



# “Didn’t that sound like the north was calling us?”

Imagined geographies and Cold War legacies  
in Sofi Oksanen’s *Dog Park (Koirapuisto)*

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## Abstract

The article presents a discussion of Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen’s 2019 novel *Dog Park (Koirapuisto)*, a social and psychological thriller about two Ukrainian women working in the Ukrainian fertility industry, offering surrogacy services to Western clients. The novel explores some of the new modes of exchange and cultural encounter that were established between Ukraine and the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It presents a reflection of the social and human consequences of the transition from communism to capitalism but is also a story of how the legacy of Cold War geopolitics continues to shape European mental geographies and experiences at the intersection of East and West. Drawing on concepts from human geography and postcolonial studies, the article offers a reading of Oksanen’s novel focusing especially on how the novel negotiates these geopolitical shifts as well as the position of the Nordic countries on the changing European map.

**Keywords:** human geography, postcolonial theory, feminism, Cold War geopolitics, fertility tourism, Ukraine, Russia, Nordic countries, Sofi Oksanen



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Two Ukrainian women meet in a park in the mundane neighborhood of Siltasaari in central Helsinki, a quiet and restorative place where local residents hang out and walk their dogs. As they are sitting on a bench, silently watching the harmonious life of a Finnish family playing with their dog, a captivating historical drama of war, migration and human suffering in post-Soviet Ukraine unfolds. We are in the opening scene of the Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen's 2019 novel *Dog Park* (Koirapuisto). Written well before the Russian full-scale military invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, Oksanen's novel offers an intriguing psychological and sociological account of some of the historical backgrounds of the present War in Ukraine, while also envisioning how these may relate to the life of a well-off Finnish nuclear family in Helsinki.

The rendezvous of the two women, Olenka and Daria, becomes the starting point for an immense piece of memory work by the novel's narrator and protagonist Olenka, who, piece by piece, recalls the events and experiences that have shaped her adult life and brought her to her present situation, living a lonely life in exile in Helsinki, working as a cleaning lady. This story brings us back to post-Soviet Ukraine during the early days of independence in the 1990s. Olenka grew up in Tallinn in Soviet Estonia, as the daughter of an Estonian mother and a Ukrainian father. After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the family resettled in the father's town of birth Snizhne (Ukrainian: Сніжнє) in the Donbas Region in Eastern Ukraine, driven by the father's dream of the new possibilities for private business in this region, which in Soviet space was the center of the coal industry. In Snizhne, the father teams up with his old friend Maksim Sokolov (the father of Daria), and together the two men become business partners in the chaotic mafia economy emerging after the dissolution of the Soviet state. Eventually, both men are killed in the brutal battle for former state properties characterizing the transition to "oligarch" capitalism in Ukraine.

Olenka and Daria, in turn, make their professional careers in another booming post-Soviet business, the Ukrainian fertility industry, offering surrogacy services and egg donation to Western clients and members of the new Ukrainian elite. As the story unfolds, we learn that this is also their connection to the Finnish family in the opening scene, whose family joy is based on the reproductive labor of the two women.

*Dog Park* is a historical novel with a very topical theme which provides a captivating psychological and sociological account of everyday life in post-Soviet Ukraine, using the topic of the fertility industry as a metaphor to illuminate, also on a more general level, the emerging entanglements between the East and West. It is a novel dealing with the social and human consequences of the transition to capitalism in post-Soviet space, while also examining the ways in which the legacies of the Iron Curtain and Cold War geopolitics continue to shape mental geographies and experiences in this part of Europe. As such it is a novel that deals with the significance of the "cartographical shifts" (Czapliński 2020:144) that have taken place in Eastern and Central Europe during the last three decades.

During the Cold War era, the geographical imagination of Europe was locked in a geopolitical opposition between the communist East and the capitalist West. The dissolution of the communist Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union during the revolutions of 1989/1991 led to a reconfiguration of the European political map with the Central European and Baltic states regaining their autonomy and independence and subsequently seeking integration into the EU and NATO. The process of transition and integration also led to cultural reflection on a shared European history and cultural identity and to a renewed interest in regional communities and identities as alternatives to Cold War geopolitics. As with regard to Ukraine's great neighbouring country, Poland, Czapliński has claimed that the new geopolitical situation was followed by a mental shift in orientation as Polish literature and cultural debate now pushed

the social imagination from the West to the North. In the Cold War era (and in fact ever since Poland's loss of national independence in 1795), Polish cultural identity was most often conceived along an East-West axis ("As far from Russia as possible and as close to the West as possible"). With the Fall of the Soviet Empire, and Poland's integration into Western Europe, Polish culture was freed from the burdens of this geographical entanglement, thus leaving space for new orientations and attachments. As a consequence, once again, according to Czaplinski, in late-20th- and early-21st-century Polish literature and public debate one can observe a shift in orientation towards the North, in which the Scandinavian model of society is often addressed as a kind of social laboratory or possible model for the future development of Polish society (Czaplinski 2023).

We may find the same topos of the Nordic countries as progressive societies of prosperity and welfare in *Dog Park*, where Olenka's trajectory, from a certain point, also assumes the character of an urge towards the North and the dream of achieving a Scandinavian lifestyle. The aim of the following article is to offer a reading of *Dog Park* focusing especially on the novel's representation and imagination of Europe's new geographies, including the location of the Nordic countries on the new map of Europe. Drawing on concepts from the field of human geography, a place may be defined as a "space invested with meaning in the context of power" (Cresswell 2014:19). Departing from this notion, I will examine how the action of this novel is inscribed in the geographical space of post-Cold War Europe and how the novel negotiates new forms of attachment and affiliation, as well as the experiences of difference and exclusion, between the East and West and the East and North, as these are expressed through the lives and migrations of the two female protagonists.

## 2. ON THE BACKSTAGE OF HISTORY – AND THE POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Sofi Oksanen can be characterized as an author who is especially attentive to the significance of cultural geographies and mental borders in Europe and especially concerned with the legacies and cultural memory of the Cold War. In a recent interview, she described herself as a child "brought up by swinging on the Iron Curtain" (Oksanen & Stock 2022). Born in 1977 as the child of an Estonian mother and a Finnish father working in the Soviet Union, Oksanen grew up in Finland in the 1980s, where she had the opportunity to visit her grandparents in Soviet Estonia and listen to their stories. As a writer she was profoundly shaped by this cross-cultural background, drawing on the memories, lives and destinies of her Estonian ancestors under Soviet rule.

As a public intellectual, Oksanen is known as an outspoken critic of the "politics of Finlandization", Finland's Soviet-friendly politics during the Cold War era, and as a vocal critic of Putin's Russia (Oksanen 2015). In a talk on the topic of "Putin's War Against Women", given at a conference at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm in March 2023, Oksanen evokes the fate of her great aunt, violated by Soviet officers during an interrogation, as an example of how Russia has deliberately used sexual violence as a weapon of imperial warfare, a history which now seems to be repeating itself in Ukraine (Oksanen 2023).

The aunt's story served as an inspiration for the 2008 break-through novel *Purge*, which narrates the story of three generations of Estonian women subject to male sex violence and abuse. Oksanen's bestselling novel may as such be regarded as an important literary contribution to the international commemoration of Estonia's recent history and the memory culture of the Soviet occupation. The Estonian scholar Eneken Laanes has characterized this novel as a cultural translation of collective Estonian memories of Soviet state terror through the transcultural memorial form of wartime rape (Laanes 2021).

In her work as both a novelist and a public intellectual, Oksanen has been a critical observer of rising Russian neo-imperialism and the still more aggressive memory politics of the Kremlin regime with regard to the Baltic countries and other post-Soviet states. Russian memory politics consists in denying the crimes and deportations committed by the Soviet regime during the 50 years of occupation between 1939 and 1990. Oksanen's literary work can be seen as a way of writing back against this policy of denial by commemorating the lives and experiences of those subjected to Soviet suppression and occupation.

Oksanen's novels are usually women's stories, often narrating the lives and experiences of several generations of women. In the previously mentioned interview, she describes her main field of interest as a writer as "the backstage" or "kitchen region" of history, i.e., the ways in which historical events and conflicts affect the daily lives of ordinary people, and especially the experiences of woman. Special attention is drawn here to the affective and bodily experience of history and to the female body as a site of memory. As the Swedish feminist literary critic Ebba Witt-Brattström has noted, an important strategy in Oksanen's writing consist in giving "a voice to the female body in order to express hitherto repressed, social taboos of sexual experience" (Witt-Brattström 2014). This is also the case with *Dog Park*. However, this time the topics are not sexual violence and trafficking, but instead the fertility industry.

Oksanen has also often identified herself as a postcolonial writer, pointing in particular to the role of Russia as an Empire which has continuously sought to exploit and colonize its European neighbors (Harding 2015). This is, of course, a discussion of direct relevance to the case of Ukraine, traditionally referred to as the "breadbasket of Europe" due to its rich and fertile soil, while in the 20th century the country's coal reserves formed a keystone in Soviet industrialization and modernization. Likewise, the question of Oksanen as a postcolonial writer is also linked to another more theoretical discussion among scholars of Eastern and Central European studies: the question of whether concepts and perspectives from postcolonial theory can be applied to the histories and national identities of post-communist countries (Moore 2006; Chernetsky et al. 2006; Thompson 2010; 2014; Snochowska-Gonzales 2012; Sušová-Salminen 2012). Do post-communist and post-Soviet countries in Europe share an experience that is in any way comparable with that of former European colonies in the global south? Can white peoples also be subject to colonialism?

Such questions are also of high political relevance with regard to the global reactions to Russia's war on Ukraine. As a recent multi-country poll (Ash et al. 2023) has shown, Russia's war on Ukraine has led to a reconsolidation of unity within the West, but at the same time, revealed a growing gap between the West and "the rest" in terms of the ways the war is experienced and interpreted. Whereas in the West, Russia's war on Ukraine has mainly been seen as the return of a Cold War-type of bipolarity between West and East, between democracy and authoritarianism, citizens in non-Western countries like China and India tend to perceive it rather as a local European conflict in an increasingly multipolar world, while considerable parts of the same populations even regard Russia as an "ally" in the resistance against Western domination (Ash et al. 2023).

*Dog Park* may be read as a story about Russian neocolonialism in Ukraine insofar as the novel depicts how the Putin regime, already from the time of the Orange Revolution in 2004–2005, initiated its hybrid war against Ukrainian independence by supporting and staging Pro-Russian separatist movements and demonstrations in the eastern regions of the country. When, in the beginning of the novel, Olenka returns to Ukraine after having failed in a career as a model in Paris, few career options appear for the young woman: She can either apply for a job in a local bride agency, or she can let herself be enrolled

in the ranks of protesters against the Ukrainian state, funded by Russian money: “They need pretty faces at protests. You get paid right then, and they take everyone who wants it”, as a girl explains to her (Oksanen 2021:13).

Olenka eventually opts for a third solution, as she signs up as egg donor in a fertility agency in the southern Ukrainian metropole of Dnipropetrovsk. She soon advances to a position as the local managing director of the agency, and it is in this capacity that she hires Daria Sokolova as an egg donor. Since the death of their father, the Sokolov family has been living a precarious life in poverty, and Daria is willing to do everything to help her family. Thanks to her pretty face and her healthy, athletic, and fertile body, she soon becomes one of the most sought-after girls at the agency, her first clients being the Finnish couple from the opening scene of the novel.

On the cover of the English edition from 2021, a blurb from *The Guardian* presents *Dog Park* as a historical thriller about “A post-Soviet state where gangsters rule and the exploitation of the female body is big business”. No doubt *Dog Park* may be characterized as a story about the exploitation of the female body, and yet this summary only presents one side of the coin, as this is not only a novel about gangsters in post-Soviet Ukraine, but also a novel about the life of a well-off Scandinavian nuclear family and the consequences of Western fertility tourism on the lives of former Ukrainian fertility workers.

That being said, the focus of a postcolonial reading also necessarily shifts from the Russian-Ukrainian relation to the relation between Ukraine and the West, and in this case, more precisely, the relation between Ukraine and the North. In such a reading, the fertility industry may be read as a token for another kind of colonialization, generated by Western clients and Western money, once again turning the female body into an object of exploitation. In this case not, as in Oksanen's previous novels, by means of rape, sexual abuse or trafficking, but in the more peaceful and socially accepted form of fertility tourism.

In the interview mentioned above, Oksanen describes how the idea for the novel came from a will to investigate how corruption affects a society (Oksanen & Stock 2022). In Western Europe, and perhaps especially in the Nordic countries, we are prone to regard the oligarchic system of former Soviet states as an exotic phenomenon which has literally nothing to do with Western welfare democracies and our way of life. Likewise, we tend to think of corruption as something that happens only in other parts of the world. Reading Oksanen's novel helps do away with such perceptions of Nordic exceptionalism or self-complacency by showing that the two worlds are more connected and entangled with each other than we might like to think.

### 3. PLACES AND MEMORIES

*Dog Park* is not told in a straightforward manner. Following a model found in other novels by Oksanen, the story is broken up into a series of dated entries, shuffled like a game of cards, intertwining past and present. The plot flips between the moment of narration, Helsinki 2016, and flashbacks to various settings in Olenka's life in Ukraine 1992–2010 (Snizhne, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa) before her escape to Helsinki in 2010. This narrative structure may be read as an indication of the basic experience that past and present are intrinsically entangled with each other, as are the various places framing the action, lives and destinies of the characters in the novel.

The place names given in the opening of each chapter situate the action in the concrete historical and geopolitical space of Southeastern Ukraine, today broadly known as the war zone of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Likewise, the choice of the dusty mine town of Snizhne (Ukrainian: Сніжне) as the setting for Olenka's teenage life and memories is no coincidence.

The town of Snizhne is in fact an important place of memory in modern Ukrainian history and in the annals of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In July 2014, this place became the center of the world's attention, when a passenger flight from Malaysia Airlines was shot down by Russian-controlled forces while flying over the area, killing 283 passengers (mainly Dutch citizens) and 15 crew members. During the 2014 pro-Russian unrest in Ukraine the town was held by separatists. Since 2022, this part of the Donbas Region has been occupied by Russia.

By locating the action in this specific area, Oksanen's novel reminds us of the fact that the Russian-Ukrainian war did not begin in 2022, or with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, but is in fact a conflict with a longer prehistory. Russia's hybrid war against Ukrainian independence was initiated already in the mid-2000s through various kinds of interventions and efforts at Russification, including the staging of pro-Russian separatist movements and demonstrations like the ones we hear about in the opening of the novel, when Olenka is looking for job opportunities. *Dog Park* is based on detailed factual knowledge on these events in recent Ukrainian history, and at times, the novel even seems to predict the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, such as when Olenka, from her exile in Helsinki, observes the political developments in her home country:

I'd tracked the progress of the revolution from afar and sometimes was sure that Russian tanks would roll into Dnipro. After the occupation of Crimea, I watched the latest Russian news broadcasts on my computer to see if overnight not just Crimea but all of Ukraine had been added to the Russian map used for weather forecasts. I wasn't the only one. (Oksanen 2021:90)

In such formulations one easily recognize the critical voice of Oksanen's political essays, and to some extent *Dog Park* may also be characterized as a didactic novel (Lehtimäki 2022:360–371), aiming at informing its readers about political and social conflicts in Ukraine. And yet, as Markku Lehtimäki has also stressed in a detailed narratological reading of the novel, *Dog Park* cannot be reduced to a mere political lecture, as the political and essayistic statements are also an essential part of the novel's psychological portrait of its protagonist, Olenka.

The geographical and historical anchoring of Olenka's story also has another important mimetic function in the novel, as the frequent use of place names bears witness to the historically contingent nature of places as well as the performative role of language and memory in the construction of geographical entities like cities, states or regions. As Yi-Fu Tuan has stressed, the very process of naming is a fundamental operation in the construction of a place (Tuan 1977). Likewise, *Dog Park* is also attentive to the politics of place-naming, as the novel deliberately alternates between Russian and Ukrainian place-names (Ukrainian Dnipro vs. Russian Dniepropetrovsk, Kyiv vs. Russian Kiev).

The alternation between varying spelling forms may at first sight seem confusing and alienating, but at closer look there is also a narrative logic behind this device. The metadiegetic indications at the opening of each chapter maintain the old and (until recently) official Russian and Soviet names, whereas Olenka's narrative voice, rooted in personal experiences and memories, uses the Ukrainian forms. By such linguistic means, the novel tells a story about an emergent Ukrainian national identity and independence from Russia and the Soviet past. The same aspect of transition is also visible from the novel's descriptions of the changing urban landscape in the city of Dnipro, where old communist and Russian tsarist monuments are removed, while the city's tram system is expanded with new tramcars from Germany and Switzerland as signs of the new times.

In her job as managing director at the fertility agency, Olenka becomes an actor in this development, exercising a great willingness to adjust to the whims and demands of the new clientele of Western couples coming to Ukraine to seek fertility treatments.

One example is her euphoria when introduced to the Radisson hotels in the cities of Kyjiv, Dnipro, Kharkov and Odessa to meet groups of Western fertility tourists: “Once they stepped into the lobby, clients believed that they were almost in Europe, and I felt the same way” (Oksanen 2021:67). Gone now were the old yellowed hotel registration cards and the musty smells typical of Soviet times. In this connection, Olenka is particularly attentive to the whims of the Scandinavian clients: “Scandinavian noses were sensitive: they always complained about the cleaning products in the hotels and the smell of chlorine in the water” (Oksanen 2021:94f.).

Yet, the willingness to welcome Western (and Scandinavian) needs is also built into the very business model of the fertility agency, which allows its clients to look through the files of potential donors (“little birds” or “angels” as they are called in the lingo of the business) selecting the genetic material of their future children. In a satirical key scene in the novel, Daria becomes the subject of a detailed body examination by the female half of a Helsinki couple who wants to measure the athletic potential of her genes. In this situation, the woman orders Daria to undress and do splits; Daria does as she is told and acts “like a well-trained horse” (Oksanen 2021:59). The Finnish couple are both previous gymnasts with similar ambitions for their coming children: “For them, physical talent was a priority worth paying for” (Oksanen 2021:59). In this case, fertility tourism takes the form of eugenics coupled with a Western nostalgia for Eastern bloc Olympics:

“I loved Nadia Nadia Comăneeci. The gymnast,” the woman said. “I wanted to be just like her. You have so many gifted athletes over here.”

I held back my retort by biting my lip. I didn’t point out that Comăneeci was not from Ukraine but rather Ceaușescu’s Romania, where this woman never would have wanted to live. (Oksanen 2021:59)

However, to be recruited as a fertility worker not only involves a willingness to expose one’s body to the critical eyes of Western clients, it also requires that the family histories of both Olenka and Daria are manipulated to avoid any unpleasant associations among the clientele. Thus, when compiling the girls’ portfolios of photos and biographical details, any sign indicating an unhealthy lifestyle, exposure to pollution, sicknesses or criminality in the family history must be erased. This is the reason why the name of Snizhne, the dusty “backwater” (Oksanen 2021:202) of their adolescence years, as well as the circumstances of the tragic deaths of their fathers, are edited out of their biographies. The fertility industry is a business that works not only through manipulations of egg cells and embryos, but also through manipulations and remodeling of Ukrainian social reality, history and memory.

Thus, to succeed in her profession as a fertility worker, Olenka has had to renounce and repress that part of herself and her past life which was connected to Snizhne and the memory of her father. In terms of Ukrainian history, the father’s story was associated with the early days of independence in the 1990s and the chaotic process of transition from communism to capitalism. This part of Ukrainian collective memory and experience thus attains the character of a historical trauma in the novel. While in her Helsinki exile, Olenka starts remembering and recalling her memories from Snizhne; this act is also connected to an event in Ukrainian history, namely the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines plane by Russian separatists in 2014. This event attains an important position in the plot of the novel, not only as the factor provoking Olenka’s self-narration, but also as the event that brings her to the decision to approach the family in the dog park:

Afterward it was difficult to understand why an airplane exploding in the sky spurred me into motion to approach the family. The Russians shot down a Malaysian airliner in July 2014, and this event led me to begin recklessly visiting the dog park. These things should have had no connection. I was in Helsinki; the plane went down in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine, and no one I knew was on board. But its wreckage dropped in an area I remembered all too well. [...] Maybe the change came because the airplane blew up right over Snizhne, just a few kilometers from the house where my father's parents had lived. (Oksanen 2021:73, 76)

#### 4. THE CALL OF THE NORTH

Similar to the her break-through novel *Purge* (2008), *Dog Park* may be characterized as a “postexilic narrative” (Mrozewicz 2016), with Olenka narrating her story from her exile in Helsinki. Olenka had to flee Ukraine because of her involvement in the murder of Viktor Kravets, the son of the local oligarch Viles Kravets in Dnipro. At the time of the murder, Viktor's wife, Lada Kravets, had just completed a difficult, yet ultimately successful fertility treatment with Olenka as coordinator and Daria as egg donor. During this process, Olenka becomes aware of the fact that Viles Kravets is identical to “the man from Donetsk”, who, some 20 years earlier, was responsible for the murder of her father, whose body was found decapitated on a construction site. Through a local gangster, she is offered the return of the head of her father if she will provide classified data from the agency's files about Viktor. In the following, Viktor is killed under the auspices of the agency and Olenka has to flee Ukraine to settle down in Helsinki under a new identity (with a Finnish passport), leaving everything behind.

When leaving Ukraine, Olenka not only had to renounce her comfortable life as the managing director at the fertility agency and leading secretary in a philanthropic fund founded by the Kravets family. She also had to leave her own mother and family in Mykolaiv as well as her fiancé Roman, a man working as the right-hand man of Viles Kravets. At the time of her escape, Olenka was pregnant with their child, but soon after her arrival in Helsinki, she loses the child, Olezko.

When planning her migration from Ukraine, Olenka was guided by the dream of a comfortable Nordic lifestyle. This urge toward the North is explicitly present in another key scene in the novel, where Olenka receives forged Finnish passports from a local gangster named Ivan and becomes familiar with her new identity as the Finnish citizen Ruslana Toivonen. As part of the deal, she also receives passports for Toivonen's two daughters and a baby boy by the name of Oleh, which she sees as a happy omen for her own impending motherhood: “Ruslana's baby was named Oleh. Olezko. My Olezko. That was a sign as well [...]. Oleh traced back to the same Viking name – Helga – as my own name. Didn't it sound like the north was calling us? As if all this had been written in the stars ages ago” (Oksanen 2021:307).

In her Helsinki exile, however, Olenka comes to live a life very far from her Nordic dream of happiness and familial joy. She lives alone, without any other contacts to her previous life and relatives in Ukraine, other than some covert phone calls and secret visits by her mother. In a cruel manner, her existence echoes the life and destiny of her Estonian grandmother, who, during the Soviet era, was sentenced to deportation to Siberia without the right to exchange letters, a fate she conceived as equal to a death sentence.

As mentioned already, it is the external historical events of the Russian shooting down of the Malaysian airliner in July 2014 that makes Olenka take the decision to approach the family in the dog park. She begins to spy on the family online and soon also during their weekly visits to the park, and she becomes acquainted with the names of the two children,



Vainö and Aino, in the faces of whom she recognizes traces of herself and her father and the Sokolov family, respectively. “I was only visible in the boy as whispers in his features” (Oksanen 2021:82).

From her permanent place on the bench in the park, she settles for the role as a silent spectator of the happiness and well-groomed Nordic lifestyle of the family. “The park bench became a soft movie theater seat I could sink into and empty my mind. There I could watch the family live their life like a story that could have been mine if everything had gone differently” (Oksanen 2021:80).

The only occasion a contact develops between them is when one day the woman suddenly approaches her asking her to take a photo of the family, without recognizing her as the original foster mother of her child. In this situation, Olenka complies with the wishes of her former client: “I captured the winter landscape and their moment of radiant family bliss in a way that only a person who lacks such a dream can do” (Oksanen 2021:82).

When Daria makes her appearance in Helsinki, Olenka is forced to reconsider her situation. She realizes she can no longer escape her past, and a psychological power struggle between the two women ensues, with Daria mocking her former employee for her humble life situation, and Olenka fearing that Daria has come to blackmail her or reveal her hiding place to the Kravets family. It turns out, however, that Daria has not come to Helsinki to settle accounts with Olenka, but to carry out her own desperate plan of kidnapping her biological Finnish daughter Aino and bring her back to Ukraine.

The desperate and precarious situation of the two Ukrainian ladies vis-à-vis the privileged position and well-groomed lifestyle of the Finnish family is evoked not least through the novel's detailed descriptions of the female body as a site of memory and history. The bodies of the two Ukrainian ladies and former “angels” of the fertility industry are both in a state of decline. In her new life as a cleaning lady Olenka has had to renounce the luxury and female elegance of her former life, and in a symbolic gesture typical of Oksanen's novels, the luxury shoes, clothes and perfume from her time in Dnipro are stored away in a suitcase in her apartment as a time capsule of her past existence.

Similarly, Daria's previously healthy and attractive body has also been transformed, worn out by her continuous work as a foster mother and by the hormone treatments she has undergone, which eventually destroyed her fertility and given her cancer:

Daria's teeth were still white, and only her canines showed even the slightest hint of tobacco stains. Still, she couldn't afford to look down on my state of decline. Didn't she realize how she looked? Before, her cuticles had been healthy, her nails her own, without any ridges, their surfaces as flawless as a newborn's. Her fingers were easy to imagine on the strings of a violin. Now there were mourning bands on her nails, her knuckles were chapped, and her previously enviable skin looked as thin as a hotel registration card. (Oksanen 2021:31)

This portrait is clearly told from the perspective of a professional fertility facilitator versed in assessing the market value of other women according to the condition of their bodies, flesh and skin. Like two fallen angels, Olenka and Daria are depicted as devaluated bodies that have lost their former grace and are now wandering about in the Finnish dog park desperately seeking contact to the children they have given life to. The miserable state of Daria's body is also evoked as a symbolic relic of Soviet times, as the texture of her skin is compared to that of a Soviet hotel registration card. The precarious situation of the two Ukrainian women is effectively contrasted with the glossy picture of Nordic welfare as presented on the woman's social media profiles:

The woman had shared with her followers some memories from the previous summer as an aperitif for the upcoming vacation season. A typical shot of vacation toes: sugar waxed legs, pedicured nails, heels rasped soft, and nearby a book to signal intellectualism. (Oksanen 2021:341)

As Lehtimäki (2022) has remarked, the stylized picture of the Finnish family also becomes a projection of Olenka's social imagination of The North as a land of milk and honey. In noticeable contrast to this, in Helsinki the two fallen angels of the Ukrainian fertility industry are left to a precarious existence as second-class citizens and mere spectators of the comfortable Nordic lifestyle from which they are definitively excluded: "People like us were invisible. The memory of our faces melted like snow from their minds because none of our clients wanted to remember our existence" (Oksanen 2021:82).

Here one may also wonder why Oksanen has chosen the dog park as the main Nordic setting of the novel. One obvious answer would be to interpret the pastoral Arcadia-like winter landscape of the dog park as a condensed image of the Nordic welfare state and lifestyle. Olenka herself notices the utopian and inaccessible character of the park, when initially entering the place:

The first time, I ventured into the park under merciful cover of darkness. Creeping along, I approached the bench where one family member often sat. I sat down cautiously, as if the slats were glass, and took in the landscape, their landscape, imagining what their life must be like in a country where dogs had their own parks, better maintained than the public spaces in Ukraine. (Oksanen 2021:80)

Surely, no dog parks are to be found in Ukraine, where, on the contrary, people are familiar with the prevalence of packs of stray dogs, as a consequence of war actions or nuclear disasters like the one in Chernobyl, forcing people to leave their homes. The bitter irony, however, is that this facility of Nordic welfare is not available to all citizens, and the two Ukrainian migrants and former fertility workers can only play the role of temporary guests and silent spectators to the show. In his reading of the novel, Lehtimäki also emphasizes the dog park as a site of exclusion inaccessible to the disadvantaged (Lehtimäki 2022:337).

However, with regard to the topic of the fertility industry, the topos of the dog park also achieves another gloomy meaning. The business model of the Ukrainian fertility industry as depicted in the novel has resulted in a commodification of life and human reproduction which allows Western clients to shop through the catalogues of potential donors, selecting the genetic material of the babies they want to produce. The consumerist approach to human reproduction and having a baby thus comes to resemble the process of acquiring a pet. In such a perspective, *Dog Park* may also be read as a dark dystopian vision of the manipulation of life and motherhood in a post-human age.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Dog Park* offers a reflection on the new geographies of post-Cold War Europe using the topic of the fertility industry as a metaphor to describe the emerging entanglements and new modes of exchange and cultural encounter that were established between Ukraine and the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The novel engages with the social and human consequences of the transition from communism to capitalism in post-Soviet space but is also a story of the ways in which the legacies of the Iron Curtain and Cold War geopolitics continue to shape mental geographies and experiences in this part of Europe. Written well before the Russian full-scale military invasion in February 2022, the novel offers an intriguing

psychological and sociological account of some of the historical backgrounds to Russia's War on Ukraine, while also envisioning how they may relate to the life of a well-off Finnish nuclear family in Helsinki.

Drawing on concepts from human geography, feminist and postcolonial theory, the present article has presented a reading of *Dog Park* focusing especially on the novel's representation of Europe's new imagined geographies, including the question of the location of the Nordic countries on the new map of Europe. One of the findings of this reading is that the novel may be read as an articulation of the same shift in social imagination, from an East-West axis to an East-North axis, as the one observed by Przemysław Czapliński with regard to Polish literature and national identity at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Czapliński 2023). In *Dog Park* this imagination takes the form of Olenka's urge toward the North, a utopian dream of family happiness and a comfortable Nordic lifestyle. This dream finds its spatial materialization in the Arcadia-like winter landscape of the Helsinki dog park, which at the same times is also a place of exclusion, beyond the reach of the disadvantaged – like the two Ukrainian women. The old Cold War barrier between East and West thus persists in the forms of both economic inequality and subtle cultural distinctions.

Finally, the article discussed the relevance and potential of concepts and perspectives from postcolonial theory for describing the history and experiences of post-communist countries in Eastern Europe – or more precisely, if the position of Ukraine in recent European history can be characterized as a postcolonial relation of subordination. *Dog Park* is a story about the exploitation of the female body, a well-known topic from Oksanen's previous novels, where it has been used to visualize Russia's exploitation and domination of neighboring European countries. In the case of *Dog Park*, the same topic is used in a somewhat different manner, as a way to explore the role of Western and Nordic fertility tourism in Ukraine and its consequence for the lives of two Ukrainian fertility workers. In this way, the perspective of a postcolonial discussion of *Dog Park* also changes from the Russian-Ukrainian relation to the relation between Ukraine and the West.

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