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On the Impossibility of Discursive-material closures: A Case of Banned TV channels in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Carpentier (2017), this paper shows how, on the one hand, discursive-material assemblages within the digital environment of interconnected information networks prevent the possibility of final discursive closures, while, on the other hand, they may weaken discourses, preventing them from serving as a mobilizing force for social change. To illustrate this, the paper discusses the case of Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, who banned oppositional television channels in a bid to shut down oppositional discourse by both discursive (the reduction of oppositional arguments) and material means (the physical closure of the studios). Discourse-material analysis presented in the paper draws on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and Nico Carpentier's Discursive-Material Knot.

1. Introduction

On February 2, 2021, Volodymyr Zelensky signed sanctions by the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) against two parliamentary deputies from 'Opposition Platform—For Life' (OPZZh), the main political rival of Zelensky's own party. As a result of these sanctions, three television channels controlled by the opposition—NewsOne, 112 Ukraine, and ZIK—were shut down. The punishment was imposed under the premise of investigating their alleged involvement in 'financing terrorism'—i.e., having economic relations with the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), separatist quasi-states that announced their independence from Ukraine in 2014 in the aftermath of the Euromaidan (Maidan) revolution.¹

Given that accusations of terrorism have been used as a perennial tactic by authoritarian leaders seeking to quash political dissent and suppress freedom of expression (Hughes, 2007; Muindi, 2021; Ngangum, 2021; Pokalova, 2010), the EU, the UN, and international press freedom watchdogs did not welcome Zelensky's move (IFJ, 2021; Radiosvoboda, 2021a; RSF, 2021). 'Ukraine's efforts to protect its territorial integrity and national security, as well as to defend itself from information manipulation are legitimate, but ... this should not come at the expense of freedom of media', the spokesperson of EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell maintained (RFE/RL, 2021).

As this paper argues, Zelensky's decision to sanction—amid criticism from international organizations and in violation of Ukrainian laws (Law on Sanctions, 2014)—oppositional politicians and shut down their news channels was an attempt to stabilize, within the national public sphere of Ukraine, meanings favorable to his unpopular neoliberal reforms. In what follows, I explicate my point by analyzing how the oppositional channels covered Zelensky's land reform and how Zelensky commented on this coverage in his address to the nation. Through this analysis, I trace Zelensky's closure of the oppositional discourse through the reduction of the variety of oppositional claims to one discursive moment.

In focusing my attention on the land reform, I do not argue that the oppositional channels were shut down only or mainly because of their criticism of this specific policy. In fact, the banned channels had been harshly criticizing all post-Maidan governments, not only Zelensky's, and voiced opposition to many different measures—Ukraine's nationalistic policies of cultural and linguistic unification, Euro-Atlantic integration, deindustrialization, and so forth. Any or all of these varied criticisms, which contributed to the decline of Zelensky's popularity, could have played a part in triggering the closure of the channels. Their ever-increasing ratings, especially among Russophone Ukrainians, not only contributed to the decline of Zelensky's popularity but also undermined 'the myth of a unified nation born in the Euromaidan

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¹ Euromaidan—a Ukrainian movement for European integration (2013–2014) characterized by intense street confrontations between protesters and police—ended with a change of power in Kyiv (Baysha, 2018). President Yanukovich was ousted from power and took refuge in Russia.

uprising', which 'marginalize[d] or even reject[ed] the legitimacy of alternative versions of Ukrainian national identity' and Oleg Zhuravlev and Volodymyr Ishchenko point out (2020: 232).

Other factors might have been at play as well. As suggested by Ishchenko (2022), for example, because the shuttered TV channels 'were pushing the conspiracy theory about Hunter Biden and Burisma', it is conceivable that 'Zelensky could have thought that blocking Medvedchuk's stations would be seen as a "friendly gesture" towards the new president' (33). Finally, one should also keep in mind that the closure of the channels took place under a state of undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine (the Donbas war), which created favorable conditions for censorship, as any criticism of governmental activities could be taken by many as "treason." As Lucan Ahmad Way (2019) argues, 'President Petro Poroshenko used the Donbas war as a pretext to take actions that directly undermined democratic norms' by repeatedly harassing Russian-language media that opposed the government (54). As this paper illustrates, Zelensky went further than his predecessor, who at least did not ban oppositional media by unconstitutional means.

Of numerous other important issues mentioned earlier, I have chosen to analyze coverage of the land reforms for three major reasons: (1) it has become the prototypical example of Zelensky's neoliberal program (Baysha, 2022), (2) it has been one of the most hotly debated issues within Ukrainian society, with up to 72 percent of Ukrainians against it (KIIS, 2019, 2020), (3) it was one of the most decisive factors in the sharp decline of Zelensky's popularity (Razumkov Center, 2019), and (4) in his address to the nation, Zelensky used the coverage of his land reform by oppositional media as an example of their blatant lies and an excuse for their closure. The very fact that in his address to the nation Zelensky referred to the land reform, which had been adopted one year before the closure of the channels, demonstrates that this issue was of utmost importance to him.

Discussing the case of the closed channels and drawing on the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as well as Nico Carpentier (2017), this paper shows how, on the one hand, discursive-material assemblages within the digital environment of interconnected information networks prevent the possibility of final discursive closures, while, on the other hand, they may weaken discourses, preventing them from serving as a mobilizing force for social change. The manuscript is divided into several parts: (1) Context, (2) Theoretical foundations, (3) Research procedure, (3) Results, (4) Discussion, and (5) Conclusion.

2. Context: the land reform and its discontents

Since the announcement of Ukraine's state independence in 1991, land sale has been one of the country's most hotly debated and emotionally charged issues. This is no surprise: About 70 percent of the country's surface (some 42 million hectares) has been used for agriculture; roughly 75 percent of this agricultural area is arable land, two-thirds of which is fertile black soil (chernozem).

The state monopoly on land ownership, a Soviet legacy, was abolished in Ukraine in 1992, when Ukrainian peasants gained the right to leave their collective farms and instead work on individual plots of land, which they obtained from the government at no charge. However, land sale had been outlawed until Zelensky and his party Servant of the People (hereafter, 'servants') came to power in 2019 and established full control over the Parliament (the Verkhovna Rada) by obtaining an outright majority of parliamentary seats (Baysha, 2022).

Zelensky's first Cabinet of Ministers was formed on August 29, 2019. Only three days later, among other neoliberal initiatives such as mass privatization of industrial enterprises and the deregulation of labor relations, Zelensky instructed his Prime Minister to work out a new Land Code by October, with the Verkhovna Rada to adopt it by December (Zelensky, 2019). In the first reading, the Rada, controlled by 'servants', approved the new land law on November 13, 2019. Its final adoption took place on March 31, 2020, during an extraordinary parliamentary meeting convened as an exception to a coronavirus lockdown, when

Ukrainians could not protest (Government Portal, 2020).

The law was vehemently opposed by Ukrainian farmers. With the slogan 'Do not sell the Motherland!' (Ksenz, 2020), they were blocking highways, picketing the Rada, and skirmishing with police. Agrarians were especially outraged by the fact that the government had been rushing headlong toward opening the land market without adopting the necessary laws for it to operate transparently: that is, laws regarding the land cadastre, preferential loans for farmers, the prevention of raiding, and so forth. Before opening the market, the protesters argued, the government should put everything in order so that farmers would be guaranteed cheap credit and protected from the threats of landlessness, raiders, and monopolization.

Unpopular neoliberal reforms, initiated by Zelensky, combined with industrial decline, salaries in arrears, budget shortfalls, rising unemployment and catastrophic rates of labor migration and depopulation, fomented massive levels of discontent. In September 2019, when the new government was formed, 57 percent of Ukrainians believed that events in Ukraine were developing in the right direction; in March 2020, when the law was adopted, 69 percent of Ukrainians believed that events in the country were developing in the wrong direction (Rating, 2020). In March 2021, new sociological data showed Zelensky's presidential rating at 24.0 percent (KIIS, 2021). This was the context in which opposition politicians were sanctioned and the television channels under their control banned.

The purpose of this study was to trace the formation of opposing discourses regarding the land reform in the respective presentations of President Zelensky and the banned oppositional channels. My research questions were therefore: How did the opposing discourses come to be formed? Which signifiers/associations were activated and ignored by each of them? What material factors were incorporated into the discursive struggle? How did these material factors influence the outcome of the discursive fight? To answer these questions, I employed discourse-material analysis informed by the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) as well as Nico Carpentier's (2017) Discursive-Material Knot, which I briefly discuss in the following section.

3. Theoretical foundations

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (DT) considers discourses from macro-textual and macro-contextual perspectives. Originally developed in their volume *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS), DT postulates that social reality is only possible on the condition of 'discursivity', where discourse is understood as a 'social fabric' on which 'social actors occupy different positions' (xiii). Articulated through both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, discourse appears as "a real force that contributes to the moulding and constitution of social relations" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 110). Discourse is thus conceptualized as a 'structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice', where 'articulation' means 'any practice establishing relations among elements' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). Discourses are stabilized by nodal points or 'master-signifiers,' which assume 'a 'universal' structuring function' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 98).

A specific discourse forms when specific nodal points and other elements from the discursive field—a reservoir of all available signs—are articulated through being equivalentially linked to one another. If one moment assumes a hegemonic (synecdochic) representation of the chain of all other elements, it 'becomes something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness' (Laclau, 2005, p. 71). To be sure, this signifier is not completely 'empty' because it signifies what, strictly speaking, it is not: an impossible totality of various elements united equivalentially. If used by alternative discourses, the same signifier comes to be linked to alternative chains of equivalence; if this happens, the meaning of such a signifier appears to be 'suspended'—it becomes 'floating'.

One of the central points in the discourse theory (DT) of Ernesto

Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) is the paradoxical impossibility yet necessity of discursive closures. On the one hand, no signification is possible without discursive closures; on the other hand, such closures are always precarious and unstable. Any ultimate fixing of meanings is inconceivable given that they can be destabilized at any time through the activation of alternative links between the elements of the discursivity field. It is here that the idea of contingency, central to DT, comes to the fore. Because signs may be linked to alternative associations, which may lead to the formation of alternative discourses, any meaning and any social configuration (as DT equates the social and the discursive) is seen as subject to change.

All social meanings and identities are both impossible and necessary: 'impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity' (Laclau, 2005, p. 70). No ultimate fixing of meaning is possible, since any constructed meaning is 'subverted by a field of discursivity which overflows it' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 113). These formulations are always precarious and unstable, given the discord between attempts to construct collective identities (or meanings) and the discursive impossibility of their total closure.

However, prolonged discursive closures (although not eternal) do happen—either through social 'sedimentation' when 'the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade' (Laclau, 1990, p. 34) or through 'administrative practices which deal bureaucratically with social issues' (Laclau, 2001: 12). The latter is central to this research. By banning oppositional channels, Zelensky strove to stabilize meanings favorable to his political course—taking away their precarity and instability, making them immutable and fixed—through bureaucratic procedures. As I show in the following section, to do so, he had to transform discursively the oppositional media into enemies of the people, as well as liquidate the physical apparatus of their broadcasting—in other words, he had to disable their discursive-material assemblage. One cannot fully grasp the situation without accounting for the interrelation of its material and discursive aspects—an analytical enterprise in which Carpentier's (2017) discursive-material knot (DMK) will be a useful tool.

In Carpentier's (2017) view, the expansion of discourse theory to include the material makes analysis of the social richer, while also allowing otherwise invisible forces to be recognized, adding contingency to established meanings. As Carpentier (2017) puts it, the incorporation of the material into analysis 'shows a richer landscape of forces that can destabilize existing sedimentations, and create more contingency' (68). The increased contingency of all the DMK components works against discursive closures, thereby boosting the likelihood of established/hegemonic meanings being challenged.

By the logic of invitation and dislocation, the material participates in discursive struggles over meanings, suggesting this or that particular articulation. Objects enter the social not only by assuming the role of intermediaries or mediators, but also by acting as social agents of their own. Any event—any material change—can dislocate discourse if the latter proves unable to attribute meaning to the former; in such cases, the material destabilizes discourses by pointing to their internal contradictions and their limited capacity to represent the material world. The material can disrupt or strengthen discursive orders; however, it is also possible that its invitation could be ignored, and an alternative meaning attached to it. Carpentier's (2017) model thus allows one to see meanings/social configurations as even more contingent by accounting for otherwise invisible material forces; it provides an opportunity to understand social change through the shifting landscape of discursive-material configurations.

4. Research procedure

For the purposes of this study, I analyzed (1) Zelensky's address to the nation on the closure of the oppositional channels, as posted on the

presidential YouTube channel, and (2) primetime (8–10 p.m.) talk shows on two oppositional channels, NewsOne and 112 Ukraine, which were devoted to the land reform and broadcast between September 2, 2019 (the day Zelensky instructed the government to work out the land reform) and March 31, 2020 (the adoption of the new land code). Within this period, the talk shows of the two channels were monitored daily. Overall, 96 television programs on the land reform were analyzed; the average length of the programs was 35 min.

To translate the ontological positions of DT and DMK into the ontic realm, I employed a two-step research procedure. First, through carefully listening to the speeches of President Zelensky and his opponents from the banned channels, I collected a comprehensive list of all the signifiers—the basic elements of any discourse formation—to trace how each of the opposing discourses of the land reform had been formed through equivalential linkages between signs. In other words, I had been tracing how the empty signifier "land reform" acquired different meanings in the presidential and oppositional discourses by being linked to different signs, equivalentially united. Although I provide only a limited number of examples in this paper due to space constraints, the complete universe of prime-time programs within the indicated period was analyzed—no sampling was involved.

Then, I identified the connections between these discourses and other elements of the discursive-material field to consider the formation of discursive-material assemblages that are "positioned at the ontic level" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 9). I was especially interested in (a) spatiality of assemblages, because it is in space that the material and the discursive interact, (b) the dislocation of discursive-material assemblages by events conceptualized as "material changes" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 31), and (c) entextualization—a concept which I use to denote "the linguistic condensation" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 48) of the material into discourse. The results of my discourse-material analysis are presented in the following section.

5. Results

5.1. Zelensky's address to the nation

Zelensky's address to the nation, which he recorded on February 5, 2021, lasted 16 minutes, and only 30 seconds of the 16-minute address were devoted to the legality of the NSDC's sanctions. As Zelensky (2021) put it, "The decision of the NSDC is legal. It is logical and justified" (11'57"–12'04"). For two and a half minutes, he explained that doing business with Donbas amounted to 'undermining Ukraine's national security' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 8'04"–8'24"). Another 13 minutes he spent on the amorality of the oppositional media, describing them as 'professional armies lying and zombifying people very professionally' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 9'47"–9'56"):

There are mass media, and there are weapons of mass destruction. Information projectiles strike the mind There is criticism against individuals, and there is sabotage against the country There is freedom of speech, and there are words that can lead to non-freedom. (15'07"–15'36").

'Only a truthful word should be free', concluded Zelensky (15'25"–15'27").

So as to cement the mendacity of oppositional channels in the eyes of the nation, the president dubbed them 'corrupted media' (0'35"–0'37") in the pocket of powerful manipulators (literally, 'pocket channels') (0'30"–0'37"). In Zelensky's view, they 'poured into people's ears endless streams of lies' (1'01"–1'08") that were 'arrogant, cynical, and most important, dangerous' (6'01"–6'06"). Those who did not 'want to get a portion of such juicy and perfect nonsense for lunch' (0'37"–0'45") should not listen to these channels, Zelensky argued.

In Zelensky's view, it would be better if, instead of swallowing the information poison of the opposition, Ukrainians would turn to their president, who had been directly and fairly informing them 'about our

work and the victories of Ukraine' (0'46"–0'52") without media distortions. In contrast to the fake-news channels spreading 'delirium on a cosmic scale' (3'35"–3'36"), as Zelensky put it, he was ready to discuss with his nation 'everything in detail: openly and honestly' (6'40"–6'45"). According to Zelensky, his authority to safeguard the truth against rogue media organizations came from his presidential obligation 'to defend the sovereignty of the state: its security and independence' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 7'43"–7'50").

What is easily discernible in Zelensky's discursive construction is the dichotomization of the social into two irreconcilable parts: the president, representing the interests of Ukrainians, and the radical outside of the Ukrainian nation, the opposition and its media seen as serving the interests of Ukraine's enemies. As is evident from the equivalential chains of discursive elements activated through this articulation, the empty signifier 'president' acquired its meaning through being linked to the ideas of working, guarding truth, defending Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, fighting against the enemies of Ukraine, protecting the interests of the Ukrainian people, and achieving victory in their name. The oppositional channels, in turn, acquired their meaning through linkage to sabotage against the country, weapons of mass destruction, disinformation, danger, non-freedom, lies, delirium, nonsense, and so on. In Zelensky's presentation, the frontier separating the two homogenized totalities—the president (representing the nation and the civilized part of the world) and the oppositional channels (aligned with the enemies of Ukraine)—appeared to be solid and impermeable; no common symbolic space was reserved for negotiating differences and finding compromises.

Not only did Zelensky present the oppositional media as a 'radical other'—imagined homogeneously as traitors and information terrorists using 'weapons of mass destruction'²—but he also approved of their erasure from the field of political representation, which can be viewed on both a symbolic/discursive level (the erasure of alternative meanings) and in physical/material terms (the closure of TV studios, silencing of broadcast apparatuses, etc.). The closure of the channels—a material development transcending the realm of the symbolic—came as a logical outcome of such a dichotomization of the social as discursively performed by the Ukrainian president. As a result of the channels' closure, hundreds of media workers lost their jobs, while millions of viewers—albeit temporarily (see below)—lost access to their favorite oppositional voices and perspectives. This is how the discursive-material assemblage of the sanctions, aimed at the stabilization of certain meanings, worked; and it is exactly through the interplay of the discursive and the material that further destabilization of these meanings occurred, which I will discuss after presenting in the next section how Zelensky's land reform was framed by the oppositional channels.

5.2. Oppositional discourse

According to Zelensky's representation of oppositional discourse with respect to the land reform, the 'trio of channels' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 6'10"–6'15"), as he called the banned oppositional media, lied blatantly by claiming 'that the government took the land from the people' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 9'56"–9'59"). Meanwhile, my analysis of the oppositional programs shows that there had been a variety of critical arguments employed by oppositional speakers. The unconstitutionality of the reform was the main claim of the opposition, which highlighted that, according to the Constitution of Ukraine, land is an object 'of the right of property of the Ukrainian people' and 'the fundamental national wealth that is under special state protection' (Constitution, 1996). As Victor Medvedchuk, a sanctioned OPZZh leader, put it, land 'is the property of our citizens. Moreover, sacred property' (Medvedchuk, 2019, p. 59'31"–59'32"). What is evident from this and numerous

similar constructions is that the Ukrainian land—the basic material component of each discursive-material assemblage analyzed in this paper—was entextualized into the oppositional discourse with the further linking of the sign "land" to the idea of an invaluable national resource that is not for sale. This contrasts with the governmental discourse, in which the Ukrainian soil was entextualized as just another commodity (Baysha, 2022).

The idea of a national referendum was very popular among the oppositional speakers whose discursive constructions I analyzed. 'Conduct an all-Ukrainian referendum and ask people. Do people want Ukrainian land to be sold? And if so, how do they see it happening?' Natalia Korolevskaya (2020, 4'23"–4'44"), a parliamentary deputy from OPZZh, inquired. 'Suggest several options. Let people choose. Why are you afraid of the people?' said Volodymyr Katsman, another OPZZh member (2019, 51'57"–52'05"). 'Why do you decide for the people? Who gave you that right?'—this was a reaction from Vitaly Zhuravsky (2019, 49'44"–49'48"), a former parliamentary deputy from the Party of Regions.

The fact that the reform had been pushed forward without proper deliberation was a specific point of oppositional indignation. 'Discussion is absent', claimed Vasil Horbal (2019), another former parliamentary deputy from the Party of Regions. 'Either you are for [the reform] or you are against. If you are against, then you are the enemy', he lamented (2019, 2'38"–2'44"), highlighting the problem of the Manichean imaginary of Zelensky's team, discussed in the previous section. Criticizing this attitude, most oppositional speakers believed the reform should be taken slowly, 'step by step', as Andriy Dikun, the head of the All-Ukrainian Agrarian Council, suggested. 'Agrarian business is 17 percent of GDP and 40 percent of foreign exchange earnings of our country. We all depend on the agricultural sector today. All the reforms ... must not hurt' (2019, 1'11"–1'33"), he maintained.

Given the omnipresent corruption in Ukrainian institutions (Transparency International, 2020), including the law enforcement system, many speakers were also concerned that Ukrainians would be unable to protect themselves against raiders and other criminals who would be interested in taking land from peasants. 'Don't you need to start with the law enforcement system?.. Give a guarantee to Ukrainians that they will not raid him, will not deceive him, and that Ukraine will protect him. And then enter the land market'—this is how one talk-show host addressed a representative of the new government (Stepoviy, 2019, p. 45'17"–45'33").

The criticism of the haste with which the reform had been carried out was explained by the speakers predominantly in terms of the pressure put on the new government of Ukraine by the institutions of global neoliberal power such as the IMF, the World Bank, multinational corporations, and so forth. As one participant on a show, an ordinary viewer, put it, 'The Bank for Reconstruction and Development has laid eyes on Ukrainian lands—one. IMF—two. Agricultural giants and global transnational corporations' (Viewer, 2019, p. 65'51"–66'03").

As seen in other commentary—e.g., 'We are under external control ... The Servant of the People is the Servant of the IMF' (Zhuravsky, 2019, p. 40'56"–40'58")—this point of view was conventional on the channels.

Given that small farmers do not have sufficient resources to buy land, most critics believed that only transnational corporations, large holdings, oligarchs, corrupted officials, and criminals would be able to acquire Ukrainian soil—in short, those who have money. 'There is no money. Where to get it? In which bank? 92 percent of market participants have absolutely no resources', argued Leonid Kozachenko (2019: 38'18"–38'45"), the president of the Ukrainian Agrarian Association. It was also widely believed that the reform would allow profiteers to consolidate land plots into large tracts and eventually reap great profits by selling them to Western companies once the market opened to foreigners. 'Money depreciates Investors are now actively looking for some assets to invest in ... A very large amount is at stake to open this land market', argued Alexei Kushch (2020), a Kyiv-based economist

² Although the signifier 'terrorist' was not activated in Zelensky's speech, the NSDC decision was based on terrorism-related charges (Zinets, 2021).

(6'40"–7'26").

In the view of oppositional speakers, transnational speculators would take control of Ukrainian soils, and then 'there will be no place for a Ukrainian peasant, a Ukrainian farmer, or even a Ukrainian large landowner', as Yuri Pavlenko, (2019: 40'23"–40'35"), a parliamentary deputy from OPZZh, put it. Denys Marchuk (2019), the deputy chairman of the Ukrainian Agrarian Council, agreed: 'And we need people to live, to build a village. To build kindergartens, to build schools, to keep young families in Ukraine We are categorically against the bills that promote the development of latifundia' (Marchuk, 2019, p. 2'21"–2'37"). In other words, what bothered the opponents of Zelensky's reform most was that the opening of the land market would deprive Ukrainians not only of soil but also of living space, given that up to 70 percent of Ukraine's territory is agricultural land.

The number and variety of oppositional arguments against the land reform is far greater than illustrated in this brief overview. However, even from this short account it should be clear that Zelensky's claim that the opposition lied about the government taking 'the land from the people' is a grand simplification of the disagreement around the land reform. In the representation of the opposition, the empty signifier 'land reform' was equivalentially united with such nodal points as ignoring the Constitution and public opinion, dancing to the tune of the institutions of global neoliberal power, the loss of state sovereignty and independence, acting with haste and thoughtlessness, indifference for the well-being of Ukrainian farmers and the future of the Ukrainian village, and so on. In fact, many of these oppositional concerns resonate with the arguments of academics claiming that the "[World] Bank's record in the post communist area—that has experienced a most ambitious enactment of land reform—is one of growing disillusionment" (Varga, 2020, p. 8). Instead of decreasing rural poverty through the stimulation of smallholder farming, Mihai Varga argues, the reforming of land relations in Eastern Europe brought land consolidation 'at the expense of those not "viable" enough' (2020; 7). This is exactly what raised concerns among the oppositional voices of the banned channels.

In Zelensky's discursive construction, all these arguments were rendered invisible, their diversity reduced to the synecdoche of a single claim 'that the government took the land from the people'. The diversity of all the voices on the oppositional media was also reduced by Zelensky to the formula of a 'trio of channels' (Zelensky, 2021, p. 6'10"–6'15"). What this construction made invisible is that the sanctioned 'trio of channels' represented, in fact, the views of different groups within Ukrainian society that opposed the reform. Among those speaking on the shows, there were current and former parliamentary deputies, economists, political experts, leaders of agrarian associations, activists, farmers, and more. In other words, the channels represented various strata of the Ukrainian population—their public opinion, with all its variation and subtle shading. In Zelensky's discursive construction, however, this richness was wiped out, leaving only the black and the white. The diversity of social actors and their democratic demands were made invisible as one discursive position assumed a representation of many different positions united equivalentially. An impossible but necessary (for the president) totality of oppositional media acting as information terrorists was formed; without it, no connections could have been drawn between the oppositional channels and Donbas separatists (equated to terrorists) and no sanctions could have been launched.

6. Discussion: discursive-material non-closures

As illustrated by the events that followed, Zelensky's attempt to shut down oppositional discourse and stabilize meanings favorable to his political course ultimately failed, despite his success in physically closing the channels. As soon as the three oppositional outlets—112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK—were deprived of an opportunity to broadcast, a large portion of their experts and viewers migrated to other media platforms, such as the television channel Nash, the news site Strana.ua, and others. The materiality of these and numerous other

media platforms that were sympathetic to alternative perspectives invited the oppositional voices from the banned channels to sustain their oppositional discourse through dislocating it to new spaces. Moreover, by a joint effort of banned journalists, the new online oppositional channels First Independent Channel and UKRLIVE were established. From these new platforms, oppositional speakers could share their concerns and visions of alternative futures with their publics. Zelensky's signing of the NSDC sanctions, in other words, was an event that triggered numerous discursive-material transformations allowing oppositional discourse to escape closure.

Zelensky, however, had no intention of retreating. Strana.ua was accused of spreading 'anti-Ukrainian propaganda' and sanctioned by the NSDC in August 2021 (UP, 2021). In December 2021, new sanctions were signed against the companies owning the newly established channels First Independent Channel and UKRLIVE (DW, 2021). The television channel Nash, whose popularity has been steadily growing since the closure of 112 Ukraine, ZIK, and NewsOne (Radiosvoboda, 2021b), had been a constant threat of sanctions over 'the language of hatred' that some of its speakers have ostensibly employed (Focus, 2021) until it was shut down by the decision of NSDC on February 11, 2022.

Going into the details of these new developments is beyond the scope of this paper, but the general pattern observed across all of them is similar to what has been discussed so far. On the one hand, the sanctioning of new oppositional media is about Zelensky's continuing attempts to arrest the flow of difference, to close the discourse, and to establish within the public sphere of Ukraine stable meanings favorable to his reforms. On the other hand, these new cases only confirm the impossibility, within the digital environment of interconnected information networks, of closing discourse and establishing meanings that remain forever fixed. This impossibility manifests itself in the revival of the oppositional discourse in new discursive-material configurations that cannot be controlled by the government. Strana.ua, for example, has changed its domain into Strana.news, which is administered from abroad; other oppositional media have moved to YouTube or Telegram—platforms beyond the reach of the Ukrainian government.

All of these developments confirm what Laclau and Mouffe theoretically deduced as early as the mid-1980s. With the advent of the Internet, however, the speed with which new discursive-material assemblages may break apart and reappear in unprecedented configurations has accelerated enormously since Laclau and Mouffe published their *HSS*. It is much more difficult nowadays to keep meanings stable 'simply through administrative practices which deal bureaucratically with social issues' (Laclau, 2001: 12). This is what Zelensky's sanctions clearly demonstrate.

A rhetorical intervention by a head of state—the denouncing of certain oppositional media as enemies of Ukraine—was sufficient to achieve the physical shutting down of the channels. However, it was not enough to accomplish a stabilization of meanings within society, which was the aim of the 'servants'. On the contrary, the meanings that Zelensky wanted Ukrainians to accept as hegemonic were destabilized even further. In December 2021, 42 percent of Ukrainian citizens named Zelensky as their biggest disappointment of the outgoing year. In contrast to Zelensky's belief in 'victories', which he touted in his address to the nation, 71 percent believed the situation in the country was deteriorating. They cited 'the level of prices and tariffs (81% indicated that the situation was getting worse), the economy (76%), national stability (74%), health (72%), public confidence in the future (69%)', and so on (Razumkov Center, 2021). Although all opinion polls are constructs that can hardly be taken as an objective reflection of social reality, these data can at least provide an opportunity to hypothesize that the destabilization of Zelensky's discourse of victory happened not only due to the spreading of oppositional narratives, but also due to the factual/material circumstances of people's lives, which a strong majority of Ukrainians signified with the meaning of worsening living conditions.

There is one aspect of the situation, however, that has been left without attention so far. Despite the impossibility of total discursive-material closures, permanent transformations of the discursive-material assemblages aimed at avoiding closures may lead to the weakening of the oppositional discourse. Not all media users may be savvy enough to switch easily from one platform to another; not all of them may be motivated enough to do so; and not all of them may be firm enough in their predisposition not to believe government propaganda about the ‘terroristic activities’ of oppositional media. It is here that we come to an important factor that is missing from analysis centered purely on the discursive aspects of the situation: the ability of media platforms not only to ‘engage in discourse production’, ‘unify different voices’, and ‘support a regularity of dispersion’ (Carpentier, 2017, p. 52), but also to strengthen or weaken the discourse. It is the material aspects of the discursive-material assemblages—the technological strength of media assemblages and their ability to reach broad strata of the population—that may contribute to a great extent to weakening or strengthening the mobilization potential of the discourses employed by the opposition.

As mentioned earlier, the oppositional discourse signifying Zelensky’s reforms with the meanings of unconstitutionality, dependence on the institutions of global neoliberal power, disregard for the interests of the people, and so on has been widely shared within Ukrainian society—regardless of whether the oppositional channels were banned. This is evident from various opinion polls before and after the sanctions indicating that many people in Ukraine identify themselves with criticism of governmental policies in the social-economic sphere. However, to mobilize people for a struggle against the unpopular reforms, the opposition needs its media to remain accessible for broad strata of the population. Otherwise, even if the oppositional discourse resonates with public opinion, there is a significant chance that the opposition will fail to accomplish its mission—to serve as a realm in which public opinion is formed to be mobilized for influencing governmental decisions.

7. Conclusion

Using the case study of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the oppositional TV channels banned by his government, this paper illustrates that the idea of discursive contingency, elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), makes even more sense when one accounts not only for the discursive but also the material aspects of the situation—discursive-material assemblages, to put it in Carpentier’s (2017) terms. If the rhizomatic connections between all the elements of these assemblages are accounted for, it becomes clear that the closure of discourse—achieved not only by discursive means (the reduction of democratic demands to one discursive moment) but also by physical shuttering of institutional infrastructure—looks even more impossible today than when Laclau and Mouffe developed their theory. However, as this paper also demonstrates, the impossibility of finally closing oppositional discourse does not necessarily mean it is impossible to weaken this discourse, preventing it from serving as a tool for public mobilization.

Unceasing governmental efforts to close oppositional discourse and unremitting attempts by the opposition to prevent this from happening through the creation of new discursive-material configurations may lead to the weakening of the opposition’s mobilization potential despite the popularity of its claims among broad strata of the population. This observation clearly supports the argument put forward by Carpentier (2017) regarding the potential of the material not only to engage in discourse production, unify different voices, and support a regularity of dispersion, but also to strengthen or weaken discourses by influencing their ability to perform as a force pushing forward social transformations. Discursive strength arising from political opposition and sustained by oppositional discursive-material assemblages is a social force making democratic policies possible; to analyze it, one needs to account for all the complexity of discursive-material configurations.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Olga Baysha: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, This is to confirm that I am the sole author of research presented in the paper “On the Impossibility of Discursive-Material Closures: A Case of Banned TV Channels in Ukraine”: its, Conceptualization, Methodology, and research design. Data gathering, analysis, and the presentation of its results have also been performed by me.

Declaration of competing interest

With this statement, I certify that **I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.**

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