

Received: 15 February, 2026

Accepted: 25 July, 2026

Published: 09 August, 2026

Festive Normality and Cultural Persistence: New Year Practices in Occupied Southern Ukraine

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Cite this article:

Zubchenko, O., Zoska, Y., Shcherbyna, V., Stadnik, O., Osetrova, O., & Mozulenko, D. (2026). Festive normality and cultural persistence: New Year practices in occupied southern Ukraine. *Revista Cultura Científica*, (24), pp. 1033–1043.

Abstract

The article analyzes how new year festivities in the media controlled by occupation administrations reproduce the social functions of a known holiday in the temporarily occupied territories of southern Ukraine. It is investigated how public celebration is being used to legitimize the political regime, to socialize children and youth, to perform symbolic control, and what kind of Ukrainian cultural identity remains visible against the background of the official discourse. The material comprises 68 photographs and 11 video clips, published in Telegram channels run by the Russian occupation administrations. The unchanged methodological approach includes qualitative content analysis, visual-semiotics, and comparative analysis of symbols, roles of participants, location of events, and accompanying descriptions. The material evidences the consistent dichotomy of administratively orchestrated visibility and culturally relevant participation. Official representations unite festive decoration of the

civic space, festive gift giving, ceremonials at schools, patriotic-military rhetoric, and pictures of orderly audience in the claim of stability of the social life that occupation created. However, restricted audience, the role of officials and organizations, and transfer of celebration to private and online sphere weaken this claim. Ukrainian colors, orientation to the time of Kyiv, family celebration, and closed online communication maintain the affiliation without making the public acts visible. The conclusion is made that new year festivities cannot establish the common festive order in the conditions of occupation. They generate dual order where public celebration legitimizes the political order and socializes youth, while private and digital sphere ensures cultural continuity and moral distance from the occupation, social links with Ukraine.

Keywords: festive ritual, occupation, cultural identity, Telegram, youth socialization, symbolic resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not only changing territorial, administrative, and security landscapes but the cultural meanings associated with the latter. Occupying power establishes its own administrative apparatus, media channels, educational programs, symbols, and calendar of commemorations in the temporarily occupied territories. On the surface, a holiday seems detached from this process, as it is traditionally connected with family gatherings, rest, and regeneration. During occupation, though, a recognized holiday provides the authorities with an existing stage that allows them to represent political control as social order. Decorations, concerts, gifts, and performances of children can make an imposed administration visible through familiar means rather than coercive ones. Thus, a holiday turns out to be a suitable entry point for studying the ways in which power gains recognition in everyday life.

New Year holds a unique status among these symbolic practices. Its seasonal regularity endows it with the appearance of continuity, while its public and domestic dimensions allow for bridging institutions and households. Decoration of municipal areas and holding public concerts puts the administration at the epicenter of civic life; organizing celebrations in schools allows the officials to engage with children and their parents; and distribution of gifts turns administrative resources into personalized performance of care. However, these practices not only serve to punctuate the calendar. They organize public visibility, legitimacy of symbols, representation of childhood, and political community that ensures security and generosity. Thus, the transformation of a recurring holiday cannot be seen as unrelated to occupation governance. It is one of the mechanisms in which occupation is described as sustainable, socially accepted, and self-reproductive.

A holiday provides for forms of distance that are difficult to detect via political actions. One may refuse to attend public events, restrict the visibility of children, celebrate in small family units, synchronize greetings according to Kyiv time, keep Ukrainian colors, or communicate via private digital channels. None of the practices listed above should be considered as open protest or overstated politically. However, in a situation when visibility in public space might carry personal risks, such reduction in participation in an official celebration or keeping alternative temporal and symbolic perspectives can draw a line between visible accommodation and cultural affiliation. Thus, holiday practices expose an unequal struggle for visibility: the occupation administration owns the public stage and the infrastructure of publications, while cultural continuity relies on domestic and digitally mediated practices.

Literature on political holidays is dedicated to the ways in which national holidays invented or recreated by the states serve as a battleground for identity contests. Scholarship on war communication via social networks is concerned with the strategic narratives, disinformation, witnessing, or memory struggles. Literature on Ukraine describes the destruction of cultural heritage, imposed changes in education, and struggle over the national identity. New Year celebrations unite these strands of scholarship in the sense that they combine spectacle organized by the state, domestic rituals, youth engagement, digital dissemination, and contested claims regarding normalcy of life.

This study investigates the following question: *How do New Year practices depicted in occupation-administration media redistribute the social functions of the holiday between legitimizing public power, socialization of youth, and maintenance of Ukrainian cultural continuity in the temporarily occupied territories of southern Ukraine?* The question is deliberately restricted to the meanings produced in 68 photographs and 11 video clips and their captions in the Telegram channel used by the occupation-administration authorities. The official media sources are not treated as an unbiased depiction of residents' attitudes, and no attempt is made to estimate the popularity of some practices. Instead, the study analyses the choice of the occupation administration in terms of the representation it makes and the tensions that arise in this representation.

The contribution of the study lies in revealing a dual festive order rather than considering celebration either as propaganda or resistance in isolation. Public ceremonies make the official institutions, gifts, militarized symbols, and mobilization of youth highly visible; private and digital practices maintain cultural affiliation through reducing visibility and preserving connections beyond the stage provided by the administration. The distinction allows understanding why a successful media spectacle is far from implying social integration. Instead, it reveals increasing distance between the authority in control of public representation and the population deprived of cultural continuity in visible spaces.

2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Ritual is a patterned mode of collective communication through which ties are reproduced, values are communicated, and membership is defined [1]. According to sociological theory of holidays, holidays organize social meanings related to sacredness, shared time, and practice [1]. The current leisure studies further argue that collective celebration is not a politically neutral period; it is a space where access, recognition, and belonging are negotiated [2, 3]. In interaction-ritual research, ritual celebrations are connected to emotional coordination and group solidarity provided by the meaningful participation rather than physical presence [3]. This point is critical in the case of an occupied region: an organized audience might provide the necessary visual elements of a celebration without sharing common commitment to collective celebration.

There is plenty of scholarly evidence proving that the calendar of national holidays and their celebrations could be

redesigned in order to promote certain political communities. Solomonovich shows that in Turkey, the newly instituted holiday became the means of organizing state institutions, schools, public space, and collective memory in order to support the existing political project [4]. Hintz and Quatrini further prove that holidays celebrated in a repressive setting are places of identity contestation since participation, adaptation, and refusal communicate certain relations to the nation-state narrative [5]. This point is crucial for the current analysis because it argues that resistance does not necessarily have to take place in the form of public demonstrations; the modification of a celebration, limited participation, or insisting on group-specific meaning can preserve the identity boundary under repressive conditions.

As far as digital communication is concerned, it extends ritual beyond physical co-presence. In their recent study, Hallinan et al. prove that the communication about New Year on social media is a patterned process of values' expression and negotiation across cultural contexts [6]. Trillò, Hallinan, and Shifman further propose social-media rituals as recurring communicative practices that formalize shared values [7]. These studies concern totally different environments, but they highlight the key idea explaining why video calls, greetings, colors, and wishes can carry collective meaning. Digital communication is not just an illustration of a holiday event; it is a way of its performance. The point is particularly important in the case of occupation because it is possible to celebrate holidays even if one is not able to meet and use the same symbols publicly.

The literature on cultural trauma and memory explains why familiar rituals are acquiring enhanced meanings in war. Cultural trauma is an individual response to harmful events, but it is also a result of unequal social relations and shared narratives [8]. Postmemory studies are concerned with the ways in which communities commemorate and reenact past experiences through intergenerational storytelling and current practices [9]. In Ukraine, the battle for memory cannot be separated from a general fight over political and cultural identity. According to Mishalova, Hordiichuk, and Sokolovskiy, the war is not just a struggle; it includes the struggle over Ukrainian cultural tradition [10]. Decolonization and memory politics research emphasizes the importance of historical narratives as the means of maintaining national identity under the existential threat [11]. These studies guide researchers to focus on seemingly minor things like language, color, timing, iconography, and naming of traditions as the means of dispute over cultural heritage.

There is an abundant amount of empirical studies on Ukrainian cultural heritage. Ivanyisko, Kazakevych, and Shydlovskiy discuss the cultural heritage as a direct target of the Russo-Ukrainian war [12]. Bazhenova discusses the attacks on people and heritage as the means of destruction of the foundations of Ukrainian collective identity [13]. The analysis of occupied Crimea conducted by Volvach proves that erasure can be studied through absence, traces, and changes in the semiotic landscape [14]. What is not visible in public space is no less important than what is visible. It does not mean that every absence should be interpreted analytically; it means that the disappearance of Ukrainian civic markers and their substitution as well as highly selective visibility in official images should be taken into consideration.

Children and youth as social actors also attract scholarly attention. In their analysis of authoritarian practice in early-childhood curricula, Michael and Luna show how educational routines can promote hierarchy and limit the boundaries of the legitimate political discourse [15]. In her study on ideological indoctrination during crises, Almazroui highlights the vulnerability of children when public institutions integrate education, loyalty, and non-religious extremism [16]. In her analysis of the narratives on children used in legitimization of Russia's war, Hoban proves that childhood is a source of moral claims as well as a political object [17]. In the occupied regions of Ukraine, independent research documents the suppression of Ukrainian curriculum and language, promotion of Russian educational materials, and military-patriotic activities [18, 19]. It provides the background to the analysis of school performances, "lessons of courage," gift ceremonies and youth-organization imagery in holiday posts.

Official benevolence requires special attention as a political performance. Gift-giving by high-ranking officials turns the institution into a person who identifies the needs of others and is able to satisfy them. This kind of communication is in line with performative governance in which visibility becomes a substitute for accountability [20]. In the case of holidays, the conventions of generosity amplify this effect. An official is portrayed as the administrator, protector, and benefactor while his/her addressee is perceived as the dependent person expressing gratitude. Thus, the importance of a performance does not lie in the material value of a gift, but in the hierarchy established in the process of its transfer.

Scholarly analysis of Russian political communication provides the media environment in which performances occur. In their study of Putin's fourth presidency, Blackburn and Petersson discuss parades and commemorative events as the means of seeking legitimacy [21]. In their analysis of disinformation and hybrid warfare in the connection to the invasion of Ukraine, Dov Bachmann, Putter, and Duczynski pay attention to Russian strategies [22]. Large-scale analysis by Geissler et al. proves that there is an organized campaign of promotion of pro-Russian messages on social media [23]. Ptaszek, Yuskiv, and Khomych further demonstrate that Telegram news channels use sharply diverging strategic narratives to cover the invasion [24]. These findings are critical since they prove that the official Telegram post should not be considered as a neutral source of information about an event. Selection, sequencing, captions, and repetition are all parts of communicative action under analysis.

In addition, there are recent works dedicated to the role of Telegram as a place of digital witnessing and memory

disputes. In their article, Bareikytė and Makhortykh describe the platform's transformation from dispersed witnessing into propaganda in the case of Russia's war [25]. Pshenychnykh, Pfoser, and Mihelj prove that conflicts about monuments on Telegram are the means of linking material sites with polarized digital interpretation [26]. The earlier analysis of visual frames of the conflict in eastern Ukraine also shows the existence of systematic differences in the visual presentation of events by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities [27]. Hauter's analysis of forensic conflict research and Christensen and Khalil's study on remote war reporting are particularly important in the context of analysis of the material published on Telegram [28, 29]. Publicly available images can prove the recurrence of certain representational practices, but they cannot provide the understanding of the motives, consent, and beliefs of the participants.

In sum, the literature leads to three related assumptions. First, participation in holidays can signal adaptation, acceptance, or refusal in the case of politically repressive environment. Second, the official images of celebrations are performances rather than measurements of social consensus. Third, digital and domestic ritual can preserve affiliation when public cultural expression is restricted. However, the question remains open concerning the way how the same holiday celebration includes all these features. It is the subject of the current analysis which investigates the social functions of official visibility, child-centered celebration, and hidden continuity of Ukrainians.

3. CORPUS AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The qualitative design of the research project is retained. Its analytical corpus consists of 68 photographs and 11 video recordings distributed via Telegram channels of Russian occupation administrations in the temporarily occupied territories of southern Ukraine. Posts in the corpus illustrate festive events related to New Year and winter holidays that are organized or promoted by the occupation administration. Captions were analyzed along with visual materials as they identify the event, name institutional actors, and give the official interpretation of the scene. Materials related to local cultural practices in general terms were taken into consideration while interpreting counter-practices but not added to the visual corpus.

Material entered the corpus if it depicted recognizable festive or ritual event and at least one feature connected with the research question: the presence of the representatives of the occupation administration or institutions, participation of children and youth, national and political symbolism, ceremonial distribution of presents, a school or a public-space context, or a claim of stability, unity, gratitude or patriotic duty. Unit of analysis was a single photograph or video recording with its caption. Re-posted duplicates and images that had no obvious connection to New Year or winter celebration were not counted as independent units.

The existing analytical procedure consisted of three steps. Content analysis of qualitative kind identified recurrent event types, institutional actors, roles of participants, objects and verbal claims. Visual-semiotic analysis of photographs involved the analysis of composition, prominence, spatial organization, clothing, symbols, gestures, and the relation between the caption and the visual material. Comparative analysis, finally, considered the differences in the corpus: officials versus residents, adults versus children, civic spaces versus institutionalized spaces, recreational imagery versus military-patriotic content, and public displays versus private or digital continuity. These analyses belong to the same interpretive scheme and have not been transformed into quantitative measurements.

Coding categories reflected the substantive concerns of the original study: the performance of normality, administrative presence, paternalistic gift giving, youth socialization, militarization, ideological substitution, constraints on participation, privatization of celebration, digital continuity, and Ukrainian symbolic continuity. These categories were used for organizing the recurrent content and not calculating population frequency. Co-occurrence was crucial in the interpretation. A Christmas tree alone did not bear any fixed political meaning; the meaning changed depending on the company that the tree kept: the officials, organized school groups, military imagery, institutional captions, and the ceremony of present transfer. Hence, the interpretation was focused on relational configurations and not on isolated symbols.

It should be noted that reading the participation of residents and their behavior required special care. A photograph can show who was in front of a camera but does not prove if the participants attend the event voluntarily, understand the event in a particular way or if there were people who decided not to take part in the action. Claims of "limited" or "fragmented" participation only relate to the visible configuration in the collected materials and to the discrepancy between the expansive captions and relatively narrow scenes. They are not the estimates of public opinion of the local population. Similarly, the participation of children means that the representation of youth plays a central role but does not mean that children accept the message.

The use of public Telegram material raises the questions of ethics and security. The analysis does not identify individual residents and gives no direct link to images containing children. Since faces and identifiers are not necessary for the answer to the research question, they are not included in the presentation of results. The decision not to give direct links limits the opportunity for the independent verification of items but prevents the recirculation of potentially identifiable images from the coercive context. Therefore, the data-availability statement reflects the corpus and the conditions of access to it but does not expose individual participants.

Three limitations are inherent to the claims made in the analysis. First, occupation administration Telegram channels

are curated sources aimed at the promotion of the authorities in particular manner. The corpus is more suitable for the analysis of the projected normality than the reconstruction of all celebration practices. Second, private and closed group practices are structurally less visible than the official ones; the analysis can uncover the cultural logic of the practices but cannot estimate their prevalence. Third, the corpus allows the interpretation of repeated representational patterns but not causal claims about the identity transformation. These limitations are incorporated in the Results and Discussion.

4. RESULTS

The most frequent motif of the corpus is the transformation of festivity into managed public visibility. Occupation administration posts show decorated trees, concerts, and gift ceremonies in squares, schools, and institutional interiors where official figures can be positioned at the epicenter of the scene. Events are typically described in captions as evidence of stable collective existence, but the visual record contradicts this assertion in some cases. Spectators are grouped tightly together, children and public sector participants are frequent, and the camera singles out selected activities instead of showing broader use of civic space by residents. The difference does not mean that every event was necessarily rejected by the population. It does mean that “mass participation” in the festive event is mostly confirmed by publication rather than demonstrated.

This difference transforms the social meaning of the holiday. Prior to occupation, public celebration provided a link between municipal space and voluntary leisure time with a variety of associations. In the described representation, administration is the author of the celebration: it decorates, invites, distributes gifts, speaks, and publishes. Residents appear as its passive recipients or participants. Such grammar of public festivity makes celebration less like a voluntary gathering of residents and more like the demonstration of the ability of the occupation apparatus to fill civic spaces with familiar seasonal imagery.

Presentation of normalcy requires specific temporal framing. New Year marks the end of one annual cycle and the beginning of another. By showing decorations and ceremonies on a regular basis, official channels show that occupation is firmly established and possesses a calendar, traditions, and predictable institutional routine. It is unnecessary to deny war and violence explicitly; they are simply shifted to the outside of festive context. This is why a decorated square can perform political work even without any slogan. Publication shows that administrative continuity has taken the place of rupture and that ordinary life continues within the institutions organizing the event.

The second pattern is the personalization of power through gift-giving. “Tree of Wishes” format makes officials appear as benefactors who receive children’s requests and fulfill them publicly. This scene condenses institutional hierarchy in the form of easily comprehensible exchange. Children are presented as passive recipients of the aid; officials take the role of the providers of care; and distribution of resources becomes the act of personal generosity rather than public duty. The captions reinforce the hierarchy by mentioning the names of officeholders and highlighting gratitude, wishes, and their fulfillment.

The political significance is in the hierarchy staged in the process of gift-giving. The provision of material assistance may be useful to the recipient, but the ceremony itself associates welfare with loyalty to the occupying power. The child is not addressed as a citizen with rights, but as an object of official care. The repetition of this hierarchy in schools and administrative contexts turns it into routine. Patriarchal rule is thus performed visually: the authority knows, gives, protects, and receives recognition, while the role of the recipient is limited to wishing, accepting gifts, and appearing in the official report.

Children’s participation is the third and the most important pattern of visual construction of New Year. School celebrations, lessons of patriotism, letters or video greetings to soldiers, and organizations such as Yunarmiya, Dvizhenie Pervykh, and Yug Molodoy connect seasonal celebration and political education. Festive aesthetic creates smooth transition between leisure time and militarized political messages. Decorations, costumes, and gifts still remain visible, but they are accompanied by the narratives of service, bravery, duty, and belonging to Russia. The holiday thus turns into a low-conflict context for the introduction of militarized politics as an ordinary part of childhood.

Such images do not reveal children’s beliefs. They show that the occupation institutions allocate a prominent role to children in representation of political continuity. Adults represent the current administrative power, while children represent its future continuation. Their presence in the scene thus helps the occupation to create projections of demographic and cultural continuity beyond the actual event. The repeated combination of school, holiday, and military-patriotic organization therefore redistributes the socializing function of the holiday: instead of passing on only family or local traditions, it is used to practice an official identity and to normalize militarized understanding of citizenship.

This material, however, suggests that there are certain limitations in the attempt to incorporate children into the political narrative. Adult attempts to limit children’s public visibility, relocation of holiday into private space, maintaining Ukrainian timing and symbolism point towards the other organization of the holiday. Such practices are not present in civic squares and official channels to the same extent. Their significance is in limiting the exposure of children while maintaining connection. Small gatherings narrow the circle of trust; Kyiv time keeps the link with Ukraine; Ukrainian symbolism

preserves the visual language absent from the official ceremony; and video communication connects separated relatives within the same festive context.

The practices outlined in Table 1 all work according to the same basic logic: separation of cultural activity from visibility to administration. The protection of their practices derives from small scale, limited circulation, or ambiguous symbolism, while visibility and attribution are central concerns for official performances. This opposition helps clarify the point that the lack of a visible countercelebration event is not the lack of Ukrainian identity. Continuity under conditions of coercion is likely to be greatest precisely where it is invisible to the official camera. Moreover, this feature limits the data that can be derived from it: the study can understand the forms of practice but cannot determine how many residents use them.

Table 1. *Resident counter-practices*

Practice	Observable or reported form	Social significance
Ukrainian symbols	Blue-and-yellow colors, ribbons, or national signs used within restricted circles or localized images	Maintains an identifiable cultural vocabulary outside official representation
Private celebration	Small family gatherings and avoidance of occupation-organized public events	Reduces exposure while preserving the domestic continuity of the holiday
Kyiv-time orientation	Greetings or key festive moments synchronized with the time used in government-controlled Ukraine	Creates temporal distance from the occupation's public calendar
Online communication	Video calls and messages with relatives and friends in government-controlled territory or abroad	Sustains dispersed family and community ties during a shared ritual moment
Closed digital exchange	Circulation of Ukrainian images, greetings, and hopes for liberation in restricted groups	Supports symbolic affiliation without requiring a conspicuous public gathering

Digital media serve the two opposing purposes equally. Telegram allows occupation administrations to boost the visibility of staged events, detach certain images from the narrowness of the immediate physical audience, and communicate an official narrative across multiple locations. At the same time, Telegram also provides a space for families and trusted networks to send greetings and symbols away from the official event. Visibility on public channels and intimacy in closed groups thus do not exist in separate technological universes: it is a matter of uneven uses of the same communicative space. It projects power to one's neighbors and preserves affiliation despite the distance and monitoring.

The interaction of occupation setting, public performance, counter-practice, and social function is illustrated by Figure 1. This scheme does not introduce a distinct analytical approach. Rather, it summarizes the categories that are identified in the corpus and demonstrates how the same seasonal event can fulfill opposing social roles.

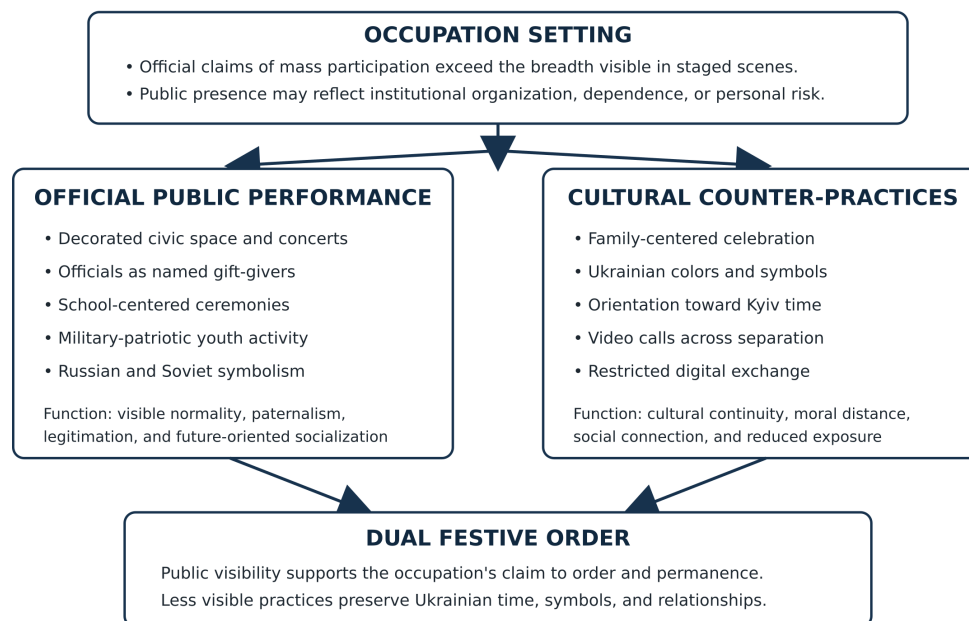


Figure 1. *The dual festive order*

As demonstrated by Figure 1, the key opposition here is not one between people who celebrate and those who don't. Rather, it is between two modes of organizing the celebration. The official mode requires public attribution, when

institutions have to be seen providing order, gifts, instruction, and patriotic meaning. Counter-practice requires selective removal from public attribution, as families and networks keep the celebration timing, symbolism, and connections while resisting the monopoly of the official ceremony. The resulting social order is dual since both modes operate in the same calendar space and territory but refer to different political communities.

The dual nature of the festive order helps to explain the emotional tension observed in the corpus. Festive imagery traditionally promises pleasure and suspension of routine pressures. In an occupied setting, the demand to appear cheerful might intensify rather than release the moral uneasiness of the participant. One might accept the gift, participate through an institution, or allow his/her child to participate in the event without agreeing with the ideology that comes with it. Official media merge these options together, as presence becomes proof of consent. It is crucial to separate attendance, representation, and identification analytically: camera captures the former; the caption imposes the latter; neither is sufficient evidence of loyalty.

The major findings of the research can be categorized using the pairs of functions shown in Table 2. These categories are not exclusive: the gift-giving promotes the performed normality; school participation facilitates the paternalism and socialization; military-patriotic content fosters ideological substitution; images' curation represents social control. Residents' reactions also intertwine: avoidance, private celebration, temporal orientation, and restricted communication coexist.

As seen in Table 2, official practices succeed most strongly in providing visible attribution but are less successful in proving voluntary identification. Counter-practices fail in terms of visible public presence but are able to preserve the boundaries of belonging. These phenomena cannot be interpreted by using the same criterion. Central square events are designed to be photographed and circulated, family greetings timed to Kyiv are designed to retain their meaning while remaining invisible. Their different levels of visibility are part of the result, not a flaw that can be rectified through treating the official visuals as an average sample of festive activity.

Table 2. *Occupation uses and resident responses*

Analytical area	Recurring form in the material	Interpretation
Performed normality	Decorated central spaces, concerts, seasonal programs, and captions emphasizing orderly mass celebration	Uses a familiar annual cycle to represent occupation institutions as stable providers of collective life
Paternalistic provision	"Tree of Wishes" ceremonies and gifts presented by named officials	Personalizes administrative power and positions children and families as dependent recipients
Youth socialization	School events, official speeches, organized performances, and youth-movement visibility	Places the occupation narrative within routine educational and festive activity
Militarization	"Lessons of courage," greetings to soldiers, military-patriotic symbols, and paramilitary youth organizations	Makes war-oriented duty appear compatible with ordinary childhood celebration
Ideological substitution	Russian and Soviet symbols, language, historical references, and claims of a single tradition	Replaces Ukrainian public meanings with a state-centered Russian account of belonging
Constrained participation	Compact staged audiences, organized groups, avoidance of broad public activity, and limited personal visibility	Reveals a gap between the captioned claim of collective enthusiasm and the narrower scene shown
Cultural continuity	Ukrainian symbols, Kyiv-time observance, family gatherings, online contact, and restricted groups	Maintains affiliation, moral distance, and social ties beyond the official festive stage

5. DISCUSSION

These results support an interpretation of occupation festivity as a performative governance strategy rather than an indication of completed social integration. The outputs provided through administrative channels are immediately visible – decorated squares, concerts, gifts, smiling children, official speeches – and the uncertainty of participation and identification are suppressed. It is similar to the larger framework of performative governance outlined by Ding [20], where visible action substitutes accountable responsiveness. In this case, there is also a territorial dimension. Repeated placement of institutions of the occupation administration into the center of the familiar festive calendar suggests their rightful organization of both the public space and time.

This research contributes to literature on political holidays in two ways. First, there is no need for the occupation administration to create a new holiday. An old one can be taken over and modified through symbolical substitutions, institutional host, speakers and youth participation. Solomonovich discusses the ability of a state to institutionalize a new commemoration to reorganize national memory [4]; this research shows how an old event can be politically rewritten through changes in the elements discussed above. Second, as Hintz and Quatrini suggest, modifications and refusals can be used as a tool for maintaining cultural identity under repression [5]. Private celebration, orientation toward time and selective non-participation fit this category perfectly.

The dual festive order concept proves more accurate than the idea of two realities. The public and private spheres are not separate. Residents can move between them, be pictured in official visuals, get the resources, communicate privately and preserve Ukrainian festive culture at different times. Coercive environment produces ambivalent behaviors since participation may be practical, institutional necessity or protective. What this research suggests is not that everyone is

either “loyalist” or “rebel”. It is that official festive meaning and cultural meaning no longer match. The integrative function of the holiday has become fractured even in its visible forms.

The prominence of children in official events is another way this fracture is expressed and projected into the future. Childhood brings moral warmth and time-depth to the regime which claims benevolence now and continuity in the future. The “Tree of Wishes” expresses this idea in personalized provision of gifts, school ceremonies and youth organizations connect it to the socialization process. This research finding supports the literature on political exploitation of childhood stories [17] and changes in the education in the occupied territories of Ukraine [18, 19]. What the holiday corpus adds is that these processes are incorporated in the emotional context of a holiday. Military-patriotic socialization is not presented as a temporary interruption of the ordinary childhood but as its component.

It works through juxtaposition. Visual images of the soldiers, patriotic lessons and uniforms of the youth organization members are combined with decorations, gifts and entertainment. The festive context reduces the symbolic distance between the war and childhood. It expands the audience for militarized messages by incorporating them into the activities directed at the family, not political organizations. The conclusion of this research, therefore, is that occupation administration uses the holiday representation to normalize militarized citizenship. It cannot, however, support claims about the success of indoctrination that would require direct evidence from children, their parents and teachers.

The digital dimension intensifies the opposition between staged consensus and dispersed continuity. Literature on the role of Telegram in the Russia-Ukraine war focuses on strategic framing, propaganda, witnessing and memory worlds [24, 25, 26]. This research adds festive ritual circulation to the list. An official post is not only reporting an event but through captions, picture selection and repetition assembling it into a story of normalcy. Restricted digital greeting is doing the opposite – allowing a culturally significant event to take place in separate households without making a spectacle out of it. Both are mediated rituals, but with different audience, risks and political functions.

However, the visual absence of something should be interpreted carefully. Volvach emphasizes the importance of the erasure of the Ukrainian presence from the semiotic landscape of occupied Crimea [14]. The absence of Ukrainian symbols from the official festive events in this corpus is consistent with ideological substitution, especially when Russian and Soviet markers are being highlighted. It does not, however, mean that something absent from an official image is also absent from the real life. Private practices found in the research results prove why. Cultural expression can be relocated away from public performance because of the danger involved. There is, therefore, a structural bias in the official archive toward the very order it tries to promote.

It reframes “quiet resistance” as well. This concept can be used if it stays in proportion with the evidence. A family celebration or a video call is not a political act automatically. It becomes relevant when it preserves the prohibited or displaced symbolic relation – Ukrainian language and colors, orientation toward Kyiv, communication with government-controlled territory or hopes for liberation. The common feature is preservation rather than defiance. This kind of practices protects the continuity of affiliation and limits the occupation’s right to define the holiday. Their political power is cumulative and boundary-preserving, not necessarily public and organizational.

Comparison with research on cultural heritage clarifies it. The war for cultural identity documented by Mishalova et al. and destruction of heritage described by Ivanyisko et al. and Bazhenova concern institutions, sites, historical narratives and traditions [10, 12, 13]. Holiday practice brings this conflict into the recurrent domestic and communal time. Here heritage is not just an object to be protected. It is a relationship reproduced through doing, timing, greeting, remembering and choice of the symbols to celebrate.

These findings have implications for interpreting occupation media and cultural reintegration after the occupation. First, photographs of attendance should not be equated with political consent. Participation and visibility are shaped by administrative organization, institutional dependence and personal safety. Second, the prominence of children makes educational and psychosocial work after the occupation especially important because of the military-patriotic meanings that might be associated with the holiday. Third, reintegration cannot be limited to replacing official symbols. It needs to recognize the private and digital practices of maintaining cultural relationships without making dangerous public actions the proof of resistance.

Some limitations of the research still remain. The corpus is small and deliberately qualitative and its sources are institutionally biased. It cannot provide information on distribution of opinions across cities and demographic groups, reconstruction of events off-camera and assessment of change over time without a dated longitudinal corpus. It cannot verify the voluntariness of participation or the meaning of a private practice. These limitations do not, however, negate the research contribution. This corpus is very well-suited to identify how the administration wants celebration to look like and find contradictions between the expansive claims and the administrative organization of the events. Interviews done in a safe environment will be needed to assess reception, memory and identity consequences.

6. CONCLUSION

Research question of this paper was how holiday practices represented in the occupation administration media redistribute the functions of the holiday between public legitimization, youth socialization and Ukrainian cultural continuity. 68 photographs and 11 video clips provide the answer. In the official public sphere the holiday gets reorganized as a performance of administrative normalcy. Decorated civic spaces, named officials, gift giving ceremonies, school events and militarized youth organizations represent the administration as a source of order, care and collective time. However, the same material does not show any signs of festive community. Narrowly framed attendance, domination of organized groups and need to declare “massiveness” through captions prove that the visibility is created administratively and not through active civic participation.

Youth socialization is a connecting link between immediate legitimization and permanent occupation. Gift giving puts children in a paternalistic relationship with officials, schools and youth organizations incorporate festive experience into the lesson of patriotism, duty and military-patriotic behavior. This research proves the prominence of this message, not its success. Children’s presence in the ceremony cannot be treated as a proof of their belief, and research refuses the conclusion that identity transformation has already been achieved.

Cultural continuity of Ukrainians happens in a different way. Family-oriented celebrations, Ukrainian colors, orientation toward Kyiv, online communication and restricted digital exchange separate belonging from visibility. They do not reproduce the spectacle of the occupation or require an equally visible counter-spectacle. They maintain relationships, moral distance and cultural vocabulary under the condition when the open display creates risk.

The main conclusion of this research is, therefore, that occupation does not replace one festive order with another one. It divides the New Year between an administratively visible and culturally persistent order. The first one uses the holiday to create legitimacy and to socialize the future political community; the latter limits it by preserving the Ukrainian time, symbols and relationships. This dual structure explains why festive imagery in the public space can look organized without establishing social integration. The decisive evidence for the future reintegration is not only what the occupation administration put on the public stage but what Ukrainians preserved behind it.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are based on publicly available visual materials (photo and video content) obtained from open-access Telegram channels controlled by Russian occupation administrations. These materials are available in the public domain; however, due to ethical and security considerations, direct links are not provided. Additional information can be made available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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