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Seeing like a train: the viapolitics of emergency mobilities during Russia's war against Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the role of trains and railway infrastructure in Ukraine as a critical component of the emergency mobility of Ukraine's population following the Russian full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Applying the concept of viapolitics, it explores how the railways became more than just a means of transport during the war, instead symbolising solidarity, struggle, privilege, and hope. The research situates Ukrainian railway mobilities within post-colonial and post-socialist contexts, examining how the infrastructures, rooted in Soviet-era practices, have been repurposed amid military aggression. Drawing on data from news reports, human rights organisations, and personal testimonies, the paper analyses the complex and multifaceted role of rail transport in the war context. The article reveals how emergency mobility, mediated through railways and political action, brings together spatial and temporal dimensions – linking Ukraine's Soviet past, post-socialist independence, renewed Russian imperialism, and aspirations for a European future. These historical and geopolitical layers intertwine with the population's self-organisation and resilience, while also colliding within the railway's diverse vehicular and infrastructural meanings of mobility.

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Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine by land, air and sea – the largest attack by one state against another in Europe since WWII. The assault included heavy air strikes on Ukraine's capital city and simultaneous land attacks along the Russian-Ukrainian border. After initial defeats, in April-May 2022, the Ukrainian army succeeded in halting the Russian advance and recapturing much of the occupied territory. Yet, in the eastern and southern regions, full-scale infantry and artillery battles have continued, with many localities effectively wiped from the map. As of today, the Russian forces continue to carry out regular air strikes on major cities (Ionita 2023; Watling and Reynolds 2023). Ukrainian political institutions, the security sector and the population have shown great resilience, adapting to and enduring the stress and trauma of ongoing war – maintaining the state's functioning and the provision of

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public services despite massive disruptions to daily life and energy supplies. Still, the risk of death or injury has become an everyday reality. In this context, mobility has emerged as a compound performance of political agency, enacted both individually and collectively.

Since the onset of the military aggression, several million people have resorted to emergency mobility – primarily through rail travel – to escape the Russian invasion or to return home. With air travel or ‘aeromobility’ (Cwerner, Kesselring, and Urry 2009) rendered impossible due to the closure of Ukrainian airspace, and with car travel accessible to only part of the population, the majority of Ukrainians travelled by train. These journeys were supported by state and local authorities, numerous volunteer initiatives, neighbouring countries, and international organisations. However, unlike other means of transport, trains rely on pre-existing infrastructure with a defined capacity, layout and gauge (Mitchell 2011, 38), which in the case of Ukraine means a dense network of broad-gauge tracks connecting the post-Soviet space, with underdeveloped infrastructure at the western borders. Nevertheless, existing links to Western neighbours – combined with satellite communication equipment and robust Soviet-era carriages – have become effective channels for travelling westward and bringing Western politicians, aid and supplies into the country. At the same time, trains symbolised unequal access to mobility based on location, social status, legal identity, or health. Emergency mobility can reflect and reinforce intersecting inequalities and marginalisation: the ‘mobility (in)justices’ (Sheller 2018) that pervade movement even in normal times.

This article focuses on the role played by trains and railway infrastructure¹ in shaping emergency mobilities from and within Ukraine after 24 February 2022, as seen through the lens of viapolitics (Adey 2016; Walters 2015). Infrastructures, vehicles and passengers – key concerns in mobilities research – are central in struggles over borders and mobility, especially during armed conflict. The concept of viapolitics not only underlines this link but also emphasises that the conjunction of mobility and vehicles and their infrastructural mediation is political. Firstly, looking through the prism of mobilities and the railway system allows us to observe a particular mobility phenomenon from ‘the middle’, not from the end, which is still uncertain in the case of Ukraine facing an ongoing war. Secondly, the perspective of a railway through the lens of its history as a Soviet infrastructure in the wake of post-socialist transition and greater EU alignment orients us towards a transnational and postcolonial perspective of Ukraine. The railway sits between Ukraine’s present and socialist past and its neighbours, and its potential integration into new infrastructure and mobility systems that it carries people between.

Finally, the application of the lens of viapolitics, with its emphasis on the politics of mobility, trains and infrastructure, draws attention to the different layers of contestation that Ukraine’s people, at both individual and institutional levels, use to oppose the military aggression to mobilise accelerated, but also slow, halting and precarious mobilities, as a coping strategy in times of war. While we approach these mobilities viapolitically (Walters 2015), we see them as types of emergency mobility: complex movements involving migration and transport that constitute the Ukrainian population’s struggle to take a life-saving journey. William Walters, who first conceptualised viapolitics, refers to the expression to ‘see migration like a ship’ (Walters 2008; 2015), which he understands as ‘a tactical move, a decentring of the otherwise familiar’ (Walters 2015, 471), underlining the perspective of travellers on a route conducted within a specific means of transport, of the decision-makers who often refer to the metaphor of vehicles in their political imagination – and where the vehicle becomes an object of control – and of different actors who might mobilise political agency through vehicular mobilities to challenge state power. By paraphrasing Walters and introducing the term ‘seeing like a train’, we foreground the political role of trains as symbols of relative safety and stability during wartime, as well as their complex functions in the lives of individuals and political communities.

We begin by presenting the article’s conceptual lens, which supports our viapolitical approach in multiple modalities of mobility, transport and migration. We also discuss research on postcoloniality and post-socialist mobilities. We seek to explain in what sense vehicles, infrastructure and people undertaking emergency mobilities are entangled in space and time.

We then explore four ways in which trains became part of the complex war emergency structures: as symbols of solidarity, as life-saving instruments, as markers of privilege, and as signs of hope for reconstruction. Drawing on news reports, human rights documentation, and online archives of war testimonies (which provide us access to people's personal stories), we show how the train assemblage – understood as a set of interrelated materialities, practices and concepts (Wiertz 2021) – becomes embedded in past, present and future discourses and practices of struggle, and how everyday infrastructures are transformed in emergency situations. We attempt to deal with the ongoing armed conflict and related human suffering sensitively and rigorously, simultaneously contributing to context-sensitive knowledge production.

Approaching emergency and post-socialist mobilities viapolitically

Viapolitics and trains in the context of war-induced mobilities

The article's main theoretical inspiration is the concept of viapolitics, which Walters, Heller, and Pezzani define as the moment when border and migration research grants an important status to vehicles as a 'key site of knowledge and struggle in migratory processes' (2022, 11). This approach underscores that vehicles and routes are as important as places in studying migration and mobility.

The term viapolitics not only underlines this link but also emphasises that the assemblage of mobility, vehicles, and their infrastructural mediation can be political. The way politicians see vehicles and the people inside them can result in vehicles becoming temporary, abstract containers for political communities (Aguar 2011). Also political is the way people inside the vehicle govern themselves and make choices. As underlined by Walters (2015), vehicles can be prominently featured in the public mediation of mobility but can also become strategic sites of political action – as is the case with contemporary Ukraine's efforts to defend itself from military attack and occupation. We look at vehicles – in our case, trains – because 'they are mobile zones of governance and contestation in their own right' (Walters 2015, 477). We recognise that these vehicles operate within assemblies of 'trajectories, routes and infrastructures' (Walters, Heller, and Pezzani 2022, 15) – interdependencies of other people and things. In this sense, vehicles are not passive instruments of human mobility. They play a crucial role in shaping how people think, make choices, and struggle for safety, agency, and recognition – both individually and as part of larger political communities.

According to this approach, viapolitics can be studied by examining three elements: the vehicles utilised for migration and mobility, the routes taken, and the geographical structure of migratory paths. The latter is particularly important in the case of Ukraine where trains have kept vast areas of the state connected and have enabled rapid emergency routes to neighbouring states. This has, in turn, stimulated Ukraine's integration into pan-European transport infrastructure, which we address later.

In the Western hemisphere, vehicles have been heavily fetishised by states and other actors – often the same ones who help construct the very threats they fear—as potentially dangerous agents of mobility. Small boats crossing borders, for instance, are seen as subversive means by which migrants circumvent 'legal' pathways and limited routes. The connection between migrants, mobilities and vehicles shows a specific angle for analysing migrants' struggles, and how they gain access to large-scale networks of commercial transportation or more clandestine routes of irregular migration, by exploring new mobility practices and coping strategies (Walters 2015). Existing literature has focused on how states try to control, reduce or halt migration movements by applying technologies and border infrastructure, often transforming certain 'unwanted' mobilities into irregular migration. For instance, Ellebrecht (2020) studies the Schengen zone as an assemblage of control practices. Examining Flixbus routes across Europe, Teunissen (2020) argues

that the differential treatment of travellers at various borders leads these routes to replicate the fragmented nature of border regimes.

We apply viapolitics in the context of the emergency mobilities of individuals escaping war amid Ukraine's post-socialist, postcolonial transformation. Following the full-scale Russian attack, mobility and subsequent migration served as defensive escape routes and empowerment strategies – not just for individuals but also for state institutions, local administrations, NGOs, and other actors involved. In this sense, such mobility is not a reaction against the usual assemblages of governance and migration control typical of neoliberal European states. Rather it is a response to a military threat that itself has used forced and coerced emergency mobilities via buses, trains and commercial aircraft to deport Ukrainians and Ukrainian children. In a way, Russia's parallel or mirroring practices of emergency mobility are a troubling mirror of the most insidious distortions of emergency mobility (Khoshnood, Nathaniel, and Howarth 2023). As Pajalauskaitė (2024) underlines in her journalistic account of the role of Ukrainian railways during the war, the same tracks that served as lifelines during war were previously used to export goods to Russia.

Emergency mobilities and forced migration

The article also draws on literature concerned with emergency mobilities and emergency governance by studying how mobilities are managed at multiple scales through emergency governance contexts and conditions (Adey 2016). An emergency can be defined as an exceptional situation involving significant risk or harm that requires urgent action to prevent or minimise great loss or harm (Sorrel 2013, 1). The apparatus of emergency governance practices is indelibly viapolitical, in that mobility becomes an object of struggle, rupture and contestation (Griffin 2020; Walters, Heller, and Pezzani 2022). These practices have been normalised in many contexts wherein the power of the sovereign exception has been subdued or deferred, rather than eliminated (Adey, Anderson, and Graham 2015). The very framing of 'emergency' and 'exception' denotes questionable and simplifying distinctions between certain kinds of threat or violence (Pallister-Wilkins 2022), in which all manner of protective responses (perhaps requiring state responses to constrain or filter mobility) are legitimated. This is in contrast to the neglect of more structural, everyday, intimate, longer-term, 'slow', small, or hidden violence, and concerning peoples, conditions, and geographies that fall outside the concern or sight of many liberal political orders (Anderson et al. 2020; Davies 2022; Nixon 2011).

In the case under investigation, we may speak of more democratic forms of emergency governance (Anderson 2017; Honig 2009) made by individuals and various types of community. Mobility could be seen as a form of societal resilience and self-organisation wherein emergency mobility is claimed and co-produced through support, solidarity and altruism (Griffin 2020) – partly because of an absence of state response. Yet more coercive measures were also legitimated, introducing a stark divide between those eligible for mobility and those who are not. The main legal rudiments that framed emergency governance were Ukrainian legislation that introduced martial law and prohibited men aged 18–60 from leaving the country, alongside EU legislation that provided temporary protection and visa-free agreements which permitted temporary settlement in European states.

The article considers emergency mobility within and from Ukraine as 'experimental and improvisatory ways that societies have learnt to live and move under threat of emergency and disaster' (Adey 2016, 41). At the same time, we acknowledge the difficulties inherent in how evacuation mobilities have been conceptualised (Adey 2024). Such mobilities often fall between various forms of movement and displacement, tend to be apolitically removed from the concerns of technical expertise, and are insufficiently addressed by domestic and international law (McAdam 2020). Indeed, the in- and post-disaster spaces of emergency mobility can be highly paradoxical, complex and political (Gibb 2022).

Our research also takes a specific stance on the interconnections between mobility research and forced migration studies. We focus mainly on mobility as a political practice and an act of agency in pursuit of trade-offs between security and freedom. We argue that mobility studies and forced migration research (which some are beginning to refer to as ‘migmob’ or ‘migro-mobility’ (Presti 2020)) require stronger connections. Indeed, the governance of migration (im)mobilities has also involved using mobility itself, and not only in deportations (euphemistically described as ‘removals’ and ‘push-back’ practices), but also using a combination of circuits of forced mobility on migrants within detention, and outside of it through practices of containment via dispersal strategies (Tazzioli 2020).

In particular, we call for more critical reflection on how forced migrants access different devices that facilitate their mobility and how they experience those mobilities. This also relates to ongoing debates about the challenge of applying the category of forced migration and the blurred boundaries between forced migration and other types of migration – while considering migrants’ own perspective on what forced migration is. As Erdal and Oeppen (2018) put forward, forced and voluntary migration form a continuum of experiences, not a dichotomy. It is too reductive to assume that all Ukrainians taking trains to the EU see themselves as forced migrants. Many made longer-term moves to safer locations, but should be seen as individuals and families undertaking emergency mobility as a temporary way of coping with war-related threats and uncertainty (Jaroszewicz, Grzymiski, and Krępa 2022).

A mobility-centred approach likewise allows us also to recognise phenomena that often go unnoticed in forced migration literature, such as voluntary immobility in the context of armed conflict. It also explains why some people choose not to migrate, highlighting the role of agency, community resilience and access to resources (Olumba 2024). Finally, we also demonstrate that, as stipulated by Gill, Caletrio, and Mason (2011), social research should cease to view mobility as a luxury of the developed world, with the forced traveller existing outside it. Instead, by analysing both the case of mobility of powerful politicians travelling to Ukraine and those fleeing the armed conflict, we reveal many similarities in the experience of both the privileged and the underprivileged when undertaking train journeys in war-torn Ukraine. Thus, the specific case of war-induced mobility of Ukrainians underscores the need to study migration through the lens of mobility, understood as an assemblage of politically salient movements, social imaginaries, and personal experiences.

Postcoloniality and post-socialist mobilities

Finally, our research builds heavily on two quite different strands of research that provide us with the lens to study past and present spatial and temporal conjunctions of mobilities and infrastructure in Ukraine, namely postcolonial theory and research on post-socialist mobility. There is ongoing debate about whether postcolonial theory, which aims to challenge global knowledge production by acknowledging that colonialism is an important element of both global history and presence, is best prepared to address the roots and consequences of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. A tendency to adopt a decolonial lens, often seen as more radical and activist in orientation, can be observed (Byford, Doak, and Hutchings 2024; Shchytsova and Korablyova 2024). While recognising the value of decolonial praxis in the contemporary Ukrainian context, and following Bhabra’s (2014) argument that the two approaches share more similarities than differences, we adopt a postcolonial lens more firmly embedded in scholarship on the post-Soviet context. We use postcoloniality as an analytical term that describes a specific historical situation after colonialism, where some structures and discourses of the past remain an important element of the present day.

On the other hand, post-socialist mobility is a theoretical concept that examines how mobility politics and discourses in former socialist states – including those in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe – are intertwined with past socialist-era practices and infrastructures

(Sgibnev and Tuvikene 2024). This approach also builds on postcolonial/decolonial premises by exploring the dynamics of ‘decolonial transport conjunctures’ (Sgibnev 2022) facing the modernity/backwardness dilemma, changing social norms around public transportation, and the evolving role of the state. By using this approach, we demonstrate how the Ukrainian railway moves through multiple spatio-temporal periods and circumstances which co-construct and bestow changing and emergent meanings onto the railway and the practices that it affords.

In the past, the colonial and postcolonial discourses towards Russia and the Soviet period were contested in the literature due to suspicions over the subversive undercurrents of Soviet colonisation pursued under the slogans of justice and progress (Amelina 2022; Hrytsak 2015). In the Ukrainian and Belarusian contexts, Russian/Soviet colonisation manifested itself in the treatment of individuals as almost ‘the same’ as Russians, a Soviet assimilation through the elimination of national and regional languages, and with national identity regarded as backward (Riabczuk 2013). Moore (2001) regards the Russian/Soviet colonisation of Ukraine as a case of ‘dynastic’ colonisation where elites had the choice to adopt the Russian culture and participate in the imperial project, while the rest of the society remained subject to the arbitrary power of the totalitarian state.

With the ongoing war, the Russian colonial approach has not disappeared. Ukrainian society is once again dragged into an imperial conquest ‘underpinned by Russia’s open denial of Ukraine’s political sovereignty and the Ukrainians’ right to exist as an independent nation’ (Mälksoo 2023, 471), with the usage of old colonial tropes, practices and discourses. The Russian contemporary discourse on Ukraine has taken on almost unimaginable dimensions. With its denial of the Ukrainian language and culture, along with the simultaneous recognition of Ukrainians as ‘part of one big nation’, it has resulted in a paradoxical assemblage of ‘love’ for those who are subjugated, with the simultaneous targeting of Ukrainians as ‘extreme nationalists’ that should be exterminated as soon as they voice the desire to build their nation-state (Kotliuk 2023; Mälksoo 2023). Some traces of postcolonial thinking can also be found in the international arena, such as the prevailing surprise that Ukraine defended its territory and was unwilling to accept the unjust terms of peace imposed by Russia (Mälksoo 2023; Oksamytna 2023).

In this article, we propose to combine the postcolonial approach with the scholarship that studies the remnants of post-Soviet history and their linkages with the mobility and infrastructural practices of the present. The neat periodisation of post-Soviet modernisation are overly simplistic frames for making sense of the way ‘mobilities shatter the borders between socialism and post-socialism: change, continuity, and anti-continuity form the hybrid reality of post-socialist condition, rather than there being any form of transition from one condition to another’ (Tuvikene 2018, 2). Rather than employing grand transitional narratives, Tuvikene’s insight helps us to identify constellations, shifts, tendencies and intensities of meanings and feelings, especially around freedom, power and citizenship, which have been crucial to post-socialist mobilities.

It is therefore important to look at multiple postcolonial perspectives through which endeavours are aimed at departing from the binary oppositions of centre-periphery or that of empire-colony, and at other active efforts aimed at revising and reconceptualising the imperial past, not only in discourse but also the way in which materiality is used. We argue that mobility and emergency mobilities are an important way in which these postcolonial meanings and processes have played out. This is unsurprising, given the way mobilities and mobility infrastructures have been seen as both an expression and transformational mode or actor, and as the debris and residue of post-coloniality (Stoler 2016), sometimes characterised by ruination in post-Soviet states (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2014).

Our approach therefore forms a lattice, forging connections between perspectives on Ukrainian emergency mobilities viapolitically, taking the angle of the Ukrainian trains and the railway infrastructure as our starting point – from the vehicular ‘middle’. Drawing from postcolonial post-socialist approaches also connects time and space, where we position the meanings and

experiences of the railway at the conjunction of socialist/post-socialist and postcolonial fractures re-emerging in the context of war.

Emergency mobility as political contestation in Ukraine after February 24, 2022

The first response of Ukraine's inhabitants to the Russian full-scale aggression was one of emergency mobility. Within the first seven weeks of the war, the invasion forced 4.6 million persons to flee the country and displaced more than 7.1 million people within Ukraine (UNHCR. 2022). However, internal displacement remains significantly under-recorded (Kupets 2023). It is also unknown how many people were forcibly deported to Russia (including forced deportation of children that served as a basis for International Criminal Court arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner) or were incarcerated there or left voluntarily (Umland and Ioffe 2024). The total number of displaced persons declined somewhat after the initial shock of the invasion, as the Ukrainian state and society implemented a range of adaptation strategies. Many people returned due to their vulnerability and lack of means to live abroad (IOM. 2024; ReliefWeb 2024). Others engaged in circular forms of mobility, leaving their homes temporarily during air strikes or disruptions to the electricity supply due to the targeting of Ukraine's electricity grid (Maidanik 2024). The vast majority of people crossing Ukraine's international borders were Ukrainian citizens. However, several hundred thousand non-citizens were also present – including people from Africa, South-East Asia, Belarus, and Russia – who encountered the full array of European migration control mechanisms when attempting to cross into the EU.

Most people fleeing the war performed their mobilities by train, particularly in the first weeks and months of the invasion. On the second day of the war, Ukrainian Railways (*Ukrzaliznytsia*) made all trains free of charge and organised routes according to passengers' needs rather than timetables or algorithms (Paplauskaitė 2024). Railway infrastructure and stations were converted into shelters. An important political role was played by the numerous visits by rail to Ukraine from global political leaders. The normal, almost pedestrian mobility of rail travel symbolised to the outside world that the Ukrainian authorities were holding power, able to resist and were not alone in their fight against the aggressor. This combination of formal, informal state-organised and civil society-driven railway mobility – both for the general population and political elites – enabled the state and society to continue functioning and to sustain their struggle for safety and solidarity.

Within the first few weeks of the war, Ukrainian railways managed to evacuate around one million people, which was achieved by significantly increasing passenger capacity per carriage (from 30 to 40 people up to 200–250) (Paplauskaitė 2024). In total, the operational length of Ukraine's railway network is 21,640 kilometres (Ministry of Reconstruction of Ukraine 2024), though some of the longest routes were cut off due to Russian occupation. Therefore, it may be assumed that the longest functioning route of the passenger trains within Ukrainian territory was the 1,300-kilometre journey from Kharkiv to Uzhhorod. Due to their connections to the railways of Poland or Slovakia (requiring the gauge change), immediately after the invasion, the Ukrainian railway started to bring people to Lviv (this city serves as main transportation hub in western Ukraine) and soon also to Kyiv – such as global and European politicians who wanted to show their symbolic support with the country under aggression. Gradually, the railways started to play the role of 'railway diplomacy', supporting 'traditional' Ukrainian diplomacy (Puto 2024).

There are several reasons for this reliance on the train network. First, civil aviation ceased with the onset of war. Second, Ukraine possessed an extensive rail network, with *Ukrzaliznytsia* being the country's largest state employer. Moreover, this extensive transnational rail network built during the Soviet era remains to some extent integrated into other post-socialist transport routes and connected to neighbouring EU states. It is quite paradoxical that despite numerous

attempts to remake *Ukrzaliznytsia* according to the modern rules of privatisation within the neoliberal system, it is the fact of state ownership and non-obedience to the rules of free market competitiveness that has allowed the Ukrainian railways to function during wartime, unconcerned with profitability, standard timetables, or safety regulations. Third, in the context of continuous shelling, steel trains proved safer than cars, which were less accessible to older or poorer individuals – a common pattern of differential access to automobility (Urry and Sheller 2004). The train became a kind of mobile shelter. Finally, the success of the railway relied on the self-organisation of the company, the efforts of volunteers, and the sacrifices made by railway workers – many of whom risked their lives clearing tracks and evacuating civilians. These workers have come to be known as Ukraine's 'Second Army' or 'Iron People' (Puto 2024; Radio Free Liberty 2024).

In the following analysis, we first provide some historical context to help understand the role and symbolism of trains during the Soviet period. We then examine four viapolitical ways trains became an inextricable part of Ukrainian emergency mobilities: as symbols of solidarity in the postcolonial moment, as life-saving vehicles, as markers of privilege, and as signs of hope for post-war reconstruction.

The Ukrainian railway in historic context

Ukraine's railway can be contextualised as a mobility assemblage or a constellation of materialities, meanings, and practices (Cresswell, 2010) that have emerged from the past. The late Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and other imperial states were fascinated by trains and railways as tools and representations of development and progress. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the railway transformed the vast, dispersed Russian empire, which had no clear territorial identity, into a continuous, joint state (Arzamas.academy 2017). The Trans-Siberian Railway during the nineteenth century, the Turkestando-Siberian Railroad in early Soviet times, and later the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) in the 1970s-1980s all served as significant political and cultural icons which embodied the power of the state as a modernising force (Mote 1990; Povoroznyuk and Schweitzer 2023). The late Brezhnev era was obsessed with BAM as its grandiose 'project of the century' (as described by Leonid Brezhnev).

Maltseva (2022), in her analysis of Soviet posters, observed that since the early Soviet era, the railway has symbolised revolution, progressive development, and the path to a brighter future. Trains were also a recurring theme in Russian/Soviet literature (Aresen'ev 2021), as well as in socialist and Soviet art (Tomasik 2002). Ethnographic and anthropological research has further highlighted the role of railways in everyday Soviet life (Simonova 2007). It was not until the late Perestroika period that the Soviet railway become part of another representation as being symbolic of state repression (Aganuskienė 2012; Maltseva 2022), since trains were used as a tool by the Soviet government to deport people to Siberia, the Russian Far East and other places of exile.

Independent Ukraine maintained both the 'old' management system and the material infrastructures of the Soviet railway. Yet the neoliberal transformation of the post-Soviet period led to a gradual retreat from the railway's earlier social functions. Capitalistic transformation increased corruption and reoriented railway services to meet the vested interests of oligarchs and new economic elites (Puto 2024; Radio Free Liberty 2024). For much of Ukraine's post-independence period, railways were perceived as symbols of backwardness that retained links with the former coloniser – a means of outdated but still functioning accessible transport. It was not until the early 2000s that Ukraine began limited efforts to modernise damaged infrastructure and improve passenger accessibility. As such, the evolution of the mobility practices of the Ukrainian railway can be understood through scholarship on post-socialist mobility, through which we see the infrastructure as an entanglement of economic transformation, negotiations over the meaning of public space, modernisation and statehood development (Sgibnev and Tuvikene 2024).

Trains as symbols of solidarity in the postcolonial moment

The resilience of Ukrainian society and the adaptive capacity of its institutions in the face of external threat should be considered key factors in Ukraine's strategic advantage over Russia's military power (Lutsevych 2023; Romanova 2022). The way trains have started to be discussed and used in political practice adds another dimension to this argument, particularly at the level of symbolic power and the re-centring of Ukraine after years of a 'Russia first policy' global policy and the dominant framing of Ukraine as a weak or peripheral state (Oksamytna 2023). Furthermore, it contradicted the popular opinion that Ukraine is a country with 'low state capacities' unable to manage its vast territories (the second largest after Russia on the European continent). The Ukrainian and Western press have frequently lionised the Ukrainian railway as a key symbol of struggle and resistance. At the same time, it savoured some of the contradictions or perhaps continuities that a former Soviet era train network should operate precisely as a uniting and protecting infrastructure during post-socialist independence, and now in the face of Russian aggression: 'Ukraine's 15,000-Mile Lifeline' headed *The New York Times Magazine* (Topol 2022), while *Foreign Policy* suggests that 'Railroads occupy an iconic space in Ukraine's culture and imagination' (Chin 2023), and the *Guardian's* photo-essay portrayed railway workers as an 'Iron People' (Harding 2023).

Trains carried EU leaders, presidents and prime ministers of neighbouring states. Images of politicians conferring in armoured train carriages evoked historical memories of the First and Second World Wars. Yet, they also broke through to the collective memory as symbols of control, stability and solidarity in a war-torn country. When US President Joe Biden ('Amtrak Joe' was already a train lover) was visiting Kyiv in February 2023, he boarded a train for the 10-hour round trip from Przemyśl in Poland (Guardian 2023a). During the visit, the head of the *Ukrzaliznytsia* board wrote on his social media account: 'We safely delivered the president of the United States, Joseph Biden, to Kyiv and back. Where the Air Force does not fly, Ukrzaliznytsia supports. Rail Force One – for the leaders that dare to fight against evil, personally' (quoted in Paplauskaite 2024, 192).

Although these words may sound like empty rhetoric, they reflect the pride associated with managing a complex and high-risk diplomatic mission during wartime – and the resilience of Ukrainian public institutions. Through stories like this, the railway materialises the production of Ukrainian agency in both the domestic and international arena, throwing off the colonial yoke of peripherality and insignificance in a global fight for freedom (Kurnyshova 2023). In this sense, the Ukrainian railways began serving as visual signals of Ukrainian strategic alliance building, for it was through railway mobilities that the country's allies sought to secure support militarily, logistically, and even through migration pathways, which the railways would also facilitate. Therefore, in the Ukrainian railway, multiple modes of mobility could be performed.

As an assemblage of political recognition, connectivity and solidarity, and symbolic in their overall security provision to the population, trains can be seen as an important element of a new Ukraine fighting its postcolonial legacy. Pictures, graphic symbols and other forms of digital influence catalyse horizontal and bottom-up war-related mobilisation in the 'participatory' war (where de-centralised societal resistance remains in an inseparable relationship with military power) Ukraine is waging (Asmolov 2022). The train journeys undertaken by political leaders, humanitarian workers and other international actors symbolised solidarity with the Ukrainian people, in contrast to the criticism of fly-in, fly-out aero-mobilities that have constituted sometimes overly-secured, privileged and cocooned performances of international aid in humanitarian emergencies (Smirl 2015). And yet, these railway practices raise the question of uneven access to long-term safety and the geometries of power that have structured other kinds of access to military mobilities. For instance, since the beginning of the war, Ukrainian authorities repeatedly asked Western countries to provide meaningful air defence support, launching campaigns such as 'Close the Skies' and 'Give us Wings for Freedom' to call for fighter jets or long-range missiles

capable of hitting targets in Russian territory (Al Jazeera 2022; BBC. 2023). So far, these appeals have produced limited results (Applebaum and Goldberg 2023; Guardian 2023b) as the US provided Atacms has been only permitted to strike Russian territory since November 2024. The future delivery of long-range missiles, however, remains uncertain, taking into consideration the rather negative stance of President Trump on further military support to Ukraine.

Apart from politicians popularising the Ukrainian trains, artists were equally active. In September 2022, *Ukrzaliznytsia* asked artists to create the 'Train to Victory' – a set of seven painted carriages, each designed by a different contemporary artist to represent an occupied region of Ukraine (Brown 2023)². These colourful carriages arrived shortly after the Ukrainian Army had restored internet, water, and food access to liberated areas (Puto 2024; Reuters 2022). This project won a European Excellence Award in the Transport and Logistics category (Railway Supply 2023).

The Ukrainian Railway also aptly combines artistic performance with social functions. For instance, train stations established 'steadfastness points' where people from destroyed cities could charge phones, warm themselves, and access clean water. With the support of donors, *Ukrzaliznytsia* also created special 'Food Trains', wagons fitted with professional kitchens that travelled to frontline areas (Suspilne 2023; *Ukrainska pravda* 2023). *Ukrzaliznytsia* was even reported to have used some of its railway carriages as a temporary shelter for 25 families whose homes were destroyed in Irpin – a so-called 'Iron Town' (weareUkraine 2022). Pets were also allowed to travel – especially since companion animals have been recognised as important agents in shaping and sometimes deterring personal and familial emergency mobility should pets be barred from the spaces and infrastructure of evacuation mobility (Baum 2016).

Finally, the courage and sacrifice of railway workers should not be overlooked. During the Soviet era, the professional status of railway employees resembled that of a para-military, imitating to a certain extent the internal structure and rules of security forces. While this is no longer the case, *Ukrzaliznytsia* did reinstate paramilitary units after the 2022 invasion. In the first weeks of war, railway workers showed extraordinary bravery, travelling into the most dangerous areas, clearing debris from the tracks, and saving civilians under shelling. As of March 2024, 606 railway workers had been killed (Paplauskaitė 2024), 30 of them while on duty (PBS. 2024). These acts of personal courage contrast sharply with their working conditions: unlimited hours (due to changes in the labour code after the invasion) and low salaries.

Trains as life-saving

Since the beginning of full-scale war until mid-2024, Ukrainian railways have transported 4.2 million people (*Ukrzaliznytsia* 2024). The first days after the Russian invasion were rather chaotic, with no state-organised transport for civilians. Despite public warnings from US and NATO officials in the days preceding the invasion, the Ukrainian authorities chose not to call for mass evacuation. It is difficult to assess whether this was the right decision, given the potential interference with military operations, human rights concerns, or the state of civil protection preparedness. Moreover, it was unclear how Russian forces would treat civilians. Yet the first days of war brought clear evidence of the bombing of civilian areas and the killing of non-combatants in temporarily occupied territories such as Bucha or Borodianka near the capital, or Mariupol on the Sea of Azov, which was wiped off the map by the invasion forces (Azarov et al. 2023). In such circumstances, trains became vital life-saving tools.

Inspired by Walters' conceptualisation of the viapolitical role of vehicles (2015, 474), we argue that Ukrainian trains have been transformed into 'mobile zones of governance and contestation in their own right', where people have quickly learnt how to leave dangerous territories, manage individual risk, and adapt to shifting security and political contexts. The train has become a symbolic life-container and life-saver, a reservoir of collective memory and imagination, and a symbol of salvation in the face of catastrophe (see other historical contexts in Höhler 2015).

Stories of people embarking on life-saving journeys by train – collected by Paplauskaite (2024) and public archives that have gathered testimonies of the war (such as the Museum of Civilian Voices of the Rinat Akhmetov Foundation (2024) and the Ukraine War Archive (2024) – indicate that on the first day of the full scale-invasion people began gathering at train stations, especially in major cities like Kyiv. Queues of people leaving the city in passenger cars clogged exit roads. Travellers often could not choose their preferred route, boarding any train going in a possible direction. Trains travelled slowly due to the risk of attacks on railway infrastructure, and operated in complete blackout. Carriages of varying quality, including diesel locomotives, were mobilised (Paplauskaite 2024). The security situation in most locations was very tense since, apart from regular shelling, sabotage groups appeared in the streets. Several attacks on train stations occurred during the course of the war – including one in Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine, in April 2022, where a Russian air strike killed 63 civilians while up to 4,000 people were waiting for evacuation trains (Radio Free Liberty 2022). In some cases, boarding a train marked the final stage of a long and dangerous journey, such as for those who managed to evacuate themselves through security corridors and filtration points in besieged Mariupol (Gillah 2023).

Life-saving journeys and social practices on trains have changed over time. On the one hand, they became more organised, less crowded and chaotic; on the other, they remained deeply dramatic (Paplauskaite 2024). Yet, if people travelling soon after the invasion were fleeing from uncertainty and the anticipation of catastrophe, the trains evacuating people from areas close to the frontlines carried the baggage of violence, occupation and prolonged suffering. Whether in February 2022 or in the second and third years of the war, train journeys often resulted in the separation of families along gender lines, as men were usually unable to join their wives, children and parents. Death and severe injury to loved ones have also become part and parcel of travellers' lives. Life-saving, as a form of resistance to the reality of the attacks, has embraced animals. The rescue and evacuation of pets – some even from Ukrainian zoos to Poland, Greece and the UK by organisations like IFAW – has been an important part of the humanitarian narrative and an example of how evacuation mobilities can apply to multi-species life (Sandvik 2023).

Trains have also played a critical role in medical transport. A key component of evacuation efforts was the launch, with the assistance of international humanitarian organisations, of medical trains capable of carrying seriously ill or injured people. Walravens et al. (2023) describe how Médecins Sans Frontières, the Ukrainian Railway Company, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Health collaborated to retrofit two trains into rail ambulances, evacuating nearly 2,500 civilian patients from frontline regions.

Trains as privilege

The story of viapolitical Ukraine under aggression is also a story of immobility and difficult decisions by part of the population to remain in their homes under missile and artillery fire, either by choice or due to their inability to access railway infrastructure. Despite being free of charge and serving many localities, the trains carrying people to safer places were not equally accessible to everybody in Ukraine. Two groups seem particularly vulnerable: older people and foreign nationals. A further under-explored issue is the travel experience along arduous and dangerous routes undertaken by people trying leave Russian-occupied territories or 'grey' zones, e.g. areas located on the front line, where mobility entails crossing various recognised and unrecognised borders, checkpoints and filtration camps (Gillah 2023).

Ukraine is a country with a rapidly ageing population. As earlier studies on the areas affected by the 2014 Russian military aggression suggest, older people suffered most in terms of lack of access to healthcare and irregular access to food and mobility (Mikheeva and Kuznetsova 2023; Summers et al. 2019). A recent report on the needs of older people experiencing the current full-scale war indicates that many, particularly older women, felt excluded from the

humanitarian response and experienced involuntary immobility (HelpAge 2023). People over 60 accounted for as much as 32 percent of civilians killed from 24 February 2022 to 28 February 2023 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2023). Older people often stayed at home during the first stage of the war. It was only in 2023, when the Ukrainian government initiated organised evacuations from frontline localities – including the provision of temporary accommodation – that older people began to receive more equal opportunities for mobility. However, since no long-term solutions have generally been offered to these individuals in terms of housing, social support or obtaining residence permits in new localities (also under the EU temporary protection scheme), many have returned to their former places of residence, even if doing so puts them at risk. Particularly concerning are recent legal developments in some EU member states, where Ukrainian refugees are offered financial benefits to return. There is a risk that older, more vulnerable people who are not fit for work may take up this offer, further exacerbating the hardships faced by elderly Ukrainians as a result of the war (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2023).

Many studies have also addressed the issue of uneven access of foreign nationals living in Ukraine to evacuation routes into the EU. Over 100,000 non-Ukrainian nationals crossed into Poland from Ukraine in 2022 (Babakova et al. 2022), and the majority of those of Belarusian, Russian, Central Asian and African origin have undergone both detailed border checks and cumbersome legalisation procedures. Several press reports and statements from human rights organisations have highlighted the unequal treatment of African citizens seeking refuge in neighbouring countries (Human Rights Watch 2022). Kingston and Ekakitie (2024) that unequal access to mobility of African students in Ukraine during the Russian aggression stemmed from a lack of access to reliable information about safe evacuation routes, as well as an inability to cope with the situation and (mixed) feelings of racial discrimination.

Unequal legal standards under the EU's temporary protection framework for Ukrainian citizens and foreign residents further reinforced these disparities. The positive reception of Ukrainians does not represent a change in EU refugee policy, which continues to rest on the foundations of border deterrence in the Mediterranean and other external frontiers (Düvell and Lapshyna 2022). The warm reception shown to Ukrainians may instead reflect European concerns about its own security, rather than empathy with an invaded state (Follis 2023; Klose 2022). Finally, one could also look for possible explanations in the continuation of COVID-19-related migration policies, which reinforced the trend of framing migrants from Eastern Europe as a labour force (Jaroszewicz, Krępa, and Pachocka 2024), even if they are forced migrants.

Trains as hope for reconstruction

As underlined by Walters, Heller, and Pezzani (2022), studying mobilities from a viapolitic perspective can be misleading if it does not consider their operation within wider networks of infrastructure, materialities and people. By their nature, trains are highly dependent on the railway infrastructure, much of it constructed many years ago and is difficult to reconfigure. As one of the most fixed and obdurate means of transport, the railway also carries strong geo-strategic significance, acting as a clear sign of a country's foreign policy aspirations alongside the popular imagination. In the case of Ukraine (and historically in many other post-socialist states), railway infrastructure materialises under the slogan of a 'return to Europe' and integration with the EU.

At present, the public discourse in Ukraine is favourable towards the railway company, its workers, and the broader social infrastructure accompanying the railway mobilities (volunteers, humanitarian workers, state social agencies) involved in evacuation and regular travel. This discourse points to the 'Europeanness' of railway management and Ukraine's struggle for modernisation. Indeed, the current positive portrayal of the railway in wartime is at odds with the earlier reporting, which often characterised Ukraine's railway company as financially unviable,

post-socialist in its inefficiency, and outdated in its management practices. However, it remains unclear whether this form of post-socialist emergency management is sustainable in the long term, especially once the war ends and the Ukrainian railway system would likely return to functioning on principles of economic profitability and routine working conditions that do not rely on the heroic efforts of its employees.

Moreover, on the material and infrastructural level, Ukraine faces several challenges that complicate its EU-type modernisation in the long-term. Ukraine has inherited a broad-gauge rail system from the Soviet Union, while most Western European countries use the standard 1435 mm gauge. It also faces significant deterioration of rail infrastructure, both as a legacy of previous neglect and as a result of war-related damage. The gauge difference requires either changing trains at the border or the use of automatic gauge-change technology. Currently, two interchange stations in Poland possess both gauge types, and some 1520 mm broad-gauge tracks in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, yet these are reaching their operational capacity (European Commission 2023). In May 2022, the European Commission proposed expanding the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to include Ukraine and Moldova, publishing a formal report in July 2023. This move was part of the EU's 'solidarity lanes' initiative, intended to ensure logistics pathways for the import and export of fuel and food to and from Ukraine. The report outlines a post-conflict infrastructural development project to integrate Ukrainian railway networks and standardise its railway lines with the EU's. In April 2024, the construction of a new standard gauge track to connect Uzhhorod with Europe from the border city of Chop to Uzhhorod was described as a 'European style railway' (Railway Gazette International 2024). These developments reflect a postcolonial shift toward reorienting Ukraine's mobility infrastructure in the direction of political and economic integration with global supply chains, post-war reconstruction, and a form of pan-European security driven by fears that a possible Ukrainian defeat would embolden further Russian expansionism.

At the same time, the movement towards EU integration also entails increasing liberalisation: Ukraine's national railway monopoly may be required to break up in order to comply with EU de-monopolisation standards and competitive market rules (Edwards and Berdyskykh 2024). Against this backdrop, thousands of rail freight carriages – designed specifically for broad-gauge tracks – have become geopolitical objects in their own right. Between 10,000 and 20,000 Russian and Belarusian freight wagons have been confiscated by Ukraine, while others remain stranded in former socialist Central European states, clogging up space on tracks, in stations and in goods yards. The EU's infrastructural plans for Ukrainian railway integration point towards the futural conjunctures of the Ukrainian train within a post-war and increasingly EU and NATO-aligned future, even with the literal material misalignment of the broad-gauge material infrastructural remains that require track narrowing to align with European rolling stock.

Conclusion

What we have seen hints at some of the possible afterlives of trains and railway infrastructure in the aftermath of the current Russian war against Ukraine which we have analysed through a viapolitical perspective on post-socialist, post-Soviet mobilities. We examined responses to renewed Russian colonialism within an infrastructural conjuncture of resurfacing and contested meanings of railway mobilities. Taking a viapolitical perspective has meant focusing on the current emergency mobility deriving from military aggression 'from the angle of' the train. We have demonstrated how the Ukrainian railway, its trains, and their movement both within and beyond national borders, as well as the people who travel on and maintain them, form a complex assemblage, one which is generative of highly potent discourses, meanings and narratives surrounding the railway within the past, present and future of Ukraine. We have traced explicit forms of emergency mobility in which everyday infrastructures and vehicles are radically repurposed and reformed in the train's emergency mobilities of passenger transport and return, its

facilitation of high-level political visits, and as a means of temporary shelter, all mobilised in response to the war.

The article advances the literature on emergency mobility and viapolitics through its contextualisation within the postcolonial post-socialist context of contemporary Ukraine under external aggression. The frame of emergency mobilities and viapolitics has required further specificity, contextualisation and conceptual precision to account for the complex post-socialist setting of Ukraine. We make a conceptual and empirical advancement by seeing the train in its emergency mode, as performing a kind of ‘conjuncture’ (Sgibnev 2022) linking not only spaces within and beyond Ukraine, especially to bordering former Soviet and post-socialist European countries and Russia itself, but also to a more complicated spatio-temporal political context of post-socialist infrastructural materialities (others might use debris) that extend from the past (Cresswell 2010) – even through to European-orientated futures. In this article, we have drawn together a postcolonial, post-socialist viapolitical mobilities framework, where the train and railway infrastructure – once an instrument of Soviet imperial integration – is reworked in multiple ways: as a symbol of national security and resilience, as a site of collective and individual resistance and solidarity, and as a means of defence and escape from conflict and aggression by repurposing an ordinary mobility infrastructure during an emergency.

The article also deepens the understanding and application of viapolitics, by drawing together mobility scholarship and forced migration research. By looking at the trains and railway infrastructure as a symbol of political solidarity, life-saving vehicles, markers of privilege and a beacon of hope for reconstruction, we expand the current scope of viapolitics, which had become more deeply embedded in the context of the sharpening and expansion of anti-migration policies in Western Europe and North America. We demonstrate that vehicles, emergency mobility and their political mediation may serve as discursive signifiers and life containers for the individuals, politicians, state institutions, railway employers and civil society actors all striving for agency.

Finally, this article demonstrates that the ruptures and controversies observed within these collective efforts of emergency governance stem from the constant military shelling, missile and drone attacks of the external aggressor – an aggressor with which Ukraine shares a complex colonial and socialist past and which projects towards Ukraine its future geostrategic aspirations. Within this assemblage of discourses, practices and materialities, individuals look for personal safety through their communities, to survive and transform in this crucial postcolonial moment in the country’s history. By presenting an extended empirical study of emergency mobility and viapolitics in war-torn Ukraine, we also aim to contribute to context-sensitive knowledge production about Eastern Europe – one that centres the mobile perspectives of those who suffer, resist and improvise in the face of war-related atrocities.

Notes

1. By train we mean a set of vehicles running over tracks while by railway infrastructure all the structures, buildings, land, and equipment to support the rail lines. Sometimes we also use the term railway, seeing it as a wider term for specific means of transport mainly used in a broader political or historical context.
2. See <https://train.foreverukraine.org.ua/en/>.

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