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## JOURNEY ALONG THE UKRAINIAN EASTERN FRONTIER IN THE NOVELS “ANARCHY IN THE UKR” AND “VOROSHYLOVHRAD” BY SERHII ZHADAN

**Summary.** The article is devoted to the study of the eastern frontier of Ukraine through the prism of the journey of the characters of the novels “Anarchy in the Ukr” and “Voroshyllovhrad” by the contemporary Ukrainian writer Serhii Zhadan. The article updates the most frequently used topoi of the writer’s novels, in particular, the topos of Sloboda Ukraine, represented by Kharkiv, Starobilsk, northern districts of Luhansk region, as well as the topos of Donbas (the area of the Donbas coal basin located in the southern districts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine). The novels provide a topographical description of the localities, highlighting the key locus for the analysed novels, in particular the locus of the railway station as a symbol of transit, travel, and unstoppable movement. The eastern frontier of Ukraine is presented in the analysed novels as a place of intersection of different ethnic groups, languages, cultures, primarily Ukrainian and Russian. The territories that historically belonged to Sloboda Ukraine are represented as patriarchal, closed to significant external influences, rooted in ancient traditions and customs. The Donbas is presented as a multinational, multicultural place, more open to external influences and tolerant of the Other. Both topos – Slobozhanshchyna and Donbas – are shown in the period of their decline, a gradual change in the consciousness of local residents due to numerous economic and social problems of the regions during the 1990s and early 2000s. The novels “Anarchy in the Ukr” and “Voroshyllovhrad” depict typical representatives of the local population of the younger generation of that time – desperate, decorated, but active and effective. The heroes of the analysed novels choose to live in Kharkiv, a large city, the centre of Sloboda Ukraine, a significant industrial, intellectual, educational, and economic centre of Eastern Ukraine. They are constantly on the move, travelling a lot on business to different districts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine, which represent the eastern frontier of Ukraine, and thus have the opportunity to analyse the life of this region, of which they are representatives.

**Key words:** contemporary Ukrainian literature, the Ukrainian eastern frontier, Serhii Zhadan, autobiographical narrative, preservation of memory, transformation of consciousness.

**Problem statement.** Donbas and Slobozhanshchyna have long been the eastern frontier of Ukraine, a kind of ethno-cultural borderland, a place where different cultures and peoples, primarily Ukrainian and Russian, clashed. The eastern frontier of Ukraine, the Wild Field, has historically been a place of collision between different languages, cultures, and civilisations (more about this can be found in the research of Dmytro Bahalii [1], Yaroslava Virmenych [2], Illia Kononov [3], and others). Since the spring of 2014, it has acquired new features and characteristics, vividly represented in

the work of contemporary Ukrainian writer, translator, musician, public figure and philanthropist Serhii Zhadan.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** The ethno- and linguistic-cultural borderland of eastern Ukraine has already been the subject of theoretical research by Borys Cherkas and Dmytro Vashchuk [4], Ihor Chornovil [5], and others, who in their studies studied the borderland factor through the picture of political, social, legal, linguistic relations, and the variegated value orientations that have shaped the identity of the population of Ukraine’s eastern border for centuries. Zhadan’s texts, whose characters acted on the eastern frontier of Ukraine, have already been the subject of in-depth research by Tamara Hundorova [6], Halyna Vypasniak [7], Yurii Barabash [8-9], and others, but the topic we have mentioned has not yet been actualised.

**The objective of the article.** The objects of our analysis in this article are the novels “Anarchy in the Ukr” [10] and “Voroshyllovhrad” [11], whose characters act and reflect within the eastern border of Ukraine. The aim of the article is to analyse the representation of the eastern frontier of Ukraine through the prism of the travel discourse of the analysed novels by Zhadan.

**Discussions.** Born in 1974 in Starobilsk, a small town in the north-east of the Luhansk region, Zhadan moved to Kharkiv in the early 1990s, where he still lives today. Already with the publication of his first novel, “Depeche Mode” [12], Zhadan declared himself as the voice of his generation, a transitional generation born in the Soviet Union and witnessing the creation of a new Ukrainian statehood in its formative years. The characters of his novels are mostly marginalised, young people who are not tied to their homes, parents, families, they are cynical and pragmatic people without roots, who are in constant motion, searching for themselves and their place in this world, people with a migrant psychology. They do not have permanent homes, they live in rented apartments for several people, because it is easier to pay for it together. They do not have permanent jobs, accept any, sometimes questionable, job offers, and they are not afraid to take risks and try something new that they have never tried before. They are constantly migrating, but all these geographical movements take place exclusively within the eastern frontier of Ukraine – they mostly leave Kharkiv and move further east, to Luhansk or Donetsk regions of Ukraine. Some of the novels contain a clearly revealed autobiographical narrative that can be easily read through easily recognisable and easily verifiable autobiographical features, primarily related to the author’s geobiography – birth and spending the first years of his life in Starobilsk, moving to Kharkiv, frequent trips from Kharkiv to his home and on business in eastern Ukraine, volunteer activities that involved fre-

quent trips to the contact line and the so-called 'grey zone' within the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. These trips always take place in the places of the author's memory, and each geographical space described is always connected to the writer's biography.

The choice of these eastern frontline territories of Ukraine as the main setting for his novels was not accidental; these were the writer's native places, which he knew very well, he knew the peculiarities of life and mentality of the local inhabitants, all the problems that existed in this region, thanks to which the novels invariably received a high degree of realism and authenticity in the depiction of images, events, and emotions. Thus, Zhadan's novels reveal the real life of the eastern frontier of Ukraine from the 1980s to the present day, the life of the territory where languages, cultures, and civilisations have long clashed. The Luhansk, Donetsk and Kharkiv regions of Ukraine have historically been two worlds apart, with different languages, mentalities, natural, economic and cultural landscapes. The southern districts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are straddled by the Donetsk coal basin, which has had a significant impact on the development and life of this region, known as Donbas (Donetsk Basin). Numerous coal mines, factories and other large industrial enterprises attracted large numbers of people to work in the region, not only from all over Ukraine but also from other republics of the Soviet Union. The vast majority of the Donbas population lived in cities, and the main language of communication for the multinational and multi-religious residents was Russian, the main language of the Soviet Union. At the same time, sociologists (see, for example, [3; 13]) have recorded in their studies that the level of interethnic tolerance in Donbas was higher than the national average. The overwhelming majority of the Donbas population was ethnically diverse and easily moved around. In 1994, following a resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the process of deindustrialisation of the region began, with the massive closure of unprofitable enterprises, primarily coal mines, and a large number of people simultaneously losing their jobs and livelihoods. This leads to an aggravation of social problems. Due to mass unemployment and a sharp decline in living standards, the role of criminals is increasing, and semi-legal or illegal activities, combined with racketeering, corruption, kickbacks, and criminal showdowns, have become the norms of economic life in the region (Politychni aspekty kryzy na Donbasi [13, p. 9], – noted the authors of the analytical report "Political Aspects of the Crisis in Donbas: Diagnosis of the Situation and Directions for Regulation". Instead, the northern districts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts belong to Slobozhanshchyna, a historical region that covers the north of modern Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine, as well as the southern districts of Voronezh, Belgorod and Kursk regions of Russia. Unlike the industrial, multinational and multi-religious Donbas, the Slobozhansky districts of Luhansk region are agricultural, with a small urban population, Ukrainian as the language of everyday communication, a patriarchal lifestyle, and a low level of migration. Local residents are rooted in tradition, with great importance attached to home and family. It is in this region that the writer was born and raised, and it is here that the characters of "Anarchy in the Ukr".

#### **A journey along the eastern frontier of Ukraine as a place of memory**

The novel "Anarchy in the Ukr" was written and published in 2005. The plot centres on the protagonist's journey from Kharkiv to the eastern frontier of Ukraine, to places associated with the activi-

ties of the participants in the Ukrainian Civil War of the early twentieth century. "My intentions were simple and clear – to travel to the places where Ukrainian anarcho-communists were most active and then try to write something about it" [10, p. 11]. Starobilsk, the protagonist's hometown (and at the same time the writer's hometown), is known for the fact that Nestor Makhno, one of the main anarchists of the Ukrainian Civil War, stayed here, and Volodymyr Sosiura who spent some time with Petliura's troops, so this city becomes the first destination. The vehicle chosen for the trip was the Sumy-Luhansk train, which ran through Svatovo, the nearest railway station to Starobilsk. The choice of this legendary train (for those who travelled from Slobozhanshchyna to Donbas) was not accidental, as at all times (both Soviet and post-Soviet) it was not easy to get to the northern regions of Luhansk region. The option chosen by the hero – to get to the right place by this train – also had its own nuances, as the short distance between the two regional centres took a very long time due to the complicated route and the large number of stops. Thus, from the very first lines of the novel, the characters set out on a long and tiring journey, one they know well, as they have been travelling this route for years to visit their childhood family and friends from time to time. This journey along the eastern frontline becomes a journey through 'places of memory', a journey into the past that will never return, a journey into a life that the protagonist does not want to return to: "I will try to return to the city where I grew up and which I have been trying not to visit lately, I will try to get to my friends who are waiting for me somewhere; that I do not intend to rediscover anything at all, <...> to make sure once again that nothing has changed, everything is as it was before, as it has always been, as it should be; that nothing could change unless you change yourself. And that it is really worth making sure of this [10, p. 14].

The economic, social, and demographic problems that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union have not spared the region. Due to the closure of former Soviet agricultural enterprises, many people lost their livelihoods and were forced to go abroad in search of work, leaving elderly parents and minor children behind. However, unlike the Donbas districts of Luhansk region, the Slobozhanshchyna districts, which have always maintained a patriarchal way of life and local traditions, were more closed to 'outsiders' – people from other regions, and the remaining locals managed to gradually improve their lives. However, the characters of "Anarchy in the Ukr", young men who did not want to live in this traditionalist, quiet, unhurried world, a world where time seems to have stopped, left their parents' homes young to get an education in a large, bustling city nearby, hoping to build a new life, a life full of energy, adventure, money. They are typical representatives of their generation, which came of age in the 1990s, with all its complexities and uncertainties. They are already largely cut off from their roots, from the land, from home. That is why every return to their homeland, no matter how short-term, is perceived as a journey in a 'time machine' to a place where they do not want to return, but they have to do it because there is still something they cannot leave behind – their parents, their relatives, and each time they convince themselves of the necessity of such journeys: "Sometimes you just have to listen to your own quirks, to your inner voices, at least to the cutest ones, sometimes you need to take their advice, for example, when they whisper to you – go ahead, go there, you lived there once, you grew up there, Well, maybe not exactly there, but what does it matter, try to get out of those hollows again, see if you have

the spirit, if you have the memory to reconstruct all those routes that have been superimposed in a strange and incredible way on your personal experience of the confrontation; sometimes it is worth letting all your demons out for a walk" [10, p. 14].

So even now, after visiting the local museum, talking to a local historian who lazily retold them the well-known legend about Nestor Makhno's stay in the city, without telling them anything they didn't already know, they leave Starobilsk without the slightest regret or reflection and take the train further to Donbas. The further they travel, the more striking the topographical changes become: instead of idyllic villages cut off from civilisation, streets full of apricots and other flowering trees, elevators, farmland and machinery, the characters see mines, spoil heaps, and typical Donbas landscapes: "We are standing under the mine again, with space landscapes and the back of the moon outside the windows, and everywhere since the morning we started driving into this real Donbas, we have been surrounded by mountains of iron, piles of rubble and heaps of greenery, too much expression in the landscape" [10, p. 59]. A leisurely journey leads the protagonist to numerous reflections on the meaning of life, on the memories of childhood and youth in the 1980s, time seems to stop for the hero, because he sees the same monuments, bas-reliefs, signs, people, and places familiar from childhood. Returning from a trip to Kharkiv, the protagonist seems to find himself in a parallel reality, he finds himself again in a large, noisy, dynamic city that lives its own life, which creates a new reality every day, without leaving the achievements of the past: "Anyone who will build universal communist megacities in the future should come to our city and see how it is done in principle. The city of domestic futurism and communist self-organisation, <... > the first and only canonical capital of the Celestial Ukraine, with a population of two million shop workers and university students, the most developed sectors of the national economy – mechanical engineering, rocket and defence industries, the most notable cultural monuments – moats and defensive walls surrounding the central part of the city, communist towers and ramming machines from which the poets of this city proclaimed the universals according to which our happy civilisation still functions" [10, p. 227–228]. And it was this city, the centre of Slobozhanshchyna, that the protagonist of the novel chose to live in fifteen years ago, leaving his native Starobilsk for a better future. A city that has historically organically united people of different nationalities, faiths, mentalities, and cultures. A city where everyone who came here found something of their own. A city of transit traffic, a centre of migration. A city where the main loci for the protagonist are the Derzhprom (State Industrial Complex), the University (here we are talking about V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University), the metro, the railway station.

Stations have a special place in the novel "Anarchy in the Ukr". For the protagonist of the novel, the station is a business card of the city, a locus that characterises the area better than any guidebook: "Everything interesting in the country happens at railway stations, and the smaller the station, the more interesting it is" [10, p. 45]. Quiet, poorly lit, cold and unwelcoming, even in summer, Svatovo station is a station where the hero does not want to come, because it is the starting point of the road to the past, to which he does not want to return: "There is nothing to do here even during the day. There is nothing to do here at night" [10, p. 45]. A large, noisy, round-the-clock railway station in Kharkiv, actively functioning like the city itself, a place of hope, fun adventures, long

journeys, a place from which the protagonist sets off on a journey and where he returns with satisfaction: "Smiling faces of tourists, stern shakes of men's hands, joyful women's voices, backpacks and sleeping bags, finally everyone gathers, they make friendly fun of the latecomers, the company throws their backpacks on their shoulders, and after passing through the hall, they reach the first platform, find their seats, the train moves respectfully, leaving the exciting smell of travel, danger and courage on the platform" [10, p. 295–296].

#### **Travelling along the eastern frontier of Ukraine as a place that remains between the past and the future**

The characters in "Voroshylivhrad" also embark on a journey along the north-eastern frontier of Ukraine, leaving Kharkiv in an old Volkswagen and heading towards Starobilsk, the writer's native area. The title of the novel is both toponymic and symbolic. Voroshylivhrad was the name of the city of Luhansk (the administrative centre of the Luhansk region) in 1935–1955 and 1970–1990, the years when the city was part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). The city was twice named after the Soviet military and political leader Kliment Yefremovych Voroshyliv (1881–1969), who was born, raised, and began his career in the mines and factories of the Luhansk region. The events of "Voroshylivhrad" take place in the 1990s, at a time when the city had already been restored to its historical name of Luhansk. The topos of the novel was mythologised to a certain extent, without being explicitly stated. Despite the use of the former (Soviet) name of the city in the title, the city itself was represented in the novel only conditionally. It was mentioned twice through the episodes of recalling postcards with its landscapes and sights, postcards that the then-young protagonist and his classmates described in German lessons at school, and based on these pictures, he had to create an imaginary story, to develop his own myth about the city. The topos of the city is uncertain, associated with the transition from a totalitarian society to a society with a market economy that is just beginning to take shape. This transitional state between the past and the future, which is barely beginning to emerge, permeates the novel at all levels, from the title to the plot and characterisation of the characters. As Halyna Vypasniak, a researcher of Zhadan's work, rightly noted: "Voroshylivhrad is a symbolic embodiment of something that no longer exists, but which continues to live on in the memories of the people associated with it, and continues to define their identity. It is a symbol of an era that seemed to have faded into oblivion, because even the city that bore this name for many years existed under a different name. <...> The renaming did not affect the essence of its inhabitants, who continued to mentally remain in Voroshylivhrad" [7, p. 97].

The protagonist of the novel, Herman (Hera), is a thirty-three-year-old, unremarkable man who likes to live his life, avoids social responsibility, and does not have a permanent stable job or a steady income: "I am 33 years old. I lived happily alone for a long time, rarely saw my parents, and maintained normal relations with my brother. I had an education that no one needed. I worked as an unknown person. I had enough money for exactly what I was used to. It was too late to develop new habits. I was happy with everything. I didn't use what didn't suit me. A week ago, my brother disappeared. He disappeared without even warning me" [11, p. 9–10]. Due to the sudden disappearance of his elder brother, who allegedly went either to Berlin or Amsterdam and stopped contacting him, Hera was forced to take over his brother's unprofitable



petrol station, with the help of his loyal friends and friends of his missing brother. Hera left her more or less well-established life in Kharkiv and moved to a remote province, one of the north-eastern districts of Luhansk region, to an area close to the Ukrainian-Russian border: “The petrol station was located about a hundred metres from the road heading north. Down below, two kilometres away, in a warm valley, was a town through which the road actually passed. To the south of the last city quarters, beyond the territory of the factories, the fields began, ending on the other side of the valley, and to the north the city was surrounded by a river flowing from Russian territory towards Donbas. Its left bank was gentle, while along the right bank stretched high chalk mountains, the tops of which were covered with wormwood and thorns” [11, p. 72]. To keep his business going, Hera engages in illegal transactions, constantly takes risks, and gets involved in dubious stories. It annoys him, he doesn't like it, but he moves forward, leaving behind everything that hinders him in the past, just as he left behind his profession, his former life, his former environment, because he understands that there is no turning back: “Those were strange days – I found myself among people I had known for a long time and people I didn't know at all, who were watching me warily, demanding something from me, waiting for some action on my part. It was frankly stressful for me. I am used to being responsible for myself and my actions. But this was a slightly different case, a different responsibility. I was living my life, solving my own problems. And then suddenly I found myself in the middle of this crowd, feeling that they wouldn't let me go so easily, that I would have to sort things out. They seemed to be counting on me here” [11, p. 72–73].

He was surrounded by people like himself, people whose lives were divided into life before and life after – a historian in the Soviet era is now an airfield guard, a drug addict is now a presbyter. Dreams and unfulfilled desires destroyed by the cruel reality: “We all wanted to become pilots. Most of us became losers” [11, p. 21]. Professions and main occupations changed, names changed to nicknames, perceptions of the world changed, life priorities, friends, acquaintances changed. The main thing is to survive, to hold on, to find oneself in a new life – uncertain, dangerous, with its own strict rules of the game. The vast majority of them are typical representatives of small businessmen of that time (in the novel, the writer calls them ‘experts’), with a typical set of external attributes: “Black Volkswagen, bought from partners, suits from the stock, boots from last year's collection, watches from the sale, lighters given by colleagues for the holidays, sunglasses bought in supermarkets: reliable, inexpensive things, not too used, not too bright, nothing extra, nothing special” [11, p. 17]. The protagonist of the novel and his friends are constantly in conflict with someone – for their business, for the right to live, they get involved in the struggle between the power of capital and the power of the land (in particular, in the episodes of confrontation with local farmers): “There are always wars going on in Voroshylovhrad. Wars with gas workers, corn growers, aviators, farmers, businessmen. For some reason, military clothing is in fashion here: a Bundeswehr jacket, an SS cap, tanker pants, a camouflage T-shirt, a British firefighter's coat, a German belt with the words “God is with us” on it, a German military jacket, a British coat, heavy soldier's boots. In short, in war as in war” [6]. Due to the harsh everyday life of the present, the characters have neither the time nor the desire to reflect on their Soviet past, traces of which still surround them today. Propaganda posters, Ikarus buses, gold crowns on their teeth, maps of the former USSR

pinned to the wallpaper of their rooms, porcelain statues of Soviet leaders that remain in their homes today simply as an interior decoration that does not distract from their daily routine. Sometimes it is a place of memory, which, however, the characters do not pay any attention to. For them, it is simply a background left over from the past, a record of the past that once was, a catalogue of what surrounded the characters' lives before and what they had no time to pay attention to in the life after, because afterwards there were complex internal and external transformations, a process of survival, attempts to find themselves in a new reality.

**Results and conclusions.** The topos change (Kharkiv, Starobilsk, Donbas), the time of action changes (from the early 1990s to 2010), the types of characters change (a journalist who goes on a journey to get information for an article; an adventurous young businessman who stands at the origins of Ukraine's emerging market economy), but the author's intentions remain unchanged – to show the diverse contemporary life of the eastern frontier of Ukraine, the evolution of the consciousness of local residents. With this, it preserved most of its typological and genre-constructing features the research of which is still waiting for more detailed literary studies.

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**Черкашина Т. Ю. Подорож східним фронтіром України в романах “Anarchy in the Ukr” та «Ворошиловград» Сергія Жадана**

**Анотація.** Статтю присвячено дослідженню східного фронтіру України крізь призму подорожі героїв романів “Anarchy in the Ukr” та «Ворошиловград» сучасного українського письменника Сергія Жадана. Стаття актуалізує найчастіше уживані топоси романів письменника, зокрема топос Слобідської України, представлений Харковом, Старобільськом, північними

районами Луганської області, а також топос Донбасу (район Донбаського каміновугільного басейну, що розташований в південних районах Луганської й Донецької областей України). У романах представлено топографічний опис місцевостей, виділено ключові для аналізованих романів локуси, зокрема локус вокзалу, як символу транзиту, подорожі, нестрімного руху. Східний фронтір України представлений в аналізованих романах як місце перетину різних етносів, мов, культур, передусім українського та російського. Території, що історично відносилися до Слобідської України, представлено патріархальними, закритими для значних впливів ззовні, укоріненими в споконвічні традиції та звичаї. Донбас представлено як багатонаціональне, багатокультурне місце, більше відкрите впливам ззовні, толерантне до Іншого. Обидва топоси – Слобожанщину і Донбас – показано в період їх занепаду, поступової зміни свідомості місцевих мешканців, пов'язаної з численними економічними

та соціальними проблемами регіонів протягом 1990-х – початку 2000-х років. У романах “Anarchy in the Ukr” та «Ворошиловград» відтворено типових представників тогочасного місцевого населення молодого покоління – зневіреного, декоріненого, проте активного, дієвого. Герої аналізованих романів обирають для життя Харків – велике місто, центр Слобідської України, значний промисловий, інтелектуальний, освітній, економічний центр Сходу України. Вони знаходяться в постійному русі, багато подорожують по справах різними районами Луганської та Донецької областей України, які представляють східний фронтір України, відтак мають змогу різнобічно аналізувати життя цього регіону, представниками якого є і вони самі.

**Ключові слова:** сучасна українська література, східний фронтір України, Сергій Жадан, автобіографічний наратив, збереження пам'яті, трансформація свідомості.