



Photo 2. Ukrainian and Estonian flags side-by-side on Freedom Square, Tallinn.



Photo 7. General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania.

THE PUBLIC PEDAGOGY OF UKRAINIAN FLAG DISPLAYS:

by **Aimee Herring**
& **Kara D. Brown**

A view from Lithuania & Estonia

Postcard from Lithuania

On a bright evening in June of 2022, I exited a plane into the terminal of Vilnius airport; a large digital sign greeted me: “*Būk Drąsus, Kaip Ukraina*” [“Be Brave Like Ukraine”]. See photo 1. Vivid yellow lettering against a dark blue background made the message hard to miss. In the following days and weeks spent visiting friends and family, I was struck by this and other visual manifestations of support for Ukraine. Ukrainian flags could be found everywhere, flown not just from government buildings but also on residential buildings and balconies, hanging on the walls and in the windows of businesses. Frequently, Ukrainian flags were twinned with Lithuania’s national flag. Variations on colors of the flag could be found in clothing, on ribbons, and even in street art, sometimes accompanied with the slogan, “Glory to Ukraine!”

Postcard from Estonia

Turning the corner onto Freedom Square (*Vabaduse Väljak*) on a sunny afternoon in June 2022, I was immediately taken aback. An enormous, joint Ukrainian-Estonian flag stretched over four of the six stories of the 1930s building on the corner of Harju Street, see photo 2. The sheer size and prominent location of this Ukrainian flag, as well as its “twinning” with its Estonian counterpart, made a dramatic statement of solidarity. Over my subsequent weeks in Estonia I regularly saw Estonian and Ukrainian flags hanging or standing side-by-side in university entry halls, on facades of government buildings or on town squares. Single Ukrainian flags meanwhile waved in miniature from city transportation vehicles and could be spotted in the windows of private homes.



Photo 3. Lithuanian Ministry of Defense – “WeAreNATO” (national flag of Lithuania to the left of the Ukrainian flag, not visible).



Photo 4. Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania.

The material landscape of the Baltic states has dramatically changed with the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine: the Ukrainian flag, or its distinctive blue-yellow, has saturated the public space. In places once reserved only for the national flag, the Ukrainian flag flies right next to it. Building facades, windows, and walls serve as new surfaces for the display of the yellow and blue. The periodic, holiday-driven appearance of national flags has given way to the constant show of Ukrainian flags. In both these countries, the visible manifestations of support in public, private and personal spheres suggests that citizens of Lithuania and Estonia, not just the governments, align themselves with Ukraine. While the Baltic states certainly share expressions and traditions of flag solidarity, such as flying each other's flag on neighboring Independence Days, and "make space" for other flags (e.g., the European Union, NATO, those of visiting delegations, etc.), the singular, voluntary, and expansive display of another country's flag is unprecedented in both countries. The pervasiveness of the flag throughout Lithuania and Estonia prompts the question: why and for whom? In short, how do we begin to make sense of the current Ukrainian flag display in these two Baltic States?

IN THIS PHOTO ESSAY, we document and try to make sense of the radically changed material environments in both Lithuania and Estonia since the start of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Over the course of several overlapping weeks during the summer of 2022 when both authors were in the Baltics (Aimee Herring in Lithuania and Kara Brown in Estonia), the Ukrainian flag and/or the colors of the flag seemed omnipresent to the extent we were moved to document and track displays: we texted photos of striking, more mundane, and unique locations and the ways the flag or flag colors were displayed. When we returned as visitors again in the summer of 2023, we found the patterns and presence of the Ukrainian-flag display had endured. During both summers, we became "informed passersby" documenting the flags across the two countries' capitals as well as in several additional cities and towns. We both occupy an "insider-outsider" role as individuals who have enjoyed decades-long personal and professional relationships with specific places and people in Lithuania and Estonia, so were deeply familiar with these material environments pre-February 24, 2022. To provide a snapshot of these first two summers after the start of full-scale war, along with the ways that we make sense of it, we share here a selection from our joint collection of over one hundred photos from the summers of 2022 and 2023 and elaborate on them with ideas from public-pedagogy scholarship.

Opening note about the Baltic context & flags

The robust display of Ukrainian flags has developed in a Lithuanian and Estonian context of significant foreign and domestic

support for Ukraine. When NATO and the EU dithered about providing heavy arms to Ukraine in early 2022, Lithuanian and Latvian citizens raised money, and, working through the institution of their respective Defense Ministries, purchased Bayraktar drones for the Ukrainian army. Estonia provides, by the most recent estimates, the second largest (after Poland) percentage of government support by donor GDP (including refugee costs) for Ukraine.¹ Beyond this governmental and grassroots aid, both governments have also been outspoken and determined voices in the European Union and NATO advocating for more Ukrainian support and stricter regimes of restriction for Russia.

Flags offer a different type of support. As symbols, they confer meaning on a space, and construct and represent community.² They can be used to signal, and to initiate or direct action.³ Flags can also come to reference meanings that may not be immediately

obvious, or even originally intended, because of their indexical quality.⁴ For example a Swiss flag can bring to mind the Red Cross, the field of medicine generally – and possibly pocket knives. A Canadian flag worn on a traveler's backpack can suggest "I'm not American" more than "I'm Canadian". Readers familiar with the context of the United States are likely aware of the many flags that now index white supremacy, despite their original use or origin, such as the Gadsden "Don't Tread on Me" flag from 1775.

With the sudden and dramatic ubiquity of the Ukrainian flag in the Baltic states, what sort of indexical associations has it taken on across the Baltics?

Reverence-Resistance-Regulation of flags

Flag culture and protocol in the Baltic states plays a dominant role in shaping, and appreciating, the display of Ukrainian flags in these countries since the start of the war. Orientations and responses towards national flags – particular to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, yet also generally shared across the three states – might be best sketched as the 3R's – Reverence-Resistance-Regulation. These orientations, which we briefly highlight below in the two cases of Estonia and Lithuania, speak to, in part, the habits, dispositions, and spaces created for the Ukrainian flag.

During the waning years of the Russian Empire, a burgeoning flag culture developed as a part of nascent national identity formation in the Baltic region. By the interwar period, both Estonia and Lithuania had national flags featuring three distinct colors – the *sinimustvalge* [blue-black-white] and *trispalvė* [the three color], respectively – which were displayed proudly until Soviet occupation. In the post-1991 re-independence period, **reverence** for the national flags has taken multiple forms ranging from a room dedicated to the Estonian flag at the Estonian National Museum to an article in the Lithuanian flag code stating that all persons must show the flag respect.

“FLAGS CAN ALSO COME TO REFERENCE MEANINGS THAT MAY NOT BE IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS.”

For both countries, the national flag, banned during the Soviet occupation, served as a symbol of identity and **resistance** at home and among émigré communities. As Smith notes, citing George Schöpflin, the “use of flags, monuments and ceremonies is not a superfluous extravagance, but a central component of identity creation and maintenance.”⁵ Smidčens identifies the mass display and rallying for re-independence around the Baltic national flags during the glasnost era as the “flag revolution.”⁶ In the late 1980s, the Lithuanian national flag was displayed at meetings of the independence group Sąjūdis, and in a notable act of defiance, which may have been instrumental in forcing the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet Council to approve the tricolor as the Lithuanian national flag, flying it upon Gediminas Tower in October 1988.⁷ In Estonia, 1987 marked the first public display of the prohibited Estonian flag. Historians have labeled 1988 as the “Spring of the Flag” given the mass display of the *sinimustvalge*. In June 1988, the ESSR Supreme Soviet legalized the flag as the Estonian “national colors.” By February 24th, 1989, commemorating the declaration of Estonia’s independence, the national flag once again flew from Tall Herman (*Pikk Hermann*) for the first time in 45 years.

BOTH COUNTRIES have developed and adhered to strict **regulations** concerning flag display – both national and foreign – since regaining independence. Lithuania’s Flag Protocol, first crafted in the early 1990s, has allowed for the ever more expansive display of flags. It initially forbade the display of the flags of foreign states outside of state institutions except for ceremonial events and official visits of foreign delegates; even private citizens were not allowed to display the flags of foreign countries, a restriction which was rescinded only with amendments to the flag protocol in 2004.⁸ With growing confidence in Lithuania’s international status, the critical importance of the nation’s accession to the European Union and NATO, as well as acknowledgement of the importance of displaying solidarity with those seeking political freedom,⁹ the flag code was amended to allow for permanent and strategic display of flags other than the tricolor. In short, the display of foreign flags has gone from being a potential threat to a display of alliance.

The Estonian Flag Act similarly sets parameters for the location and days of flying of the *sinimustvalge* and the European Union flag. The Estonian flag must be flown by state agencies, local governments, and others under public law on defined holidays and days of commemoration while the European Union flag must also be flown in front of state, county, borough, and city governments (to name a select few locations) and always on European Day and election day for European Parliament (§ 11). While beyond the scope of the Estonian Flag Act, Estonia also has policies that guide the flying of the Ukrainian flag including outside of Estonian Embassies worldwide.¹⁰

Flags & public pedagogy

Budrytė has recently discussed the strong emotional, vicarious identification with Ukraine and its citizens felt in Lithuania specifically, and throughout the Baltics generally, given the shared historical trauma under Soviet rule, as well as the on-going threat of Russian invasion.¹¹ The display of Ukrainian flags, as well as other acts of protest against the war, represent one way to signal that identification. We would like to suggest that the flags serve another purpose as well: that of public pedagogy.

Commonly understood as education that takes place outside of formal sites of learning, public pedagogy is often used to develop civic and national identity, promote cohesion, and memorialize.¹² It can play a strategic role in cultural and identity formation. Of particular significance here are the essential qualities of effective pedagogy: it is both relational and intentional, and affects change in another person.¹³

BIESTA’S TAKE ON public pedagogy, based on Arendt’s conceptualization of “publicness” as a quality of human togetherness, attends to the purpose and impact of public pedagogy.¹⁴ In Biesta’s framing, there are three kinds of public pedagogy. One is a public pedagogy *for the people*: it is instruction aimed at the public, often by state entities. Public pedagogy that is *of the people* is initiated by the citizenry and emphasizes learning. Finally, public pedagogy can be conducted *in the interest of “publicness”*, as a unique, unscripted engagement between human individuals that furthers plurality, action and freedom.¹⁵

Biesta’s conceptualization of public pedagogy, particularly that of pedagogy *for* and *of* the people, informs our understanding of the use of the Ukrainian flag in public spaces around the Baltics. Our contention is that the display and/or use of the colors of the Ukrainian flag has become a form of public pedagogy, in

that the Ukrainian flag is displayed strategically, with the purpose of impact and effect, individual and collective. Repetitive use of the flag, particularly when twinned with the national flag on state institutions, creates an indexical relationship: you see the Ukrainian flag, and think of – if not necessarily see – the national flag.

The pervasive display of the Ukrainian flag in the windows of schools, cafes, private residences, and cars; ribbons of blue

and yellow affixed to backpacks, statues, and blouses – these create associations between the flag, cityscapes, and citizens, as well. Flag pedagogy educates a variety of publics, not just local citizenry, or residents, but also foreign visitors and international bodies. The ubiquity of the flag doesn’t just keep awareness of the ongoing war alive; it also teaches vicarious identification with Ukraine and its citizens,¹⁶ building community and continued momentum for national support that is not without risk or costs. Budrytė argues that the Baltics identify vicariously with Ukraine due to both their shared history of Russian occupation and Soviet terror as well as their status as younger, newer members of the Europe Union.¹⁷

**“PUBLIC PEDAGOGY
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Photo 5. University of Tartu (Estonia) lit up in Ukrainian colors.



Photo 6. Language Instruction in Lithuanian and Ukrainian: Support and Respect. The windows of Vilnius' Salomėja Nėris Secondary School.



Photo 9. Kiosk on a street in Vilnius, June 2022.



Photo 8. Ferry terminal in Tallinn.



Photo 10. Outside the Russian Embassy in Tallinn: "Ukraine is not Putin's own".



Photo 11. Glory to Ukraine! Inside a pub in Vilnius.



Photo 14. Inside a pub, Vilnius.



Photo 15. For your freedom and ours, Vilnius.



Photo 1. Sign from Vilnius airport terminal, "Be Brave, Like Ukraine".



Photo 12. "Putin, the Hague is Waiting" message and flag in Vilnius.



Photo 13. Street art in a Tartu, Estonia pedestrian underpass.

Public pedagogy: For the people & of the people

For the people. One way to understand the pervasive Ukrainian flag display is as a pedagogy aimed at the public, as a way to instruct citizens, residents, and visitors about state values, positions, and priorities. Across both Lithuania and Estonia, we observed a range of state and municipal buildings (e.g., government offices, schools, as in Photo 6, and universities, see Photo 5), city/town properties, even public transportation buses and trams flying the Ukrainian flag or displaying blue and yellow. The state or municipal government's endorsement of the Ukrainian flag, as well as the positioning of the flag in and on governmental property, particularly given the reverence for the national flag and space usually reserved for it, signals the priority of Ukrainian support and solidarity. The state government's social media, especially on official ministry and presidential Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) accounts, likewise incorporated the Ukrainian flag as a frame or icon creating a coherent virtue link between the physical and virtual spaces. When the state included messaging along with the Ukrainian flag, we found examples of national language and English use suggesting domestic and international target audiences.

An additional form in which we found "for the people" public pedagogy was in the government's display of Ukrainian flags, or the blue and yellow, as a signal for refugees on official notices, directions, or services. It was common at transit points (e.g., ferry terminals, airports, train stations, etc.) to have signs with Ukrainian blue and yellow frames or backgrounds along with messages in multiple languages, typically a mix of Ukrainian, Russian, English (see Photo 8) and/or the national language. The use of the Ukrainian flag, or Ukrainian flag colors, in these cases served as a guidepost to instruct those needing assistance. This color-coding of services along with their position in key border crossing points speaks to a pragmatic public pedagogy of alerting newcomers to local services and assistance. Lithuania

offered a distinct take on this blue-yellow signaling of pragmatic information regarding Ukrainian refugees. In Vilnius, a kiosk poster detailed, in Lithuanian only, the rights of refugees in Europe/Lithuania (see Photo 9). As such this pedagogy was explicitly aimed at educating the citizens of Lithuania.

Of the people: Protest. We found the Ukrainian flag often displayed as a form of protest and/or in conjunction with other visual displays of protest generated by actors outside of the state. Locations included spaces such as in front of Russian Consulates/Embassies (see Photo 10); on privately-owned buildings and in private establishments, at times accompanied by messaging (in English) such as, "Putin, the Hague is waiting for you" (see Photo 12) or (in Ukrainian) "Slava Ukraini!" (see photo 11). Use of the flag in this instance, particularly when combined with such slogans, is an exercise of the democratic right to protest and to free speech, as well as the demonstration of the solidarity of one citizenry with another. It is also learning methods of effective protest in real time: flags displayed by one are answered with flags displayed by others that are echoed with the hanging of flags by others still, in similar prominent displays. Singular voices join together; the call of "Slava Ukraini!" that has been spoken by the leader of independent Ukraine and Ukrainians worldwide is answered in a sort of call and response by the citizenry of another country (see Photos 11 & 13). Unique acts of protest, such as Vilnius Mayor Šimašius' spray painting of "Putin, the Hague is waiting for you" in front of the Russian Embassy in Vilnius just a few days after Russia's invasion are taken up by many, and also inspire acts by others who have learned have learned this as a method of attention-grabbing and effective protest. Given the messaging in English, it is clear these acts of instruction and protest aim to communicate with a public larger than that of national citizens.

Of the people: Space-Claiming. Placement of a flag within a specific location confers meaning upon that space.¹⁸ It also creates



Photo 17. Cafe in Vilnius provides free coffee and pastries to Ukrainian mothers and their children on certain days of the week.

and then represents a community.¹⁹ The display of the Ukrainian flag in locations where people gather socially declares the support – or at least tolerance – for the meaning the flag has taken on since February 2022: support for Ukraine in its battle against an invading Russian force. It lays claim to a space in locations where people are gathered as social beings, not necessarily as “citizens”. It signals a continuity of support from civic space to social space, from citizen to individual. In the case of the multi-story twinned Estonian-Ukrainian flag featured earlier in the article (Photo 2), the creator of the installation, Sergei Metlev, a board member of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory and current editor-in-chief of the Russian-language version of the Estonian daily newspaper, *Postimees*, explained the significance of this space-claiming display: “This symbol expresses the belief that democracy, freedom and human dignity will win, which Ukrainians have taken up to defend for all of us.”²⁰

Of the people: Assistance. Some of the most meaningful acts of public pedagogy have come in the form of private and/or pooled material assistance to the people of Ukraine, the most famous example, of course, being the opening of private homes to refugees from Ukraine.²¹ Generosity as a form of solidarity can be signaled in other, discrete acts, which in turn spark further, discrete acts of generosity. Lithuanian journalist Andrius Tapinas spearheaded a crowd-sourcing campaign that raised millions from Lithuanian citizens to purchase a Bayraktar drone, which was delivered to Ukraine in July of 2022; inspired by the success, a charity in Latvia followed suit (Photo 16).²² Smaller, but still meaningful, acts of kindness and recognition – such as offering free pastries and coffee for Ukrainian mothers and their children certain days of the week – mean something in a country where economic challenges are a given and profits are not (Photo 17). The contri-

“THIS SYMBOL EXPRESSES THE BELIEF THAT DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY WILL WIN.”



Photo 16. Ad soliciting support for NGO blue-yellow.lt, Vilnius.

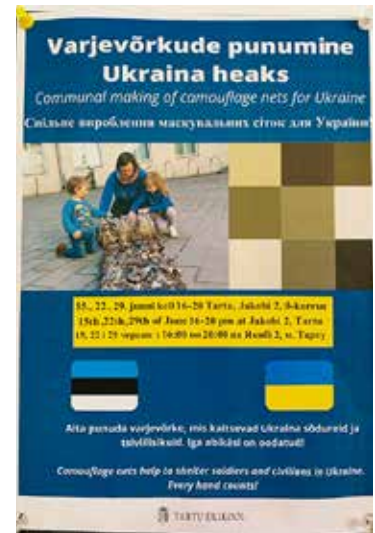


Photo 18. The NGO Aitan Kaitsa Tartu section's call for volunteers to weave camouflage cover for Ukrainian tanks.

bution of time and energy across Estonia to weave camouflage cover for Ukrainian tanks represents a practical contribution that adults and children, visitors and residents alike can make. The language decisions, across these calls and offers of assistance, also signals various collectives – solicitations for monetary assistance typically are in the national language or English, calls for collective action (as with the tank-net camouflage, as in Photo 18) are in three languages – Estonian, Ukrainian, and English, and offers of assistance (e.g., food, discounted/free tickets, etc.) were in Ukrainian and periodically both Ukrainian and the national language.

Discussion

Conceptualizing the display of the Ukrainian flag as public pedagogy allows us, as passersby, to attempt to make sense of its ubiquity since the summer of 2022 in Lithuania and Estonia. It provides one explanation, among many, of why and for whom the flag and/or its colors permeate public, private, and personal space, the boundaries of which – as illustrated above – overlap. Following Biesta’s conceptualization of public pedagogy as be-

being for the public and of the public, we see public officials and leaders instructing the citizenry: articulating and reminding those at home and abroad of state values (i.e., “We support Ukraine, despite the risks and costs”), aligning identities and sacrifices (i.e., “This could be us and in fact, IS us”).²³ The citizenry learn and facilitate the learning of others; not just other national citizens, but citizens of other nations, and other state and political entities: “Here’s what I do, and we do, and what you could

do, too.” Pedagogy is meant to encourage such acts of support by demonstrating their possibility and effectiveness. Our “informed passersby” approach to gathering and reflecting on the radically transformed semiotic landscapes of Lithuania and

Estonia, while not empirical, provided an opportunity to create a visual record of these places during a time of ongoing war and also to make some additional observations about socio-cultural practices common, and distinct, to both countries. In each of these Baltic States, we found a “layered” appeal to those in and beyond the country given the range of languages used, the locations chosen, and the forms of messaging. Across Lithuania and Estonia, we observed the signature Ukrainian blue and yellow in lights, officially made signs, stand-alone flags, with and without textual overlay, in art, and much more. Location matters as well as we share in this essay. Our experience over two summers in these two locations also allows us to speak to the stability of these semiotic shifts. Virtually all the Ukrainian flag displays we observed in 2022 remained in 2023.

We conclude with ideas for research that could spin off from this photo essay. One path would be to explore Biesta’s “in the interest of publicness,” which we didn’t focus on here. Another possibility is to explore the use of a variety of national flags in Ukraine as symbols of support and recognition. A recent article featuring Ukrainian soldiers holding up the Lithuanian flag next to a destroyed Russian tank signals that the identification is not necessarily one-sided [Endnote Abromaitis].²⁴ Finally, investigating the more covert, smaller displays of the Ukrainian flag or its absences (that is, where you would expect it to be) would provide an important counterpart to our record here. ❌

Aimee Herring is a PhD-student in Anthropology, and Kara Brown, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Education Foundations and Inquiry Program Department of Leadership, Learning Design and Inquiry. Both are at the University of South Carolina.

Note: All photos are taken by the authors. Aimee Herring’s photos were taken summer of 2022 in Lithuania and Kara D. Brown’s photos the summer of 2022 and 2023 in Estonia.

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