

Cinematic Statecraft: Engineering Electoral Choice Through Strategic Storytelling in Eastern Europe

MARIANNA PRYSIAZHNIUK,
PHD STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST; POLITICAL
ANALYST, DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVES FOUNDATION

On April 21, 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy won Ukraine's presidential election with 73 percent of the vote. While Western analysts struggled to explain how a television entertainer could so thoroughly dominate Ukraine's political establishment, Ukrainian voters were not surprised. Spanning three seasons, voters had watched Zelenskyy play President Vasyl Holoborodko in *Servant of the People*, experiencing his fictional presidency across dozens of episodes and multiple emotional arcs. When Zelenskyy announced his real candidacy in December 2018, voters confronted not the question "Can we imagine this comedian as president?" but rather "Should we elect the president we have already emotionally experienced?"

The Ukrainian case represents an extreme manifestation of a phenomenon increasingly visible across electoral democracies: the deployment of long-form fictional narratives as preconditioning that shapes the emotional and cognitive substrates upon which campaigns subsequently build. Unlike traditional campaign communications such as advertisements, debates, and rallies, which are recognized as persuasion attempts and thus trigger critical evaluation, political films operate through what scholars⁶⁶ theorize as narrative transportation: the psychological state in which audiences suspend critical faculties and process stories experientially rather than analytically.

This article examines three Eastern European cases in which fictional narratives appeared in proximity to electoral cycles: Ukraine's *Servant of the People* (2015–2019), Romania's *The Perfect Candidate* (2024), and Moldova's *Plaha* (2025). While these cases differ dramatically in institutional settings, media environments, and political outcomes, they exhibit structural similarities in deploying narrative frames that align with campaign objectives.

We analyze them not as determinative of electoral outcomes but as components within broader persuasion ecosystems, where strategic storytelling functions as a soft preconditioning mechanism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Existing research addresses components of this phenomenon but not their intersection. The strategic narratives literature⁶⁷ explains how political actors compete to impose meaning through system, identity, and issue narratives, but treats narratives primarily as elite communications rather than mass entertainment. Conversely, entertainment-education research^{68,69} documents how audiences internalize beliefs through fictional storytelling but rarely examine electoral politics.

We bridge this gap by theorizing political films as strategic narrative vectors leveraging entertainment-education mechanisms for electoral purposes. Our

66 Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. 2000. "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (November): 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.

67 Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.

68 Bandura, Albert. 2004. "Social Cognitive Theory for Personal and Social Change by Enabling Media." In *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*, edited by Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, 75–96. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

69 Slater, Michael D., and Donna Rouner. 2002. "Entertainment-Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion." *Communication Theory* 12, no. 2 (May): 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00265.x>.

contribution identifies the use of emotionally absorptive long-form fiction to establish cognitive-affective templates that campaigns later activate through associative priming.

The technology operates through what we conceptualize as a five-stage pipeline:

1. Entertainment-framed entry lowers epistemic vigilance.
2. Narrative transportation produces experiential processing.
3. Archetypal encoding creates durable cognitive templates.
4. Emotional priming establishes latent affective associations.
5. Electoral activation triggers pre-positioned cognitive structures.

Each stage leverages well-documented psychological mechanisms, but their combination and deliberate deployment in electoral contexts represent an evolution in campaign strategy deserving systematic analysis.

The post-communist context provides particularly fertile ground for this phenomenon due to three converging factors: weak party institutionalization creating space for personality-based politics; widespread cynicism making traditional messaging less effective while increasing receptivity to anti-establishment narratives; and hybrid media ecosystems enabling rapid transmedia amplification through social platforms.⁷⁰

CASE I: UKRAINE 2019 – PROSPECTIVE MOBILIZATION

Servant of the People premiered in October 2015 on 1+1, Ukraine's most-watched TV channel. The series followed high school history teacher Vasyl Holoborodko (Zelenskyy), whose profanity-laden rant against corruption goes viral, propelling him to the presidency. Across 51 episodes, audiences watched

Holoborodko navigate political intrigue while maintaining authenticity and moral clarity.

The narrative established Zelenskyy-as-Holoborodko within powerful archetypal frames. The reluctant hero archetype – ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances – provided aspirational identification while maintaining accessibility. Unlike traditional politicians, Holoborodko embodied the civic ideal: competent without being elite, principled without being inflexible, tough without being cruel.⁷¹

Crucially, the series generated hope – the rarest and most powerful political emotion. Audiences experienced simulated reform success, watching anti-corruption measures implemented, oligarchs prosecuted, and institutions rebuilt. This emotional priming established latent associations between outsider leadership and systemic change that Zelenskyy's campaign would later activate.

When Zelenskyy announced his candidacy on December 31, 2018, the critical moment had already passed. Voters had spent years in a parasocial relationship with President Holoborodko. The campaign merely activated pre-existing emotional bonds and archetypal templates.^{72,73} His victory speech was telling: "I'm not a politician. I'm just a simple person who came to break this system."⁷⁴ This was the verbatim articulation of the Holoborodko character voters had internalized. The Ukrainian case demonstrates prospective mobilization while creating enthusiasm for future change through aspirational outsider leadership, a narrative that became psychologically real before political reality emerged.

Table 1 illustrates a narrative pattern of the story built around **hope and trust**, following a **reluctant hero** arc across a long, multi-series storyline. Therefore, through extended exposure, the audience develops **parasocial trust** in an ordinary man unexpectedly elevated to power. His character is continuously tested, reinforcing moral consistency and building credibility. The emotional journey moves from frustration with the status quo to belief in change and,

70 Hutchings, Stephen, and Vera Tolz. 2015. *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. London: Routledge.

71 Dal Cin, Sonya, Mark P. Zanna, and Geoffrey T. Fong. 2004. "Narrative Persuasion and Overcoming Resistance." In *Resistance and Persuasion*, edited by Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn, 175–191. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

72 Brown, William J. 2015. "Examining Four Processes of Audience Involvement with Media Personae: Transportation, Parasocial Interaction, Identification, and Worship." *Communication Theory* 25, no. 3 (August): 259–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12053>.

73 Giles, David C. 2002. "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research." *Media Psychology* 4, no. 3: 279–305. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04.

74 Zelenskyy, Volodymyr. 2019. "Victory Speech [Speech]." Kyiv, Ukraine, April 21, 2019.

Table 1 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: *Servant of the People* (Ukraine 2019). Table created with Claude, AI technology, on 25 October, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION
Dominant Emotion	Hope, trust, aspirational optimism
Archetypal Pattern	Reluctant hero (Campbell’s Monomyth)
Temporal Structure	Long preparation: 4 years (2015–2019), 51 episodes
Psychological Mechanism	Parasocial bonding through extended exposure → Trust accumulation
Entry Point	Ordinary man thrust into power (viral video)
Character Development	Integrity tested repeatedly → Moral consistency established
Emotional Trajectory	Frustration (status quo) → Hope (change possible) → Trust (character proven)
Climax/Resolution	Small victories demonstrate that change is difficult but achievable
Viewer Conditioning	“I know this person” → “I trust their character” → “They won’t betray us”
Electoral Translation	Parasocial trust → Political support (73 percent landslide victory)
Political Function	Aspirational mobilization → Creating hope for transformative outsider

ultimately, trust in the protagonist. Small but symbolic victories signal that transformation is possible. This enables **aspirational mobilization in the electoral context** and provides a space for an outsider-driven catalyst of political change.

CASE II: ROMANIA 2024 – PROSPECTIVE DEMOBILIZATION

The Perfect Candidate premiered in September 2024, two months before Romania’s presidential and parliamentary elections. Unlike *Servant’s* episodic buildup, *Perfect Candidate* operated through concentrated satirical intensity, depicting the entire political system as a corrupt conspiracy.

The narrative centers on an ordinary, incompetent guy with a senseless life. Costică is recruited by the intelligence services to run as a presidential candidate because his incompetence guarantees controllability. The film systematically reveals democratic processes as theater: campaigns as manipulation, debates as scripted performance, elections as predetermined outcomes. Every institution – parties, media, and civil society – exists only to maintain the illusion of choice while elites extract rents.⁷⁵

The archetypal structure positions the anti-hero fool: a protagonist neither heroic nor villainous, but pathetic, revealing systemic absurdity through incompetent participation. This choice proves strategically crucial. Had *Perfect Candidate* featured a heroic

75 Converse, Philip E. 1964. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David E. Apter, 206–261. New York: Free Press.

Table 2 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: The Perfect Candidate (Romania 2024). Table created with Claude, AI technology on October 25, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION
Dominant Emotion	Cynicism, despair, futility
Archetypal Pattern	Anti-hero fool (inverted hero journey)
Temporal Structure	Medium preparation: months before election, single 90-minute film
Psychological Mechanism	Dark comedy → Bitter recognition → Systemic conspiracy schema
Entry Point	Pathetic protagonist with absurd motivation (parking revenge)
Character Development	No transformation; remains ridiculous throughout (anti-catharsis)
Emotional Trajectory	Recognition (laugh) → Cynicism (worse than thought) → Despair (no escape)
Climax/Resolution	Either outcome confirms corruption; system always wins
Viewer Conditioning	"All politicians corrupt" → "System is conspiracy" → "Why bother voting?"
Electoral Translation	Mainstream demobilization → Space for anti-system candidates
Political Function	Cynical demobilization: reinforcing despair about endemic corruption

Note. This narrative inverts traditional hero structures to create learned helplessness. By depicting all political actors as equally corrupt conspirators, it delegitimizes mainstream options, depresses turnout among pro-democratic voters, and potentially benefits radical alternatives who position themselves outside the system.

reformer exposing corruption, it would have generated mobilized anger. Instead, presenting corruption as so total that even protagonists are complicit generates demobilizing despair.

The film’s release coincided with Călin Georgescu’s emergence – an independent candidate promoting sovereigntist, anti-establishment, and orthodox-nationalist positions. Georgescu’s sudden first-round victory (22.9 percent) shocked analysts. Post-election analysis revealed massive TikTok amplification, suggesting coordinated external intervention.⁷⁶

Romania’s Constitutional Court annulled the elections on December 6, 2024, citing evidence of foreign interference and “massive manipulation of the democratic process.”⁷⁷ While establishing direct causation between *Perfect Candidate* and Georgescu’s rise proves impossible, the temporal correlation and functional alignment are striking.

Perfect Candidate created despair about present corruption that discouraged mainstream participation while potentially benefiting radical alternatives. The mechanism – narrative transportation, archetypal

76 DFRLab. 2024. “Romania’s Social Media Election Interference: Preliminary Analysis.” Atlantic Council (blog). Accessed [date]. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

77 CCR Decision 32/2024. 2024. “Curtea Constituțională a României.” <https://www.ccr.ro/>.

Table 3 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: Plaha (Moldova 2025). Table created with Claude, AI technology on October 25, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION
Archetypal Pattern	Systemic villain (network corruptor)
Temporal Structure	Compressed: 2 weeks before election, multi-part serial (8+ hours)
Psychological Mechanism	Historical dramatization → Horror recognition → Justified compromises
Entry Point	2025 frame asking “How did we get here?” → Flashback to 2016–2019
Character Development	Not protagonist-centered; focus on systemic capture mechanisms
Emotional Trajectory	Stability (2025) → Horror (past revealed) → Relief (nightmare ended)
Climax/Resolution	Unlikely coalition removes villain through moral compromise
Viewer Conditioning	“Never again allow capture” → “Compromises were necessary” → “Current order justified”
Electoral Translation	Retrospective legitimization → Vote for continuity vs. risk of return
Political Function	Retrospective legitimization: justifying past political changes and compromises
Political Function	Cynical demobilization: reinforcing despair about endemic corruption

Note. This narrative uses a circular temporal structure – past horrors justify present compromises. Unlike Ukraine’s prospective hope or Romania’s prospective despair, Moldova’s narrative is retrospective, teaching viewers that sometimes distasteful political deals are the price of preventing worse outcomes. The broadcast timing (two weeks prior to the election) maximizes recency effects while minimizing counter-narrative time.

encoding, and emotional priming – operated identically to *Servant of the People* but with opposite political valence.

Table 2 illustrates how the core narrative frame of **despair and futility** revolves around an **anti-hero, the fool**. This film, released before the election, uses dark comedy to guide viewers from amusement to bitter recognition and a **systemic-conspiracy mindset**. The protagonist enters as an absurd figure that never evolves and produces deliberate anti-catharsis. The emotional arc transitions from laughter to deep cynicism and a sense of hopeless entrapment. No matter the plot’s resolution, the system appears irrevocably

corrupt. This aims to encourage **political apathy** and the belief that all politicians are corrupt and that voting is pointless.

CASE III: MOLDOVA 2025 – RETROSPECTIVE CONSOLIDATION

Plaha is the multi-episode drama series broadcast in Moldova’s final two weeks before the 2025 parliamentary elections, depicting events from 2016 to 2019: the state capture network orchestrated by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc and the unprecedented coalition that forced his removal.

Plahotniuc, despite never holding formal executive office, exercised near-total control over Moldova through systematic institutional capture.⁷⁸ His power rested on controlling parliament through purchased and compromised loyalty, controlling the judiciary through appointing dependent judges, and controlling the media through ownership and intimidation.⁷⁹

The archetypal structure positions Plaha-Plahotniuc as a systemic villain – not merely a corrupt individual, but a corruptor who built capture institutions persisting beyond his person. This framing proves politically critical: if portrayed as an individual bad actor, removal appears sufficient; as a systemic architect, continued vigilance seems necessary.

Plaha's 2025 broadcast, six years after the events, employed sophisticated dramatization, reconstructing them through investigative journalism, leaked documents, and insider testimony. The series depicted the mechanics of vote-buying, judicial corruption, media capture, and economic schemes with detail that made abstract concepts viscerally comprehensible.

From an emotional perspective, *Plaha* generates retrospective horror – audiences experience delayed recognition of thorough state capture – serving a justificatory function: making removal appear not merely desirable but morally imperative. The relief creates emotional anchoring: “we escaped something terrible” that makes the status quo feel valuable by comparison.⁸⁰

Plaha's electoral timing – two weeks before voting – suggests a clear political intention. Production by pro-authority media indicates coordination with governing circles, consolidating the post-Plahotniuc order through retrospective legitimization.

Table 3 illustrates the mechanics of narrative that elicits **retrospective horror**, followed by **relief** and **pragmatic acceptance**, built around an archetype of the **systemic villain**. Released shortly before the election as an extended serial, it reconstructs past events

through historical dramatization, directing viewers from stability in the present to shock about earlier systemic capture. The story plot shows how the villain's network of corruption operated, and ambiguous compromises were the only chance to escape. The emotional arc moves from horror to relief that the worst is over. This logic legitimizes political change and frames compromises as necessary, thereby encouraging voters **to oppose regression**.

SYNTHESIS: MECHANISM AND VARIATION

The core mechanism operates through five steps documented across all cases despite substantial differences:

First, narrative entry through entertainment framing lowers epistemic vigilance. Audiences approach political films seeking pleasure rather than belief formation, meaning critical defenses against persuasion remain deactivated. All cases were consumed as entertainment, even by viewers recognizing political content.

Second, narrative transportation produces experiential rather than analytical processing. Once engaged, viewers enter a state where attention narrows to the narrative world, imagery becomes vivid, emotions intensify, and critical evaluation decreases.⁸¹

Third, archetypal encoding creates durable cognitive templates that persist after conscious memory fades. Specific archetypes varied – reluctant hero versus anti-hero fool, versus systemic villain – but the encoding mechanism operated consistently.⁸²

Fourth, emotional priming establishes latent associations between political themes and affective states. Each narrative generated emotions encoded with political content. These associations persist in implicit memory, rapidly reactivating when campaigns activate thematic resonance.⁸³

78 Tudoroiu, Theodor. 2020. “Moldova’s ‘Twitter Revolution’ that Never Was: State Resilience and Electoral Manipulation.” *Democratization* 27, no. 8: 1367–1385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1793043>.

79 Freedom House. 2019. “Freedom in the World 2019: Moldova.” Accessed September 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2019>.

80 Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina, and Dacian Dumulescu. 2019. “The Costs of State Capture in Moldova.” Government Transparency Institute. Accessed [September, 2025]. <https://www.againstcorruption.eu/>.

81 Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. 2000. “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (November): 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.

82 Brewer, William F., and Glenn V. Nakamura. 1984. “The Nature and Functions of Schemas.” In *Handbook of Social Cognition*, edited by Robert S. Wyer Jr. and Thomas K. Srull, 1:119–160. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

83 Reber, Rolf, and Norbert Unkelbach. 2010. “The Epistemic Status of Processing Fluency as Source for Judgments of Truth.” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1, no. 4 (December): 563–581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-010-0039-7>.

Fifth, electoral activation occurs when campaign environments present stimuli matching film-established templates and emotional keys. Voters enter decision contexts with cognitive-affective structures pre-positioned by narrative consumption.

While this mechanism operated uniformly, political functions varied. *Servant of the People* performed prospective mobilization; *Perfect Candidate* performed prospective demobilization; *Plaha* performed retrospective consolidation, legitimizing past changes. This functional diversity confirms we are identifying general-purpose technology rather than a mechanism tied to specific ideological goals.

Ethical consideration: Tables are created with AI, and grammar clarity checked by AI in accordance with the Oxford University guidelines of safe and responsible use of AI.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This analysis reveals a sophisticated campaign technology exploiting fundamental features of narrative cognition that make it psychologically portable across diverse electoral contexts. While Eastern Europe's weak institutions and hybrid media environment may intensify operation, the underlying psychology transcends regional specifics.

For democratic theory, this poses challenges. Traditional models assume voters make reasoned choices based on policy comparison and candidate evaluation. Yet, our cases demonstrate how narrative preconditioning establishes emotional and cognitive structures, shaping "choice" before campaigns begin. This doesn't eliminate agency but constrains it in ways citizens don't consciously recognize.

For campaign regulation, current frameworks prove inadequate. Electoral laws govern spending limits, advertising disclosure, and debate formats, all of which are explicit attempts at persuasion. But entertainment products consumed months or years before elections fall outside regulatory purview, even when serving clearly political functions. The "bypass mechanism" isn't just psychological but legal.

For democratic resilience, implications prove mixed. The technology could enhance democratic participation by making politics emotionally accessible and civically engaging – *Servant of the People* arguably increased Ukrainian political interest. Yet, it could also manipulate through mechanisms citizens cannot consciously resist; *Perfect Candidate*'s demobilization potentially facilitated external interference.