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The Ukrainian dove. A metaphor of peace and war in political cartoons

Stanca MĂDA[1]

This article investigates the evolving symbolism of the white dove—a universal emblem of peace—within contemporary political cartoons portraying Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Vladimir Putin in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Drawing on visual rhetoric, semiotics, and theories of political discourse (Gombrich 1985, Burke 1966, Bourdieu 1991), the study explores how cartoonists deploy multimodal metaphors to expose the contradictions between declarations of peace and the exercise of authoritarian power. By tracing the metamorphosis of the dove motif from World War II propaganda to twenty-first-century satire, the analysis reveals its inversion into a symbol of hypocrisy, performative diplomacy, and ideological manipulation. The findings suggest that the degradation of the peace symbol reflects a broader moral and representational crisis in global politics, in which "peace" functions less as an ethical value than as a rhetorical commodity within populist and illiberal political narratives.

Keywords: *political cartoons, visual rhetoric, multimodal metaphor, Russian-Ukrainian war*

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 24th, 2022, there were numerous attempts to bring peace between the two parties, involving political and military leaders throughout the world. Among the personalities actively involved in the peace process, the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, has repeatedly tried to make a breakthrough in the negotiations. These efforts were attempted by Donald Trump with the declared intention to become the 5th American president awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize (Iorfida 2025). "In a period of just seven months, I have ended seven 'un-endable' wars," he claimed during his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2025. "No president or prime minister — and for that matter, no other country — has ever done anything close to that" (Trump 2025). Despite his efforts, he could not bring

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania, stanca.mada@unitbv.ro

together at the negotiation table the leaders of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin or even to come close to a steady ceasefire in Ukraine.

Political leaders are often subjects of political cartoons, caricatures, and other forms of visual commentary meant to satirize the powerful. Cartoons have been described as "drawn jokes" (Hempelmann and Samson 2008), though not all cartoons try to be humorous. In many cases, political cartoonists aim to provoke indignation and outrage rather than laughter. Cartoons have also been employed to evoke positive emotions such as confidence or enthusiasm, through war posters, social movement banners, and other forms of political advertising. A beloved place in the eyes of the audience, however, is the use of cartoons to ridicule power. The caricature, the most established genre of political cartoon, uses exaggeration to undermine powerful people's carefully cultivated public personae and cut them down to size. Normally, caricatures use visual metaphors and made-up dialogue to comment on events, situations, and issues in the news. Political or editorial cartoons are standalone visual comments that can be thought of as the drawn equivalent of the written opinion piece. The most striking feature of cartooning as a medium of political communication is the sheer asymmetry of power between cartoonists and the elites they choose to lampoon. The cartoon is an elemental message crafted by an individual with pencil and paper (more expensive technologies can increase the artist's efficiency and reach but do not add substantially to the cartoon's meaning). Unlike exposés by investigative reporters, cartoons do not reveal state secrets. On the contrary, the most effective cartoons resonate with what is already public knowledge.

But while cartoons generally do not convey original information, they make meaning by condensing complex facts into a striking image, using metaphors to make issues comprehensible and familiar, and deploying journalistic conventions such as irony to register normative judgments and assign blame (Gombrich 1985, Greenberg 2002, Morris 1993). The effective satirist has been likened to the boy in the fable "The Emperor's New Clothes": observing the parade along with the masses, the child guilelessly blurts out that the vain ruler is in fact naked. Once a cartoon thus strips the powerful of their pretenses, exposing their hypocrisies and the contradictions between myths and reality, it can be hard to see them the same way again. Furthermore, the political cartoon's publicness can help overcome the collective hurdle action in authoritarian societies, encouraging others to speak out. To make matters worse for the target of a cartoon, it is difficult to reply in kind. Politicians are accustomed to engaging in verbal debates but trying to argue with a joke usually only compounds the ridicule it directed at them (Sorensen 2008).

The widespread use of cartoons in political discourse — whether for or against the state or some politician — raises questions about the nature of power. Cartoons invite us to treat seriously the symbolic quality of power: institutions and politicians depend partly on myths that they successfully persuade people to believe. Gombrich (1985) points that political communication is already filled with verbal imagery. Cartoons are merely a more obvious manifestation of the human metaphorical thinking; they show "the role and power of the mythological imagination in our political thought and decisions" (Gombrich 1985, 129).

Gombrich (1985) also notes that cartoonists draw on "natural metaphors" – metaphors that are widespread, and to which we respond emotionally even without much cultural literacy, such as contrasts between light and dark. It is often claimed that cartoons' visual mode allows very direct, visceral communication, but this should not be taken to mean that there is a neat correspondence between what the artist intends and what the audience receives. The best cartoons invite the audience to co-create meaning, such that the artist loses control of the product much more than the writer does. Meaning is always interpreted in a cultural context, and — especially when today's cartoons are rarely anchored in the pages of a newspaper but instead float freely in social media streams — those contexts are impossible for the artist to shape.

In the globalized world of today's political cartoons, the need to work with widespread metaphors is even bigger. The *dove* is a metaphor for peace due to its symbolic association with hope, tranquility, and the end of conflict. The symbol has its roots in the story of Noah's Ark, where a dove was sent out and returned with an olive leaf, signaling that the floodwaters were receding and that life was beginning to return to the earth. This event established the dove as a symbol of hope, deliverance, and peace. The dove became as cemented as a global symbol of peace after Pablo Picasso's 1949 lithograph, "Dove of Peace," which was chosen as the emblem for the World Peace Council. The dove, often shown with an olive branch, is a pre-eminent symbol of peace used by organizations like the United Nations. In Christianity, the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, representing love, hope, and peace, while in Judaism, the dove's association with the story of Noah connects it to themes of renewal and hope. Nowadays, this imagery is universally recognized across various cultures and religions as a symbol of peace, reconciliation, and harmony.

In the present paper I will follow the dove metaphor across three editorial cartoons depicting various views on peace efforts in the Russian– Ukrainian war. In the theoretical part, I will highlight some of the rhetorical elements used by cartoonists to render political opinions with a focus on the audience's understanding of political cartoons. The analysis proves a change of the

traditionally peace-bringing dove metaphor into a symbol for the rather belligerent and egocentric views of peace pertaining to various political leaders.

2. Understanding the rhetorical elements in political cartoons

The term "political cartoon" refers to all cartoons that are more politically than socially focused. An "editorial cartoon" is a political cartoon that is drawn when the issue under scrutiny appears. The rhetoric of political cartoons consists of more than words. It is a complex system of symbols, pictures, and words put together in such a way that news consumers will better grasp the intended message of the cartoonist.

2.1. Skimming a political cartoon

Affectively engaging with cartoons is a combination of looking at pictures, reading the words, understanding pictorial representations, and keeping up with current events. Because of these particular receptive skills, readers of cartoons are called "skimmers." The term was coined by Raymond Morris who stated: "We expect to skim or glance at [the cartoon], grasp its message, laugh or groan, and move on." (1989, 3). It is an appropriate term in that someone who peruses cartoons does not merely look at the picture, nor does s/he just read the text. "By allying a picture with a text they activate more of the reader's senses. They thus invite greater involvement, offering a suggestive pattern to be grasped in its totality rather than an informative discourse which must be followed one step at a time." (Morris 1989, 80) Most cartoons are a combination of illustration and text and are best understood by the person who skims the entire piece in order to grasp its meaning. For lack of a better term, "skimmer" refers to those who read cartoons, while "reader" refers to the literate public.

Text may appear in three places in a cartoon. The one situated above the frame of the cartoon is in the *title position* (it may be a description or a dialogue). *Text* is often written within the frame. And that which is below the frame is a *caption*. The text that is written is largely either a descriptor or a dialogue exchange. Either one can be object language, the voices of characters that do not reflect the artist's opinion, or authorial voice, which is text that reflects the artist's opinion. It is incumbent on the cartoonist to make the intent of the text obvious enough for the skimmer to determine which one it is.

Truthfulness is important to cartoonists and skimmers, and while most cartoon content is hyperbole, and is treated as opinion, that hyperbole must have

some factual basis in order to work. Laying that groundwork of truth is a rhetorical construct in political cartoons. Sometimes the factual basis is stated in the cartoon, and sometimes the facts are assumed by the cartoonist. Either way, if the skimmer does not recognize either the stated fact or what the cartoonist assumes, the point of the cartoon is missed.

There is evidence that most people do not understand the intended message that cartoonists convey in their cartoons (Carl 1968)[2]. However, for the minority who do understand them, political cartoons provide more than just entertainment at the expense of politicians who may have committed a *faux pas*, they are critical analyses of current events.

The art of cartooning uses many different types of symbolism. This symbolism creates a vocabulary that does not simply consist of words, but of pictorial representations that cartoonists use repeatedly and skimmers are expected to understand. Skimmers inherently understand some of the symbols, such as largeness versus smallness, but others are learned. Cartoonists use pictographs, symbols that represent an arbitrarily designated entity, to represent concepts. For example, as a result of a convention that began in the 19th century, cartoonists[3] and skimmers have agreed that the elephant represents the Republican Party of the United States. There is nothing particularly elephantine about Republicans, but artists and skimmers have agreed on this convention. How does a skimmer know that a depiction of an elephant in a cartoon represents the Republican Party rather than a pachyderm? S/he must put the signifier into the context of whatever else is in the image and determine the correct signification of the elephant. While the inherent symbols never change, learned symbols are flexible. They are used until something better comes along, and as cartoonists change their symbolic vocabulary, it is incumbent on skimmers to change their perceptions.

Symbols used by cartoonists are binary in the way cartoonists represent a thing, person, or concept as wholly positive or negative (Gombrich 1985; Morris 1989; Bush 2012). Gombrich's theory (1985) focuses on the drawing and coloring of elements of the cartoon, while Morris's theory (1989) approaches the representation of characteristics in the drawing. These theories are complementary

[2] In this article, Carl uses scientific methods to poll Americans and argues that only 15% of Americans fully understand the artist's intent of individual editorial cartoons, and 15% partially understand the artist's intent in an editorial cartoon. Therefore, 70% of Americans do not understand editorial cartoons.

[3] It is thought the Republican elephant was first used like this by an Illinois newspaper during Abraham Lincoln's 1860 election campaign - perhaps as a symbol of strength, although it is still debated. It was then made popular by Thomas Nast who was a Republican and drew it in a cartoon in 1874. He also shaped other symbolic references such as the donkey for the Democratic Party, Uncle Sam, and Santa Claus (https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/why-democrats-are-donkeys-republicans-are-elephants-artsy accessed on October 10, 2025).

in that a cartoonist may use elements from both theorists to enhance the effectiveness of a cartoon. Morris (1989) applies the symbolic action theory of Kenneth Burke (1966) to political cartoons. Burke (1966) proposes a theory of social processes as they apply to politics of good versus bad, victory versus defeat, and heroism versus villainy. Politics is full of symbolic action. "A leader who ignores symbolic action is apt to be caricatured as dull and colorless; one who ignores necessitous action is seen as playing to the gallery while doing nothing; one who does not correlate the two is seen as incoherent." (Morris 1989, 37)

Repeated use of the symbol changes it from an ad hoc one requiring explanation (a label on the character is usually sufficient) to a symbol as familiar to readers as a common word, needing no explanation (Gombrich 1985). Rhetorically, ad hoc symbols eventually become signifiers[4] for skimmers in a similar manner that words become signifiers for readers of text (Saussure 1916).

One of the rhetorical devices that poetry and cartoons share is dialogism (Bakhtin 1981), a concept which refers to "double-voicedness", the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance. It is the responsibility of the skimmer to detect the dialogism in cartoons, and to figure out who the voices represent. Often, the voice of a character is also the voice of the artist. In other cartoons the voice of a character also renders the voice of the parodied subject. It is incumbent on the cartoonist to give clues to the skimmer as to who the parodied subject is. It is the responsibility of the skimmer to find the clues and figure it out. The expectation of wordplay will make the cartoon more humorous (Bush 2012) and that expectation aids the skimmer to identify dialogism.

Cartoonists use several devices to introduce the issue they will be addressing so that the skimmer can understand it. These introductions act as topic sentences in a paragraph of text. Sometimes they describe the issue or label a subject. World leaders are generally exempt from having to be introduced to skimmers in cartoons (Bush 2012). A caricature is sufficient for skimmers to recognize a world leader. They are literally the folks who need no introduction. Name-dropping is the technique of putting the name of a prominent, but not necessarily recognizable celebrity, in the text of the cartoon. The name is usually dropped in the caption or in the dialogue between characters. The least subtle, but most effective way of introducing the subject, is to label the person either with a full or partial name. In most cases, a surname is sufficient, but in the case of former president George W. Bush, he was simply identified as "W" even before he was elected. The most popular form of labelling people is "tagging" them. For better known celebrities, cartoonists often use only initials (Ronald Reagan was often identified as "RR,"

[4] The term is used according to Saussure's theory of structuralism.

using the logo of Rolls Royce). The protocol is to identify subjects by using the most concise method that skimmers will comprehend.

Political cartoons are part of the category of fact-based humor (Bush 2012). Introductory phrases, such as direct quotations and headlines, offer cartoons an essential element besides making the skimmer aware of the subject matter. They relate the characters with some news items. If a political cartoon does not contain facts that are recognizable, the skimmer will not be affectively engaged in the cartoon because s/he will be unable to connect the correlatives. Cartoonists prefer to use headlines to introduce a topic. Since conciseness and subtlety are important characteristics of a good cartoon, cartoonists strategically place a hint somewhere within the image to introduce the topic of the cartoon to the skimmer (Bush 2012). Once the skimmer and cartoonist are on the same page, the skimmer is able to better understand the cartoonist's intended meaning. Quotations from politicians are also used by cartoonists to introduce the subject. The quotations are sometimes placed in talk balloons or captions as they are attributable to that person or in the white space at the top of the cartoon. This method is used when someone makes a particularly noteworthy gaffe. Often, the satirized quote is well-known to readers, leading context and credibility to the cartoonist making the artist's opinion more believable.

The cartoonist works with a multiplicity of images and texts. It is the artist's responsibility to organize those units to convey his/her message with the greatest effectiveness in order that the skimmer may best understand the concept that the cartoonist is imparting. Each misplaced piece causes confusion among skimmers and decreases the effectiveness of the cartoon. Conveying dialogue is an important aspect of political cartoons and one such most recognizable method is through talk balloons. Like balloons, captions are used almost exclusively by magazine cartoonists to convey dialogue (usually monologue with other voices assumed from the text). Captions are most convenient when there is one character in the image that is speaking, usually indicated as the only person with an open mouth.

Even the way the words are written sometimes affects the skimmers' understanding of the text. An artist may use calligraphy in order to reinforce the words, which includes simply making a word or phrase bold in order to draw attention to it. It also involves hand-lettering elaborate fonts to achieve a symbolic representation. The effect of calligraphy is that it guides the skimmer to the emotional response that the artist expects of his/her audience. If the writing is hard to read the skimmer is forced to take a little extra time to understand the artist's intent. The additional effort that artists put into their work is sometimes the difference between a successful cartoon and one that is forgettable (Bush 2012).

2.2. Understanding visual metaphors

Editorial cartoons have become powerful ways to communicate visually in today's world. They capture the essence of our daily lives and break down complex issues into easy-to-understand, often funny formats. They make use of conceptual metaphor to clarify ideas, critique what is happening around us, and connect with viewers. Editorial cartoons, usually created by professional artists and published in established media outlets, have a long-standing tradition of providing political commentary and rely on conceptual metaphor to affect public discourse, challenge mainstream views, and encourage viewers to think critically about various events and experiences (Zibin 2022).

Editorial cartoons, drawn artistically, usually target readers of newspapers, and aim for more serious reflection on issues. They resort to conceptual metaphor to condense various sociopolitical situations into impactful single-panel illustrations. Cartoonists employ a variety of source domains (vehicle) to represent target concepts (tenor). The specific choice of source domain depends on the message the cartoonist aims to convey and the cultural context in which they are working. The effectiveness of these metaphors arises from their reliance on visually-driven imagery and cross-modal mappings, where the visual source interacts with a verbal target (Zibin 2022). Monomodal metaphors (relying on visual *or* verbal cues) can be more ambiguous and open to interpretation, yet multimodal metaphors, which combine *both* visual and verbal elements, are often easier for a wider audience to understand, as they provide multiple entry points for comprehension (Jahameh and Zibin 2023).

Metaphors in editorial cartoons often address sensitive situations, such as war, cultural or socio-political issues, using satire and symbolism to communicate their message. Metaphors employed in cartoons can provoke critical reflection on significant political and social events, exposing the contradictions and hypocrisies of international relations.

One of the key elements that makes editorial cartoons so effective as tools for satire is their use of humor. Through employing wit, irony, and absurdity, creators can engage audiences on an emotional level, making their commentary more memorable and impactful. Humor also serves as a defense mechanism, allowing creators to address sensitive or controversial topics in a way that is less likely to offend or alienate viewers (Holmes 1998). Another important factor in the success of cartoons is their use of cultural references. Creators can establish a sense of connection with their audience, which makes their commentary more relevant and relatable using shared knowledge, experiences, and values.

Visual metaphors used in editorial cartoons are powerful tools for visual communication. They are graphic representations of an abstract idea or concept through an image, symbol, or visual element that stands for something else. These symbols often have culturally recognized meanings that resonate with the audience. By using metaphor, humor, and cultural references, creators can engage audiences on an emotional level, making their commentary more memorable and impactful. Analyzing how metaphor operates provides a window into the ways by which individuals and communities make sense of the world (Zibin 2022). The visual metaphor invites skimmers to engage with the imagery to uncover its significance. Examining the function of metaphor in cartoons can aid in gaining a better understanding of the power of visual communication.

Many cartoon controversies center on misfiring visual metaphors. The image of tentacles, symbolizing the reach of businesses, has also been used in racist propaganda to represent Jewish and Chinese diasporas, for example. The Star of David appears on Israel's flag, but since it was originally a symbol of the Jewish faith, artists who use the symbol in cartoons attacking the conduct of the state are often accused of antisemitism. The use of floating signifiers, which allows artists to have fun with visual puns, can be weaponized by others to perform outrage to achieve wider political goals (George 2024).

Political cartoons operate through the compression of complex political realities into simplified yet potent visual metaphors, allowing artists to expose contradictions between rhetoric and action. The persuasive force of cartoons lies in their ability to reconfigure familiar symbols to challenge official narratives. Within this framework, the recurring image of the white dove—traditionally emblematic of peace—serves as a site for such rhetorical reconfiguration, especially in times of war.

I will exemplify this visual rhetoric by means of two historical cartoons.

Image 1. *Sending Forth Another Dove*

On April 29, 1941, more than seven months before its attack on the United States in World War II, the Japanese government sent an "exploratory" peace proposal to the United States. In a blatant attempt to gain American support for aggression by the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo-Axis, it called for a new world order that would carve out spheres of power. Germany and Italy would control Europe and Africa, Japan would control Asia, and the United States would control the Western Hemisphere. An editorial cartoon of the time, entitled *Sending Forth Another Dove*, depicted the three leaders of the axis Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany, Benito Mussolini of the Kingdom of Italy, and Hirohito of the Empire of Japan using a white dove as cannon fodder. The label on the cannon ironically states: *Axis 'Peace' Offensive*.

Image 2. *Sending forth a dove – with escort*

As if in response, the cartoonist Herbert Block draws a piece entitled *Sending forth a dove -- with escort*. The editorial cartoon makes reference to the so-called Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration of Anglo-American war and peace aims, issued by the United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, following a meeting off the coast of Newfoundland on August 14th, 1941. The dove here stands for a declaration of principles for the post-World War II world, based on self-determination, economic cooperation, and the abandonment of the use of force. The white dove (symbolizing the peace offer) was escorted by an eagle (standing for the protection or guarantee offered by the United States, though US was not yet an official belligerent).

Political symbols, as Edelman (1988) observes, do not merely reflect public values but actively shape perceptions of political reality. They allow leaders to condense complex ideologies into emotionally charged images that resonate with mass audiences. The white dove, in this sense, is not neutral. It represents a moral claim — the assertion that one's political project serves stability and order. Yet as symbols circulate through the media, they are subject to contestation and reinterpretation (Bleiker 2009). Both of the above cartoons reverse the moral assertion either by weaponizing the dove or by enhancing the menacing conditions of the peace offer.

3. The politics of peace making

The present analysis focuses on the visual metaphor of the white dove in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian war which started in 2022. The cartoons examined here transform the dove from a sign of harmony into an emblem of hypocrisy, dramatizing the tension between the language of diplomacy and the practice of power. The analysis applies this interpretive lens to depictions of Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Vladimir Putin, highlighting how visual satire redefines peace as a contested symbol within contemporary politics. The chosen cartoons expose the gap between the professed pursuit of peace and the political behaviors that undermine it. Each of the three cartoons visually dramatizes what scholars of populism describe as the *performative contradiction* of illiberal politics (Moffitt 2016). Leaders such as Orbán, Trump, and Putin present themselves as defenders of their nations' peace and sovereignty, yet their rhetoric and actions often generate instability. The dove, when trampled (Image 3), bloodied (Image 4), or lifeless (Image 5), becomes a metaphor for peace degraded by political branding — an emblem of how "soft power" (Nye 2004) can be converted into spectacle rather than substance.

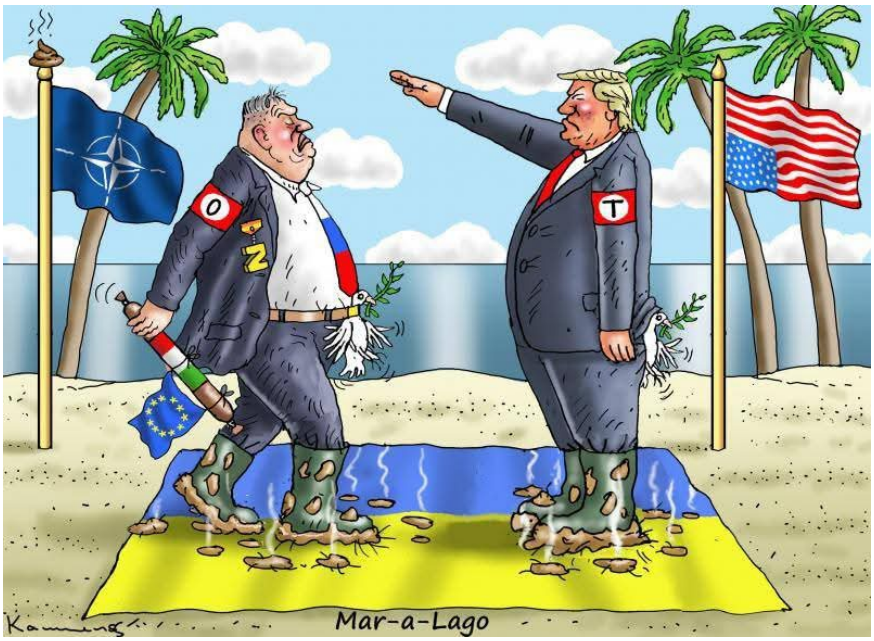

Image 3. *Friedensesel Orban trifft Trump* (in German language in original)

The cartoon entitled *Friedensesel Orban trifft Trump* [Orban, the peace donkey, meets Trump], by Marian Kamensky, depicts Donald Trump (then running for the Presidency of the United States) and the Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán standing on a beach labeled "Mar-a-Lago." The editorial cartoon resulted from the meeting between the leaders of the two countries on July 11, 2024. In a tweet posted at the end of the meeting, Mr. Orbán called the visit "peace mission 5.0", adding: "We discussed ways to make #peace. The good news of the day: he's going to solve it!"[5] The two leaders are wearing boots covered in mud and are standing on the Ukrainian flag. On the left side, the flag of NATO is "adorned" with feces. On the right side stands the reversed American flag.

3.1. Viktor Orbán: the dove as a symbol of illiberal pacification

The political representation of Viktor Orbán in Image 3 as Prime Minister of Hungary is rendered through the following elements: the letter "O" on his right arm functioning as a label, a traditional salami covered in the colors of the Hungarian flag, and the flag of the European Union (Hungary held the presidency of the European Union at the time of the meeting) hanging from the same salami. The Hungarian leader was frequently criticized in Europe for his pro-Russian views but remained popular among Trump supporters and US conservatives. The pro-Russian views are symbolized by means of the military decoration depicting the letter "Z"[6] and the tie in the Russian colors.

Orbán has positioned himself as both a critic of liberal globalism and a defender of national peace and order. His political narrative, grounded in the rhetoric of "illiberal democracy," claims to protect Hungary from external interference and internal disorder (Krastev and Holmes 2019). Yet in the cartoon, Orbán's association with the white dove is steeped in irony, visible in the very title of the cartoon. Orbán is called a *Friedensesel*, the German word for peace donkey.

He appears with a dove lifeless and trivialized, reflecting the contradiction between his rhetorical calls for peace and his political practices of exclusion and alignment with authoritarian powers. Orbán's discourse exemplifies what de Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) describe as the populist articulation of nationalism: a strategy that constructs peace not as coexistence but as the suppression of dissent and pluralism.

The cartoon's visual cues — Orbán's complacent posture, the dove as accessory rather than ideal — underscore the illusion of stability produced by illiberal governance. The dove's death or lifelessness can be read as the cost of

[5] According to BBC News (https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cydvj24m4g4o).

[6] Z symbol was marked on Russian tanks since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. It is an abbreviation of the phrase "for victory" (Russian: за победу, Romanized: *za pobedu*).

Orbán's self-styled "peace": a peace maintained through control, censorship, and moral panic. This visual rhetoric echoes what Mouffe (2018) calls the post-political masquerade: the substitution of genuine democratic contestation with the performance of unity.

In Orbán's case, the dove's reversal symbolism exposes how peace is redefined in this particular context. The cartoon functions as a critique of illiberal pacification, showing how the rhetoric of protecting national peace masks complicity in global instability.

3.2. Donald Trump: the dove as a prop of political branding

The cartoon featuring Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán standing on a Ukrainian flag at "Mar-a-Lago" captures the complex interplay between performance and diplomacy characteristic of Trump's politics. In the image, the men hold limp or lifeless doves, their boots muddy and stained. The symbolism is quite explicit: peace is not pursued, but displayed. Debatably enough, Trump also performs the Nazi salute when meeting Viktor Orbán.

Trump's political strategy relied heavily on the aesthetics of spectacle and the language of deal-making. Kellner (2016) notes that Trump's approach to foreign policy emphasized personal charisma and transactional negotiation rather than institutional cooperation. The dove, in this context, becomes a prop — a visual extension of his political "brand" as the self-styled negotiator capable of brokering peace through strength. Yet the limpness of the bird and its positioning at Trump's backside subvert this claim. Instead of embodying vitality, it signifies moral exhaustion.

The muddy boots trampling the Ukrainian flag evoke both literal and symbolic contamination. The mud signifies hypocrisy or guilt — peace is being trampled for political posturing and the dove becomes an ironic emblem: peace is not pursued for its own sake but used to construct political identity or alliance. In political semiotics, the act of standing on a nation's flag represents disregard for its sovereignty or suffering. Here, Trump's pose suggests complicity in the degradation of peace — a performance of diplomacy that is indifferent to the ethical costs of real conflict. The use of *Mar-a-Lago* as the setting intensifies the irony: a luxury resort stands in for the global stage, turning international crisis into a backdrop for political theater.

In Image 3, the dove's traditional connotation of sincerity is inverted into a sign of vanity. Trump's attempt to achieve peace becomes an element of political marketing — what political communication scholars describe as the commodification of virtue (Marland 2017). Thus, the cartoon exemplifies how populist leaders deploy moral symbols to construct authenticity while simultaneously undermining their moral content.

3.3. Vladimir Putin: the dove as a victim of militarized sovereignty

Image 4. *Vladimir Putin's approach to peace*

The cartoon entitled *Vladimir Putin's approach to peace*, by Nicola Jennings, depicts the bare-chested President of Russian Federation kicking a dove, which flies away bleeding. The cartoon was published less than two weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February 24, 2022). At that time, the Kremlin was publicly discussing about "peace talks," even while intensifying missile strikes on Ukrainian cities. Jennings's cartoon was *The Guardian*'s satirical response to that contradiction — the gap between Russia's language of "peace" and its brutal conduct of war. More precisely, the editorial cartoon comments on the events on March 5, 2022, when the army forces of the Russian Federation announced a ceasefire in order to set up humanitarian corridors from Mariupol. About 200.000 civilians were forced to evacuate a city that remained without water and electricity. In the same day, the Russian troops captured other two cities[7]. Jennings uses sharp irony to expose hypocrisy in political rhetoric of authoritarian leaders as well as the moral doublespeak, proved by the use of euphemisms like "special military operation" to define war atrocities.

Putin is shown kicking or assaulting a dove — the universal peace symbol — implying that his "approach to peace" is violent and destructive. The image's violence

[7] According to https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cronologia_invaziei_Rusiei_%C3%AEn_Ucraina_(2022), accessed on October 12, 2025.

is unambiguous: peace itself becomes the victim of power. The dove's blood, rendered against its white feathers, dramatizes the contradiction at the heart of Putin's geopolitical narrative. The dove's suffering signifies the destruction of peace itself — an active rejection of diplomacy. The red blood on the white feathers contrasts the purity of peace with the violence of war. Peace here is not merely lost — it is attacked, making the dove a victim rather than a symbol. The dove's blood and broken body stand for the death of diplomacy and the suffering of civilians. The destroyed buildings in the background allude to the bombardment of Ukrainian cities. The cartoon's tone is bitterly ironic: the "peace" Putin offers is annihilation.

Putin's use of symbolic politics is well documented. Scholars such as Hutchings and Tolz (2015) note how his regime relies on a blend of militarized patriotism and moral conservatism to sustain legitimacy. The dove, as a universal sign of peace, is incompatible with this worldview unless subordinated to sovereignty. By the physical attack of the dove, the cartoonist represents Putin's rejection of international norms of diplomacy and his preference for unilateral action — a visual metaphor for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

From a political communication perspective, this act of violence against the dove can be read through Nye's (2004) concept of soft power failure. Where soft power depends on attraction and legitimacy, Putin's image-building strategy transforms moral narratives into instruments of coercion. The bleeding dove symbolizes the collapse of moral persuasion under the weight of military aggression.

Yet the image also implicates global spectatorship. The fact that the dove, though wounded still flies, suggests that the idea of peace though maimed, persists. It becomes a paradoxical emblem — simultaneously suggesting the casualty of war as well as the remainder of an ideal that cannot be entirely obliterated. This reading aligns with Bleiker's (2009) argument that visual politics operates not only through representation but also through affect: the capacity of images to evoke empathy or horror in the viewer.

3.4. Political branding and the death of moral symbols

The cartoon entitled *Trump and Putin dance for peace*, by Vladimir Kazanevsky, depicts the United States President Donald Trump, who is dressed as a woman, dancing with Vladimir Putin over the dead body of a dove with an olive branch. The passionate dance symbolizes a close and possibly cooperative relationship between the two leaders — one that was often criticized as being unusually friendly or compromising. The swirling motion of the dance, along with their exaggerated faces, conveys a sense of mockery and absurdity. It implies that their "dance for peace" is more of a chaotic spectacle than a genuine diplomatic effort.

Image 5. *Trump and Putin dance for peace*

The passionate dance symbolizes a close and possibly cooperative relationship between the two leaders — one that was often criticized as being unusually friendly or compromising. The swirling motion of the dance, along with their exaggerated faces, conveys a sense of mockery and absurdity. It implies that their "dance for peace" is more of a chaotic spectacle than a genuine diplomatic effort.

The dance is traditionally associated with harmony, partnership, or mutual understanding, but here it carries a satirical tone. It implies that their relationship is a kind of performance — a dance for show rather than a genuine pursuit of peace. Trump is wearing a blue dress and red high heels, and Putin is dressed in a suit and a red cap. This reversal of traditional gender roles suggests a certain power dynamics — Putin leads the dance while Trump follows. The image mocks Trump's position, implying submission or subservience to Putin's lead, hinting at accusations that Trump was too accommodating toward Russia.

The red cap is a recognizable symbol of Trump's 2016 and 2024 presidential campaigns and the slogan "Make America Great Again". It acts as a visual shorthand for American nationalist and populist MAGA movement. By placing it on the head of the figure leading the dance (Putin), Kazanevsky creates a layer of irony and criticism. The cap, emblematic of Trump's identity and political brand, now appearing on Putin's head suggests a blurring of political boundaries and influence. It can be read as implying that Putin controls or appropriates Trump's political

symbolism, thereby undermining American independence and agency. Alternatively, the cap could also signify the merging of their ideologies—a visual metaphor for how Trump's brand of nationalism aligns, intentionally or not, with Russian geopolitical interests. In both readings, the red cap reinforces the cartoon's theme of complicity and dominance within the supposed partnership.

The most powerful and tragic of symbols is that of the dead dove with an olive branch that lies beneath their feet. The image suggests that peace has been destroyed or trampled upon as a result of this "dance." Despite the supposed pursuit of peace, their actions have killed its true spirit. The white dove contrasts sharply with the dark clothing and bold colors (red, blue, yellow) of the dancers. This contrast highlights innocence and purity crushed by political showmanship and ego.

Kazanevsky's cartoon uses dark humor and exaggeration to criticize the hypocrisy and theatrics of international politics. The title "Dance for Peace" is ironic — the very act meant to symbolize peace ends up destroying it. In essence, the cartoon suggests that Trump and Putin's relationship, rather than promoting global stability, undermines genuine peace efforts through ego-driven performance and misplaced allegiance.

4. Conclusions

When viewed together, cartoons from images 3-5 form a coherent critique of the contemporary politicization of peace. Orbán, Trump, and Putin differ in ideology and geopolitical orientation, yet their representations converge around a shared dynamic, namely the transformation of moral symbols into instruments of political branding.

This phenomenon illustrates the logic of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) and the capacity of political actors to define and manipulate meanings within public discourse. The dove, in each instance, no longer communicates universal peace but the particularized "peace" of nationalist self-interest. This symbolic reversal exposes how populist and authoritarian leaders appropriate moral language to legitimize illiberal practices.

Furthermore, these cartoons reveal the erosion of the boundary between soft power and political spectacle. For Orbán, peace becomes domestic control; for Trump, diplomacy becomes entertainment; for Putin, it becomes a tool of imperial assertion. The dove's various fates — limp, bloodied, lifeless — correspond to these strategies. Its degradation reflects the disintegration of a shared moral vocabulary in international politics. Anderson (1983) described nations as "imagined communities" bound by shared symbols. These cartoons suggest that in the age of mediatized populism, symbols no longer unify but divide; their meanings are fractured by competing claims to authenticity. The white dove, once an emblem of

common humanity, becomes a battlefield for narrative dominance. The reversal of the white dove's symbolism in contemporary political caricature reveals more than disillusionment with individual leaders; it marks a broader crisis of moral representation in global politics. As Orbán, Trump, and Putin deploy the language of peace to reinforce their national narratives, the ideal of peace itself becomes commodified and hollowed out. The analyzed cartoons employ visual irony to expose this contradiction, transforming a universal emblem of harmony into an image of hypocrisy, complicity, and violence.

In political terms, this transformation reflects the decline of normative consensus in the post–Cold War international order. The moral authority once attached to peace as a global aspiration has been supplanted by its strategic use as a rhetorical asset. The white dove's death, therefore, is not merely symbolic — it is the diagnosis of a political reality in which the pursuit of peace is subordinated to the performance of power.

The visual metaphor of the broken dove invites cartoon skimmers to confront this loss. It challenges the audience to recognize how moral symbols, when detached from ethical practice, can serve to obscure rather than reveal political truth.

Sources of cartoons

Image 1: *Sending forth another dove*, May 13, 1941, Published by NEA Service, Inc., available at https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/herblocks-history/dove.html, accessed on October 11, 2025.

Image 2: *Sending forth a dove -- with escort*, by Herbert Block, August 15th, 1941, available at: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010636465/, accessed on October 11, 2025.

Image 3: *Friedensesel Orban trifft Trump,* by Marian Kamensky, July 12, 2024, available at https://www.toonpool.com/cartoons/FRIEDENSESEL%20ORBAN%20TRIFFT%20TRUMP_447077, accessed on October 5, 2025.

Image 4: *Vladimir Putin's approach to peace*, by Nicola Jennings, March 6, 2022, available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2022/mar/06/nicola-jennings-on-vladimir-putins-approach-to-peace-cartoon, accessed on October 10, 2025.

Image 5: *Trump and Putin dance for peace*, by Vladimir Kazanevsky, March 24, 2025, available at https://www.cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/trmp-and-putin-dance-peace, accessed on October 10, 2025.

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