

Compromises. A script for an unreleased film about Snake Island

The compromises Ukraine is being asked to accept seem to follow no logic we can recognize—only the echoes of old empires whispering through the corridors of diplomacy. In a world where our agency is thinned to a suggestion, these bargains resemble not peace, but a return to myth-born hierarchies, where history is rewritten to serve the hunger of those who would rule through memory, not justice.

Zmiinyi Island, also known as Snake Island, has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance since the first hours of Russia's full-scale invasion, when one of our soldiers defending the island responded to a Russian warship's demand to surrender with the legendary phrase: "Russian warship, go fuck yourself." Russians managed to capture the island then, albeit briefly.

A few months after the island's de-occupation, we went to the nearest settlement, the Romanian border town of Sulina, to film *Snake Island*. We made an agreement with the boat captain: he was to take us out to sea, to the horizon line, where we could see the island. But as soon as we left the mouth of the Danube, the captain, bent over the side in silence, began to vomit into the waves. Without a word, he turned the ship around. Later, it turned out that he had been very hungover. When the city authorities learned about our plans, they refused to allow us to film the island at all.

Two years have passed, and we have returned to this topic again. The words of Putin's Russian ideologue Aleksandr Dugin gave us a new impetus for reflection: "Whoever owns Zmiinyi controls the course of world history."

After Ukraine regained the island, a Dugin-linked channel quoted: "If the island cannot be captured, it must be submerged."

Zmiinyi once belonged to the Ottoman Empire, Romania and the Russian Empire. In the 2000s, Romania even tried to legally prove that it was not an island, but only a rock, in order to reduce Ukraine's territorial waters in its favor.



This piece of land, 500 by 500 meters, with no fresh water and no single tree, has been a landmark for sailors since antiquity. At its highest point, the ancient Greeks built the Temple of Achilles—likely in the 5th or 6th century BCE—as a sanctuary dedicated to those who perished at sea.

Zmiinyi has never had a permanent population. Today, it performs an exclusively strategic function: by controlling the island, Ukraine ensures the security of the sea corridor for grain exports.

For Russians, the sacred connection to ancient Greece is another way to justify their belated colonial ambitions. Russia has always sought to mythologize its wars. It must prove that it is not just conquering, but “reclaiming” something sacred.



Perhaps Dugin sees Zmiinyi as a trace of the Hellenes and a way to prove that the “Russian world” begins here, on the wreckage of an ancient civilization. After all, Russia has never owned any land south of Zmiinyi.

Today, when some allies hint at the compromises that Ukraine must make to end Russia’s war of aggression, we think of the island again.

What if we really submerged it? Drown the imaginary “key” to history that Russia is so eager to find? Could this be the beginning of the end of empires?



But what would we really lose?

The sparse flora and fauna of the island: a few species of plants, insects and reptiles.

How acceptable would this sacrifice be?

Reflections on this led us to a list of losses that any “rational” decision entails.

This list formed the basis of a script and, at the same time, the voiceover of the film, which was never filmed.

We are publishing it here.

EXT. OPEN SEA – DAY.

We look at the sea; in a super wide shot, a piece of land is visible—this is Zmiinyi Island. After a while, it becomes noticeable that the island is very slowly sinking under water. Meanwhile, a voiceover comments on what is happening.

VOICEOVER

The sparse vegetation of the island’s gentle slope is the first to give in to the foamy waves. On the surfaces of orthoquartzites, the lichen *Candelariella vitellina* gradually swells and peels off in gelatinous pieces. With a little more resistance to the unrelenting water, holding on to rocky outcrops, one of the few epigeal lichens, *Cladonia pyxidata*, is gradually dispersing. A little higher, the remains of swollen sorrel drain down. The water also rises noticeably over the boulders from which the lighthouse foundation protrudes, abundantly covered with clinging *Neofuscelia pulla* and *Lichina confinis*. Just in time, the radiated wolf spiders are moving to the upper part of the island. But in vain: a little higher up from the low-lying reliefs of Snake Island, a frightened plague of spider wasps, insidiously mixed among the chironomid midges, awaits them. Sooner or later, the wasps will paralyze many of the spiders fleeing to the island’s upper part. Will the wasps have time to lay their eggs in the spider bodies

before the sea water arrives? Migrating loons are watching all this indifferently as they are calmly staying near the island...

Having its moment, a wide flat wave gradually soaks the tall rustling grass *Phragmites australis* and turns it into long underwater algae, as if it had always been that way. Flocks of *Troglodytes troglodytes* jump from stem to stem, higher and further from the water. They are lively birds, talented camouflage artists. High above the island, if you look closely, you can see small flocks of migrating rooks circling. Sometimes they stay overnight, but frightened by the hitherto unknown tide, they hover in helpless anticipation. If you listen closely, you can no longer hear the soothing rustle of the dry cereals that, along with *Geranium divaricatum*, covered the lowlands of the gently sloping part of the island in shaggy, fluffy patches. Like *Phragmites australis*, they are already submerged under the water, which took them by surprise, and they pretend to be a hitherto unseen species of algae. One can see countless torn-off flowers of dandelions and sow thistles drifting away from the island in waves, and above them, hummingbird hawk-moths swarming and buzzing helplessly. As we can see, the water is gradually reaching invasive plants, which have not been welcome here since 2005, when their infectious substance was first noticed in large numbers. We can already hear the waves crashing between the piles of scrap metal left by the Russian occupiers in June 2022. Since then, the house sparrows have reappeared here, and they are the only birds currently nesting on the island. None of the others—black redstarts, rooks, loons, chaffinches, chiffchaffs, which are most fond of perching on Russian scrap metal, song thrushes, rare bluethroats, great and pygmy cormorants, white storks, geese, robins, northern guests snow buntings, blue tits, long-eared owls, masked shrikes, super

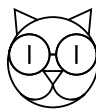




rare Rüppell's warblers, corn crakes, almost extinct in Europe, eastern red-rumped swallows, Kuhl's pipistrelles, hawks, and even quail, which are the food for hawks—none of them like to nest on the island. This means that none of these birds, except the house sparrows, will lose anything after the water closes over the island. Except for these migratory birds, however, almost all species of flora and fauna on the island will die after the flooding. But no-no, not everyone will die; we forgot to mention ixodid ticks, which parasitize song thrushes and chaffinches in large numbers. Having got into the birds' bodies—and sometimes it is enough for these ticks to feed only once in their lives—they will migrate with the birds for several days to a month after the flooding is complete.

BIO

Yarema Malashchuk and Roman Khimei have been working as filmmakers and visual artists since 2016, exploring the intersections of documentary and fiction to engage with Ukraine's recent history and present. Their work examines the lingering structures of post-imperial power and their impact on a new generation of Ukrainians, caught between historical trauma and an uncertain future. They received the main award of the PinchukArtCentre Prize (2020) and the VISIO Young Talent Acquisition Prize (2021). Their short film *Additional Scenes* won the main awards at Tallinn Black Nights PÖFF 2024 and the Ukrainian Film Critics Award.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann
 Translated from Ukrainian: Les Vynogradov
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