. It is situational, adaptive, and normally subsides once the danger has passed. Such aggression is therefore not identical with hatred. Hatred begins where a negative attitude ceases to be a response to a particular threat and becomes a stable stance towards the very being of the Other.

In this respect, hatred is structurally closer to malignant aggression – the specifically human destructiveness that serves no biologically adaptive function and may be directed at humiliating, subjugating or eliminating another person. Yet hatred and destructiveness are not identical either: hatred is a stable emotional and semantic orientation towards the Other, whereas aggression is one of the possible behavioural expressions of that orientation.

For an understanding of hatred, it is therefore insufficient to register an aggressive impulse or a destructive act. One must move from the question of what the subject does to the Other to the question of who the Other has become for the subject. Unlike a situational reaction to a threatening action, hatred is directed at the Other as the bearer of a supposedly immutable malevolent essence.

2.3. Hatred, anger and dislike

"We hate persons and groups more because of who they are, than because of what they do. Hate has the goal to eliminate its target" (Fischer et al. 2018: 309). Hatred shares features with other negative emotions, above all with anger. One of the more important findings of recent research on emotion, however, is that hatred does not reduce to intense anger. Fischer and her co-authors show that anger and hatred are directed at the person in different ways. In anger we evaluate a particular act negatively and assume that the person's behaviour can be changed. Hatred is directed at the person as such: his negative traits are perceived as fixed and unalterable. Anger therefore motivates correction of the situation or of the other's conduct, whereas hatred more often issues in the wish to distance oneself from him, to harm him or to remove him.

Empirical confirmation of the qualitative difference between hatred and ordinary dislike has been supplied by Clara Pretus and colleagues. In a series of laboratory studies, they tested two hypotheses: that hatred is merely the extreme pole of negativity (the intensity hypothesis), or that it involves a distinct moral component (the morality hypothesis). Hated objects were indeed evaluated more negatively than disliked ones, but they were also more strongly associated with core moral convictions and moral emotions, even after negativity had been statistically controlled (Pretus et al. 2023). Hatred, then, is not simply intensified dislike: it is experienced as a response to something that touches the subject's moral values and identity.

This conclusion is complemented by the work of Cristhian A. Martínez, Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. Van Lange. Across four studies, they established that symbolic threats – threats to worldview, values and identity – predicted hatred more strongly and more consistently than realistic threats to resources or security (Martínez et al. 2022).

Two conclusions follow. First, hatred and anger or dislike are not identical emotional states. Second, hatred should not be understood merely as the opposite of morality or as its simple collapse. Hatred can arise within a system of moral evaluation: the capacity to draw a line between good and evil, between the worthy and the unworthy, is a condition of negative as well as positive feelings. This also helps to explain the resistance of hatred to rational objection. A subject may experience the demand that he relinquish his hatred as a demand that he abandon his own moral convictions.

2.4. Hatred, contempt and disgust

Hatred borders not only on anger but on other negative states, above all on contempt and disgust. Contempt is especially close, since it too involves a negative evaluation of the Other; but contempt manifests itself chiefly in stable rejection and social distancing. Disgust likewise motivates withdrawal, yet it presupposes the avoidance of contact with what is experienced as unacceptable or repellent.

In hatred, the negative relation to the object becomes more radical: the Other is perceived as the bearer of a stable negative disposition, the possibility of his change

is assessed as low, and the motivational orientation exceeds mere distancing, taking the form of a striving for his social, symbolic or physical removal (Fischer et al. 2018).

The experience of powerlessness that may accompany hatred deserves separate attention. It matters because hatred arises not only from a negative evaluation of the Other but from the experience of being unable to change him or to restore an acceptable order of interaction. This is the point at which hatred and ressentiment become comparable, an issue to which we return in Section 3.1.

2.5. Hatred as a mode of relation

Hatred is a negation of the Other, who ceases to be someone to be heard, understood or simply allowed *to be* Other. The Other appears as an object – someone about whom we supposedly know in advance who he is and what may be expected of him. He no longer holds any mystery. In this sense, hatred does not merely narrow the space of possible dialogue: it gradually produces a vacuum of dialogue in which the Other's reply can no longer change anything.

Martin Buber captured this shift in the mode of relation through the distinction between "I-Thou" and "I-It" (Buber 1970). In the I-Thou relation, the Other appears as an interlocutor, a living presence irreducible to our representations of him; the "Thou" remains open and to some degree mysterious. In the I-It relation, the Other becomes an object of description, evaluation, classification or use. Such a relation is in itself indispensable in everyday life; the difficulty arises when it becomes the only possible way of relating to another person. Hatred fixes the Other in precisely this status: he is no longer a "Thou" who can be addressed and from whom an answer may be received, but an "It", the bearer of a ready-made definition.

A related problem, recast in a different key, appears in Emmanuel Levinas. Consciousness in its drive to comprehend, explain, classify and subordinate inevitably extends this drive to the Other. The Other then ceases to be an independent reality and becomes an object that the "I" seeks to seize and dominate. Where the Other is reduced to what can already be explained and subordinated by the "I", his alterity is effectively denied, and the relation acquires the character of totality (Levinas 1969). The Other is deprived of the possibility of being otherwise than our consciousness takes him to be. Against this, Levinas insists on the fundamental unassimilability of the Other: he does not entirely fit into our knowledge of him and cannot be finally appropriated by consciousness. It is his alterity that disrupts the self-sufficiency and totality of the "I" and compels it to move beyond its own closure. The appeal of the Other becomes an appeal of conscience and responsibility; even ignoring it does not annul the fact that it has already been heard (Levinas 1969, 1987).

Hatred therefore does not merely attach a negative evaluation to the Other; it deprives him of the right to remain open, unfinished, capable of turning out to be other than we think. In this sense, hatred is not only an emotion but a distinctive mode of relation to the Other. That mode has an axiological dimension. Hatred narrows access to the value-fullness of the Other. In a Schelerian perspective, love "opens" the Other, allowing more to be seen in him than our evaluation already contains, whereas hatred contracts the axiological horizon within which the Other is

perceived (Scheler 1954). Through the lens of hatred, we perceive the Other within a one-dimensional negative horizon. Hatred may thus be regarded as a form of value blindness: the negative image of the Other becomes so all-encompassing that everything which does not correspond to it ceases to be visible.

2.6. Hatred as a double schism

The duality noted above can now be stated more precisely. Hatred is a schism in two dimensions at once, the intersubjective and the intrasubjective.

The intersubjective schism. Hatred removes the Other from the shared world – not from my field of vision but from the sphere of possible shared meaning. Analysing hybrid warfare, Yevhen Bystrytskyi describes it as a war of identities in which military destruction is combined with the propagandistic violence of post-truth, aimed at transforming the very reality of a community's identity (Bystryc'kyj 2019). In this context, hatred may be understood as a kind of ontological weapon: it is directed not only at the physical removal of the Other but at the destruction of the very possibility of a world shared with him.

The intrasubjective schism. On the one hand, hatred is directed at the negation of the Other, up to the wish to destroy him; on the other, its arrow is simultaneously directed at the one who hates, damaging him from within. The object of our hatred is most probably indifferent to what we feel, whereas it is we who are unbalanced by this feeling, which awakens and intensifies our worst qualities (Stebel's'ka 2025). Scheler's formula of the "self-poisoning of the soul" describes exactly this: repression proceeds in two steps – first the repression of the representation of the object that aroused the negative feeling, then the repression of the affect itself, which, denied external discharge, begins to act inwards; the consequence is a negative relation to one's own body, extending as far as a metaphysical dualism of the Cartesian type (cited in Kebuladze 2024).

The intersubjective and intrasubjective dimensions do not exist in parallel: they are one and the same schism seen from two sides. In hating the Other, we deny him the right to be Other and seek to remove him; and although we deny him a place in the shared world, he paradoxically remains permanently within our field of vision. Yet in denying the Other's right to his alterity, we inevitably destroy the integrity of our own life-world as well, transforming it into a homogeneous space in which there is no room for otherness as such. Together with the Other, the very possibility of an encounter with what is not myself disappears from our world – and with it the possibility of moving beyond our own self-identity. In negating the Other, the "I" ultimately closes in upon itself.

2.7. Indifference as a limit state of the schism

Elie Wiesel's widely cited formula – that the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference – is usually received as a moral admonition. It nevertheless contains an important ontological intuition: hatred and indifference assign the Other different places in the subject's world.

Hatred paradoxically holds the Other in being. It attests that before us is an Other who is experienced as unacceptable, hostile, dangerous or even unbearable – but who *is*. When the Other ceases to have any value-weight for us, even a negative one, the ground for an intense negative relation to him disappears as well. Where we see no value in the Other, feelings towards him vanish, and with them hatred (Stebel's'ka 2025). In this sense, hatred may be regarded as a limit form of negative recognition: the Other is negated, yet the very intensity of the negation testifies that he is.

Indifference has a different structure. It does not so much negate the Other as cancel the question of him, depriving him of moral and axiological relevance. The Other drops out of the field of attention and ceases to be someone with respect to whom questions of good, evil, responsibility or compassion are raised at all.

A cognate mechanism is described by Zygmunt Bauman through the concept of adiaphorization – the placing of certain actions, relations or persons outside moral evaluation. What ends up in such a zone is no longer considered in categories of good and evil and may be reduced to a functional, procedural or technical matter (Bauman 1993, Bauman and Donskis 2013). Adiaphorization can be accomplished without hatred, through distancing, the distribution of responsibility and the conversion of a moral question into a technical one. Hannah Arendt's figure of Eichmann is instructive here. The "banality of evil" is associated not with an excess of hatred or any other negative affect but above all with thoughtlessness, with an incapacity to reflect critically on one's own actions and to put oneself in the place of the Other (Arendt 1963). Evil proves possible not only where the Other is hated but also where he ceases to be an object of moral consideration and becomes the execution of a function, a procedure or an order. In her letter to Gershom Scholem, Arendt notes that evil is never radical but only extreme, possessing neither depth nor any demonic dimension; it can overgrow and lay waste the world precisely because it spreads over the surface, "like a fungus" (Arendt 2007: 470–471).

Nick Haslam's theory of dehumanization is of particular relevance here. He distinguishes animalistic from mechanistic dehumanization. In animalistic dehumanization, the Other is denied uniquely human attributes and assimilated to the image of an animal or a primitive, "lower" being. In mechanistic dehumanization, it is human nature that is denied – emotionality, warmth, individuality, agency – and the person appears as an automaton, a thing, a function or a statistical unit. The two forms have distinct emotional profiles. Animalistic dehumanization is often bound up with the humiliation of the Other and is accompanied by disgust and contempt. Mechanistic dehumanization presupposes emotional distancing and represents the Other as cold, robot-like, passive and devoid of depth; its characteristic emotional correlate is therefore indifference (Haslam 2006).

The three modes may now be summarized. *Aggression* arises primarily when the Other appears as an actual obstacle or source of threat. The negative evaluation is largely situational, and the aim is to remove the obstacle, stop the threatening action or restore a disrupted order. Aggression is typically episodic and does not in itself entail a denial of the Other's human status. *Hatred* alters the status of the Other. He is perceived no longer as the source of a particular threat but as the bearer

of a stable negative essence or disposition. The negative evaluation ceases to be situational and becomes enduring, while the motivational orientation may exceed the removal of a particular obstacle and take the form of a striving to distance, exclude or eliminate. The Other remains extremely significant – but his significance is negative. *Indifference* means that the Other ceases to be a significant object of moral and emotional attention. He may remain physically present, yet he loses axiological relevance. There is then no need even to seek his removal: his fate simply ceases to be a question for the subject. Structurally, mechanistic dehumanization, in which a person is reduced to a function, an object or a statistical unit, stands close to this mode.

It must be stressed that the triad "aggression–hatred–indifference" is neither a scale of gradually decreasing emotional intensity nor a necessary sequence of stages. Aggression does not necessarily generate hatred: it may remain a situational reaction to a concrete threat and subside once the threat is removed. Nor does hatred necessarily pass into indifference. Indifference is only one of the possible limit states of the rupture with the Other, one in which he loses even the negative significance that hatred still preserved. Moreover, indifference can arise without any preceding hatred, where the Other never entered the subject's axiological space at all. What is at issue, then, is not a linear scheme but different modes of the Other's presence in the subject's world, between which transitions are possible under certain conditions.

3. The triad under test: Ukrainian society at war

The practical significance of these distinctions emerges with particular clarity in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In a study conducted by Kateryna Skorokhod through in-depth semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian civilians, service personnel and veterans in March–June 2022, a high level of dehumanization of Russian military personnel was recorded, but its modes differed. For civilians, the dehumanization of the adversary simultaneously reinforced the self-identification of their own group as a bearer of humanistic values; among military personnel it took the more pronounced form of depersonalization of the adversary, whose destruction was perceived as a component of professional activity (Skorokhod 2022).

These results allow different regimes of a dehumanized relation to the enemy to be distinguished. In the first case, the Other retains a marked negative axiological significance, and the relation is structurally close to hatred. In the second, depersonalization and a functional attitude come to the fore, which brings this regime closer to the logic of adiaphorization. At the same time, the professional distancing of a soldier should not be identified with indifference: these are different psychological and ethical phenomena that may have outwardly similar manifestations. The distinction is not academic. It bears directly on how the moral condition of a society at war is to be assessed, and on what exactly should count as evidence of a loss of humanity.

3.1. Two sources of hatred: injury and powerlessness

Section 2.4 identified powerlessness as a component that may accompany hatred. Scheler's analysis of ressentiment shows why this component is decisive. Ressentiment arises from the experience of powerlessness, but only where the cause of one's own powerlessness is located in something external; the inability and unwillingness to see the sources of that powerlessness in oneself or in one's own community generates the search for an external enemy who is imagined to be responsible for it. The temporal and spatial structure of ressentiment is accordingly inverted: what is primary is not the external enemy but ressentiment itself, which then produces the representation of an enemy who allegedly deprived the community of its greatness in the past (Kebuladze 2024). Anatolij Jermolenko extends this analysis with the concept of hubris, in which ressentiment is sublimated into arrogance and a claim to superiority, and traces its ideological deployment in the twentieth century and in the doctrine of the "Russian world" (Jermolenko 2019).

This yields a distinction of two sources of hatred that the psychological literature, focused on appraisals and action tendencies, tends to leave implicit. Hatred may arise from *injury* – from real harm inflicted by a real agent – or from *powerlessness* that requires an enemy in order not to acknowledge itself as the cause of its own condition. Hatred of the first kind has an addressee; hatred of the second kind produces one. The first can in principle be metabolized by justice, recognition and accountability; the second cannot, because its object is constructed, and it is dissolved only by a return to self-examination.

Vendrell Ferran's typology, which distinguishes normative, ideological, retributive and malicious hatred, offers a complementary conceptual grid (Vendrell Ferran 2024). It allows a question that otherwise degenerates into rhetoric to be posed precisely. The hatred felt by Ukrainians towards the aggressor and the hatred cultivated by the aggressor towards Ukrainians are not one phenomenon. The first is retributive and normative in structure: it responds to injury and refers to a violated norm. The second is ideological: it is constructed by a narrative that precedes any injury, as documented in analyses of the extremist narratives deployed against Ukraine (Treyger et al. 2025). The ontological structure of the schism is common to both; their moral and political status is not. To ignore this difference is either to exculpate the aggressor or to demand that the victim cease to be a moral subject at all.

3.2. The measure of hatred: a public controversy

In 2023, a minor episode generated a revealing controversy in Ukrainian public discourse. After a Russian citizen was killed by a shark off the Egyptian coast, expressions of satisfaction appeared in Ukrainian social media, followed by an equally vigorous wave of moral condemnation of those expressions as evidence of *rozliudnennia* – of Ukrainians losing their own humanity. The philosopher Oleh Khoma objected that black humour is a very weak form of hatred, "almost vegetarian in the midst of a war", and that moralizing exercises about the damage

such reactions supposedly do to "our humanity" are symptoms of a peculiar hyper-civility; untimely moralizing, he argued, harms morality itself by hollowing it out into empty talk (Khoma 2023).

The objection is well taken with respect to *timing*, but it does not dissolve the question of the *measure*. Two things must be separated here. To demand of the victims of a war of extermination that they not hate is not an ethical requirement but a form of secondary victimization; on this point Khoma is right. Yet it does not follow that no distinction can be drawn within the field of hatred itself. Our analysis suggests where the distinction lies. Hatred that keeps the Other as one who *is* – even as an enemy, even as a person justly held responsible – remains within the space of the human, because it still presupposes an axiological relation to him. What ceases to be human is not the intensity of the negative relation but its conversion into adiaphorization, in which the fate of another person is no longer a question at all.

This reformulation has a practical consequence. It shifts attention from the policing of affect, which is both futile and unjust in wartime, to the identification of the specific practices in which the schism either stops or deepens: the attribution of responsibility as against the denial of humanity, the discharge of hatred into work as against its repression, and public discourse that keeps moral categories operative as against discourse that renders them merely technical.

3.3. What is tested: practices that preserve humanity

Three such practices deserve emphasis, and each has an empirical as well as a conceptual dimension.

The first is the *attribution of responsibility as distinct from dehumanization*. To hold a person, an institution or a state responsible is a judgment about guilt that presupposes evidence, degrees and procedures; it treats its object as an agent, and therefore as a human being. To deny humanity is to dispense with all of this. The two may sound alike in public speech, especially in wartime, and the philosophical task here is not to moralize but to keep the distinction available for reflection. It is this distinction, rather than the presence or absence of hatred, that separates the demand for justice from the logic of extermination.

The second is the *discharge of hatred into work*. Volunteer movements in Ukraine offer an instructive example: those involved plainly do not love the enemy, yet many of them do not experience destructive hatred, because the corresponding energy is redirected into socially useful activity. Such redirection does not abolish hatred; it prevents it from turning inwards (Stebel's'ka 2025). In Scheler's terms, what is thereby avoided is precisely the repression that converts affect into the self-poisoning of the soul. This has an institutional corollary: where legitimate channels of discharge – courts, reparations, documented accountability, public deliberation – are absent, hatred is more likely to be transformed into ressentiment and to seek an internal enemy.

The third is the *acknowledgement of the inward cost*. The intrasubjective dimension of the schism is not a metaphor. Research on Ukrainian populations has documented moral injury – the distress arising from events that violate a person's core moral

convictions – as a predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms among both active-duty personnel and civilians (Zasiekina et al. 2024). Moral injury is not identical with hatred, but the two are structurally related: both concern a damaged relation to value, and both are aggravated when the injury goes publicly unacknowledged. This is where the philosophical analysis converges with the clinical literature on recovery, which identifies community acknowledgement and accountability, rather than the private management of feeling, as the conditions of repair (Herman 2023). It also indicates the proper order of any programme of "overcoming hatred": safety and justice first, then the work on the inward schism, and only then – and only where the wrongdoer has acknowledged the wrong – the question of forgiveness (Murphy 2003).

These considerations are consistent with one of the more counter-intuitive findings in the psychology of intergroup conflict: anger can be constructive precisely in the absence of hatred, since anger is addressed to actions and is therefore compatible with change, whereas hatred is addressed to being and renders change irrelevant (Halperin et al. 2011). The normative implication is not that a society under attack should cease to feel negative emotions, which is neither possible nor desirable, but that the intentional structure of the emotion matters: "they are evil" generates no obligation on the part of the Other except his elimination, whereas "they have done evil" generates an agenda of judgment, reparation and memory.

4. Conclusions

The analysis presented here supports five conclusions.

First, hatred is not an intensified form of anger or dislike. It differs from them in the status it assigns to its object: where anger addresses an action that can be changed, hatred addresses a supposedly stable malevolent essence, and its motivational horizon extends to the removal of the Other. This difference is not merely one of degree but of intentional structure, and it is corroborated by empirical evidence that hatred is bound up with moral convictions and with symbolic rather than merely realistic threat.

Second, hatred is a mode of relation, not only an emotion. Read through Buber's I-It, Levinas's totality and Scheler's account of value perception, it appears as the fixing of the Other in a finished definition and as a form of value blindness: the negative image becomes so encompassing that whatever does not fit it ceases to be visible. Etymology preserves this insight in the Ukrainian *nenavydity* – an active refusal of the gaze.

Third, hatred is a double schism. It removes the Other from the sphere of shared meaning and, by the same act, contracts the hater's own life-world into a homogeneous space in which alterity has no place. The intersubjective and intrasubjective dimensions are not parallel processes but one schism seen from two sides; its clinical correlate is the damaged relation to value described in the literature on moral injury.

Fourth, aggression, hatred and indifference are three distinct modes of the Other's presence in the subject's world, not three points on a single scale, and no necessary sequence leads from one to another. Indifference is nevertheless the limit state of the schism, because it withdraws from the Other even the negative significance that hatred still confers. Its mechanism is adiaphorization and its emotional correlate is mechanistic dehumanization – which is why evil requires neither hatred nor passion in order to be extreme.

Fifth, and consequently, the test of humanity in a society at war does not lie where public debate usually places it. It does not lie at the threshold of hatred, since hatred in response to a war of aggression is a morally intelligible reaction of people whose values have been assaulted, and the demand that they renounce it is experienced, correctly, as a demand that they renounce their own moral judgment. The test lies at the threshold of indifference: at the point where the question of another human being ceases to be asked at all. Accordingly, the criteria by which a society may judge itself are not the intensity of its negative emotions but the practices it sustains – whether it continues to distinguish the attribution of responsibility from the denial of humanity, whether hatred is discharged into work and into institutions rather than repressed into ressentiment, and whether the inward cost of hatred is publicly acknowledged rather than denied. To this extent, the philosophical task in wartime is neither to condemn hatred nor to justify it, but to keep visible the boundary beyond which the Other ceases to be a question.

Data availability statement

This is a theoretical study. No new data were generated or analysed. All empirical findings discussed in the article are drawn from previously published sources, which are cited in full in the list of references and are publicly available; the survey report of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology is available online at the address given in the references.

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