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Homogenised Heritage:
AI and Central Europe



***HOMOGENISED
HERITAGE: AI AND
CENTRAL EUROPE***

***THE IMPACT OF AI ON LOW-
RESOURCE LANGUAGES AND
VISUAL CULTURES IN THE
VISEGRAD COUNTRIES***

Disegno

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THE PAPRIKA-EFFECT CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AS A NOISY LABEL IN AI-GENERATED IMAGES

Anna Keszeg

ABSTRACT

This article examines how AI-generated images reproduce geopolitical imaginaries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) through a visual analysis of images generated using Midjourney. Drawing on popular geopolitics as a theoretical framework, the study situates AI image generation within a long-standing transglobal media environment in which visual culture plays a key role in shaping geopolitical knowledge and spatial hierarchies. Popular geopolitics foregrounds the power of everyday visual representations in producing meaning beyond formal discourse, a dynamic intensified by generative AI systems.

Methodologically, the study analyses a dataset of eighty AI-generated images across twenty countries, using standardised prompts varying by gender and dress (folk costume versus contemporary clothing). The analysis focuses on culturally coded visual markers such as facial features, stylisation, and their relation to dress. The article conceptualises the observed pattern as the “paprika-effect”: a form of epistemic cultural flattening in which complex regional identities are reduced to exaggerated, globally recognisable, and unevenly documented visual tropes. The findings suggest that generative AI systems reproduce not cultural accuracy, but the contradictions inherent in transglobal geopolitical imaginaries. Rather than offering a fully systematic or generalisable account of AI image generation, this study adopts an exploratory approach. The analysis is intended to function as a hypothesis-generating intervention, identifying patterns that raise broader questions about the relationship between generative AI and geopolitical imaginaries, and it does not provide definitive empirical conclusions.

#Central and Eastern Europe; #popular geopolitics; #Midjourney; #visual culture; #AI image generation, #noisy label

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THE PAPRIKA-EFFECT: TRANSGLOBAL NARRATIVES OF REPRESENTATION

Reflecting on the exhibition about the dresses of the Habsburg era she curated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1979, Diana Vreeland (2011, 178) wrote these words in her memoir: “Unfortunately Hungarians don’t impress the world anymore—they’ve never been successful, and success is the only thing the world we live in now understands and remembers”. Recalling her encounters with Budapest during the preparation of the exhibition, Vreeland contrasts the city she experienced in the 1970s—by then a Soviet satellite—with the Budapest of the early twentieth century, which she recalls as culturally dense, eccentric, and visually excessive.

In her description, Hungarian dandies of the pre-war period dressed in ways that were “absurd”, excessive, and unmistakably different from anything else in Europe. Their style, she suggests, was comparable to the taste of *paprika*: overwhelming, too much, bordering on bad taste. Yet for Vreeland, bad taste was always preferable to the absence of taste altogether. Excess, in her view, was not a failure of style but a mark of distinction—an insistence on visibility in a world structured by hierarchies of recognition (Vreeland 2011, 188; 122).

This anecdote demonstrates a key mechanism of global cultural recognition: regions often become legible not through nuance but through intensified and stylised markers that condense difference into recognisable form. Fashion, in this sense, emerges as one of the earliest and most powerful forgers of transglobal imaginaries, translating local specificity into globally circulating visual codes.

As a researcher in fashion studies, I have long been convinced that fashion played a foundational role in shaping the transglobal visual imaginaries of regions, cultures, and identities. Much like contemporary AI training datasets, the early globalised fashion media system (organised around international fashion weeks) functioned as a transglobal representational structure that universalised selective visual norms, predefined the role and place of small cultures, and marginalised cultural specificity in the process (Skov 2011). Generative AI represents a new step in this longer history. Where fashion once mediated regional difference through garments, silhouettes, and taste regimes, AI image-generation systems now mediate difference through datasets, prompts, and algo-

rhythmic pattern recognition. Yet the underlying logic remains strikingly similar: cultural visibility is achieved through selection, exaggeration, and simplification.

This article conceptualises this process as the *paprika-effect*. Like paprika as a metaphorical marker of “Eastern European flavour”, AI-generated images intensify cultural cues in order to produce images that are immediately legible within a global visual economy. Rather than offering culturally specific or internally differentiated representations, generative AI systems tend to amplify a narrow set of visual tropes, resulting in an *epistemic cultural flattening* (Grossman 2025; Krämer 2023, 12) of regional visual realities.

Prompting an image-generation system with phrases such as “/IMAGINE female/male model in folk dress from [country]; /IMAGINE female/male model in contemporary dress from [country]” produces images that appear coherent at first glance, yet reveal patterned inconsistencies upon closer inspection. Hungary for example is frequently rendered through a generalised Slavic visuality, Romania through an orientalist or far-eastern imaginary, and the Czech Republic through a Mitteleuropean, Western-coded aesthetic. These outcomes suggest that AI-generated images do not draw from a unified understanding of Central and Eastern Europe, but instead mobilise conflicting geopolitical imaginaries embedded in transglobal visual culture.

The paprika-effect, therefore, is not the result of technical error or intentional distortion. It reflects the conditions under which AI image-generation systems operate: uneven cultural visibility, historically sedimented visual hierarchies, and the dominance of popular geopolitical imaginaries. By situating AI-generated imagery within this longer genealogy— from fashion to algorithmic representation—this article argues that generative AI does not disrupt existing visual regimes, but rather extends and intensifies them, translating long-standing geopolitical imaginaries into algorithmic form.

Building on critical discourses concerning the imperial nature of constructed visual imaginaries, and drawing on a dataset assembled in August 2025, this article suggests that in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, AI image-generation systems reveal the difficulty of articulating a coherent Central and Eastern Europeanness, a difficulty deeply rooted in the region’s historically layered and ideologically discontinuous geopolitical traditions.

AN AI AS ACCURATE AS WE ARE: DEEP LEARNING, AI IMAGE GENERATION, AND KNOWLEDGE REPRESENTATION

In their widely cited overview of artificial intelligence paradigms, Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig (2021) argue that the multiplicity of discourses surrounding AI can be traced back to four distinct underlying ambitions. These ambitions form a fourfold matrix structured along two conceptual axes: the human versus the rational, and thinking versus acting or

behaving. This framework provides a useful heuristic for understanding how different models of intelligence conceptualise knowledge, cognition, and representation, and it remains particularly relevant for examining contemporary generative AI systems.

According to Russell and Norvig, early approaches to artificial intelligence were largely inspired by the ambition to reproduce human behaviour. Within this paradigm, intelligence is evaluated through externally observable actions rather than internal cognitive processes. The Turing Test exemplifies this orientation, as its primary concern is whether a machine's behaviour can convincingly imitate that of a human. Intelligence, here, is framed as performative resemblance rather than epistemic understanding.

Alongside this behaviour-oriented approach, other strands of AI research have focused on modelling human thinking itself. These approaches attempt to simulate internal cognitive processes such as reasoning, introspection, perception, and imagination. Intelligence is thus understood as a function of internal mental operations, and artificial systems are evaluated based on how closely they approximate the structure of human cognition.

On the opposite side of the matrix, Russell and Norvig identify approaches that abandon the aspiration to reproduce human cognition or behaviour altogether. Instead, these paradigms focus on rationality, defining intelligence as the capacity to make optimal decisions or to act in ways that maximise predefined goals. Some of these approaches emphasise rational thinking through formal logic and symbolic reasoning, while others prioritise rational action, focusing on effective behaviour in specific environments.

Russell and Norvig argue that contemporary AI development is predominantly oriented toward the modelling of rational action. Rather than striving for holistic models of human cognition, current systems tend to be action-specific and task-oriented. This has resulted in highly specialised models optimised for specific functions—such as image generation or pattern recognition—without possessing contextual or cultural understanding of the content they produce.

This framework can be productively connected to Yann LeCun's (2025) distinction between symbolic, logic-based AI (GOFAI – *good old fashioned artificial intelligence*) and data-driven deep learning systems. LeCun, one of the key figures in the development of deep learning, identifies two major traditions in AI research. Early AI, emerging in the mid-twentieth century, was grounded in the assumption that human intelligence operates through logical, rule-based processes that could be formalised and computationally reproduced. Artificial intelligence, from this perspective, was a matter of symbolic manipulation and explicit knowledge representation.

The rise of deep learning in the 2010s marked a significant epistemic shift. Rather than encoding knowledge through rules and symbols, deep learning systems acquire patterns through exposure to large datasets.

Intelligence, in this paradigm, emerges from learning statistical regularities rather than from reasoning about meaning. LeCun characterises contemporary AI as hybrid: combining the goal-oriented rationality of earlier approaches with the pattern-recognition capacities of neural networks.

LeCun links this hybrid model back to a proposal by Alan Turing, who suggested that instead of attempting to simulate the adult human mind, AI research should focus on creating systems analogous to a child's mind—capable of learning through experience. In contemporary machine learning, training datasets effectively replace education, and optimisation replaces understanding. While this approach has proven remarkably effective for task-specific performance, it has profound implications for how cultural knowledge is represented.

A widespread assumption in public and technical discourse holds that generative AI systems are “as accurate as their training datasets.” While this claim is often invoked to defend AI outputs, it obscures a crucial epistemological problem. Training datasets are not neutral repositories of knowledge; they are structured by uneven visibility, historical power relations, and dominant cultural narratives. Cultural knowledge, unlike technical or formalised knowledge, is rarely standardised, consistently annotated, or evenly distributed. As a result, generative AI systems tend to reproduce not cultural accuracy, but statistical dominance.

Concerns surrounding the representation of minority cultures and languages—such as ongoing debates about the inadequate modelling of Sámi languages in AI systems (Li 2026)—illustrate this limitation clearly. These cases demonstrate that even if and when datasets are extensive, they may still fail to capture culturally specific epistemologies, leading to misrepresentation, simplification, or erasure, as complex cultural meanings are reduced through processes of tokenisation and vectorisation into abstract, context-insensitive computational representations (Toraman et al. 2023).

In the domain of AI-generated images, this dynamic manifests as *epistemic cultural flattening* (Krämer 2023, 11–12): a process through which complex, historically layered cultural identities are reduced to simplified, globally legible visual tropes. Generative AI systems trained to produce visually plausible outputs rely on statistically dominant patterns rather than culturally situated meanings. Consequently, they tend to reflect inconsistencies and contradictions embedded in transglobal geopolitical imaginaries rather than coherent regional self-understandings.

In machine learning, the concept of *noisy labels* refers to training data in which labels are inaccurate, inconsistent, ambiguous, or contextually unstable (Carneiro 2024). Noisy labels do not necessarily result from error or negligence; rather, they often emerge in domains where categorisation itself is contested, imprecise, or historically layered. When models are trained on such data, they tend to learn distorted or averaged representations, privileging dominant correlations while obscuring internal variation.

Central and Eastern Europe can be understood as a paradigmatic example of a noisy label within transglobal datasets. The term itself does not denote a stable cultural, political, or historical category, but rather a composite designation shaped by shifting borders, competing strategic geopolitical projects, and externally imposed classificatory regimes. As a result, visual and textual data associated with Central and Eastern Europe are marked by semantic inconsistency: the same label may refer to Slavic, Orientalised, Mitteleuropean, post-socialist, or “almost Western” imaginaries, depending on context.

From this perspective, AI image-generation systems are indeed “as accurate as we are.” They reproduce the fragmented, uneven, and often contradictory ways in which regions are imagined within global visual culture. The epistemic cultural flattening produced by generative AI thus reflects not a technical failure, but a mirror held up to the cultural and geopolitical imaginaries already embedded in the datasets from which these systems learn.

POPULAR GEOPOLITICS AND TRANSGLOBAL VISUAL CULTURE

Popular geopolitics is a field of research concerned with how geopolitical knowledge, spatial imaginaries, and regional identities are produced and circulated through popular culture rather than through formal political discourse alone. Emerging at the intersection of political geography, cultural studies, and media studies, popular geopolitics shifts attention from state-centric narratives and elite geopolitical strategies to everyday cultural forms such as films, literature, fashion, advertising, and visual media. Within this framework, geopolitical meaning is understood as something that is learned, felt, and normalised through repeated encounters with images, stories, and aesthetic conventions (Saunders and Strukov 2018).

The forging of regional imaginaries in popular culture has been addressed across several disciplinary traditions. Literary studies, cultural history, media studies, film studies and critical geography have all contributed to understanding how regions are invented, exoticised, or normalised through representation. One of the most influential contributions in this regard is Vesna Goldsworthy’s (1998) *Inventing Ruritania*, which examines how Western cultural production has historically imagined Eastern Europe as a semi-fictional space of intrigue, backwardness, and excess. Goldsworthy conceptualises this process as an “imperialism of the imagination”, through which cultural domination operates not through direct political control, but through representational asymmetry. Eastern Europe, in this account, becomes a canvas onto which Western anxieties, desires, and fantasies are projected.

Goldsworthy’s argument highlights a key mechanism of popular geopolitics: the reduction of complex regions to narrative and visual shorthand. Such shorthand enables rapid recognition within transglob-

al media circuits, but it does so at the cost of internal differentiation. This process closely resembles what this article terms *epistemic cultural flattening*, whereby historically layered and heterogeneous regions are rendered legible through a limited set of recurring tropes.

A related but distinct intervention is offered by Maria Todorova (1997) in *Imagining the Balkans*, which traces how the Balkans have been constructed as Europe's internal Other. Todorova introduces the concept of "Balkanism" to describe a representational logic that positions the region as chronically incomplete, irrational, or backward in relation to an imagined European norm. Importantly, Todorova emphasises that such imaginaries are not static; they shift over time while retaining a core structure of hierarchical differentiation. The Balkans, much like Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, function as a liminal space.

These insights resonate strongly with the study of popular geopolitics in the post-socialist context. Robert A. Saunders' (2020) *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* extends the analysis of geopolitical representation into the contemporary media landscape, focusing on how post-Soviet states actively attempt to manage and reshape their international image. Saunders demonstrates that nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and media representation operate within pre-existing geopolitical imaginaries that constrain how regions can be seen. Even when states seek to reposition themselves, they must negotiate inherited symbolic frameworks that structure global perception.

Taken together, these works underscore that regional imaginaries are not simply imposed from above, but are continuously reproduced, negotiated, and modified through popular cultural forms. This is where popular geopolitics intersects with broader theories of popular culture and globalisation. John Storey's (2007) *Inventing Popular Culture* traces how popular culture itself has evolved from localised folklore to a globalised system of cultural production and consumption. Storey emphasises that popular culture is not a stable category, but a dynamic field shaped by power relations, technological change, and transnational circulation. In a globalised media environment, popular culture becomes a primary site where regional difference is negotiated, standardised, and commodified.

Within this transglobal visual culture, regions are increasingly known not through direct experience, but through mediated images that circulate far beyond their original context. Visual literacy, therefore, has always had a transglobal and mediatic character. Long before the emergence of digital platforms or generative AI, fashion, film, illustration, and photography played a central role in forging visual imaginaries of regions and peoples. These imaginaries are learned implicitly, through repetition and familiarity, and they shape expectations about what regions look like and how they should be recognised.

Popular geopolitics provides a critical framework for understanding how these visual imaginaries become normalised. By foregrounding the

everyday, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of geopolitical knowledge, it reveals how seemingly neutral images participate in the reproduction of spatial hierarchies. Regions such as Central and Eastern Europe are particularly susceptible to this process because they occupy an ambiguous position within global imaginaries. They are simultaneously familiar and foreign, European and not-quite-European, central and peripheral.

In this sense, Central and Eastern Europe can be understood as a paradigmatic example of a noisy geopolitical label. Its meaning shifts across historical periods, ideological regimes, and cultural contexts, generating a dense accumulation of partially overlapping and often contradictory representations. Popular geopolitics helps explain how such noise is not resolved, but rather managed through repetition, simplification, and aesthetic convention. Over time, this produces a repertoire of visual cues that stand in for the region.

When generative AI systems draw on datasets shaped by these transglobal visual regimes, they inherit not only specific images but also the geopolitical imaginaries embedded within them. The epistemic flattening observed in AI-generated representations of Central and Eastern Europe thus reflects a longer history of popular geopolitical representation. AI does not invent these imaginaries; it accelerates and recombines them, transforming historically sedimented cultural noise into algorithmically optimised visual outputs.

By situating AI-generated images within the framework of popular geopolitics and transglobal visual culture, this article argues that the inconsistencies observed in AI representations of Central and Eastern Europe are neither random nor purely technical. They are the algorithmic expression of a region whose global visibility has long been structured by competing, externally mediated imaginaries. Popular geopolitics therefore provides a crucial lens for understanding how generative AI participates in the ongoing production of geopolitical knowledge, translating cultural ambiguity into visual form.

THE NOISY LABEL OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism describes the everyday, taken-for-granted ways in which national belonging is reproduced through routine symbols, habits, and visual cues. Flags on public buildings, weather maps, linguistic conventions, and media narratives subtly remind citizens of the nation without requiring overt ideological mobilisation. Banal nationalism functions precisely because the nation it reproduces is assumed to be stable, coherent, and self-evident. Its power lies in its invisibility: nationalism becomes effective when it no longer needs to declare itself (Billig 1995; Weber 2021).

A comparable logic has been identified in critical scholarship on the Balkans. Building on the work of Maria Todorova, scholars have described forms of *banal Balkanism* through which the region is routinely framed as Europe's internal Other—backward, excessive, unstable, and perpetually

incomplete. In this sense, Balkanism can become banal insofar as its representational codes are predictable and widely recognisable, even when they are stigmatising (Plantak and Paleviq 2022).

The case of Central and Eastern Europe, however, resists such banalisation. Unlike the nation-state, or even the Balkans as a symbolic category, Central and Eastern Europe has never crystallised into a single, stable imaginary capable of sustaining banal reproduction. There is no banal Central and Eastern Europeanism because the region's history is marked by ideological rupture, geopolitical displacement, and asymmetrical inclusion (Nowak 2022). Rather than being anchored in a continuous narrative, the region has repeatedly been defined through external frameworks and shifting centres of power.

This instability is not only imposed from outside but is also reinforced through processes of self-colonisation (Kiossev 2011). Many Central and Eastern European societies have historically internalised Western evaluative frameworks, adopting external standards of cultural legitimacy, modernity, and Europeanness. These internalised hierarchies shape how the region represents itself and how individual countries position themselves in relation to one another. Self-colonisation thus functions as an internal reproduction of external imaginaries, reinforcing symbolic dependency even in the absence of direct political domination.

Milan Kundera's (2023) essay "A Kidnapped West" provides a particularly influential articulation of this condition. Writing in the context of Cold War Europe, Kundera argued that Central Europe was culturally Western but politically displaced—"kidnapped" by the East and misrecognised by the West. His formulation captures a persistent tension between cultural self-identification and geopolitical classification. Europeanness, in this view, is not a given but a contested status that must be continuously asserted, narrated, and defended.

Kundera's argument helps explain the centrality of the *Mitteleuropa* imaginary within Central and Eastern Europe (Nowak 2022, 41–43). *Mitteleuropa* operates as an aspirational framework promising symbolic reintegration into Western cultural lineages—urban modernity, intellectual tradition, aesthetic refinement. Yet this imaginary is unevenly accessible. While some countries, such as the Czech Republic, can be more readily aligned with *Mitteleuropa* narratives, others remain marginal, contested, or excluded from this symbolic geography.

Historically, the region has been shaped by overlapping imperial and ideological projects. Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian, Soviet, and Western European influences have all contributed to its symbolic landscape, but none has succeeded in stabilising a coherent regional representation. Instead, these layered histories have produced a fragmented representational field characterised by internal hierarchies and competing narratives.

One of the most persistent of these narratives is the *Slavic* imaginary (Nowak 2022, 37–41). Within this framework, Central and Eastern Europe is visually and culturally coded as Slavic, marked by generalised

phenotypical traits, folk aesthetics, and assumed cultural dispositions. This imaginary functions as a powerful visual shorthand in transglobal media, but it is also exclusionary. Countries such as Hungary and Romania, whose linguistic and historical trajectories do not align with Slavic identity, occupy ambiguous positions within this representational system. They are frequently absorbed into Slavic visual regimes despite their difference, or else rendered anomalous and difficult to place.

This uneven inclusion generates representational tension. Hungary and Romania are geographically situated within Central and Eastern Europe, yet they are not fully integrated into the dominant symbolic frameworks through which the region is imagined. Their exclusion from the Slavic imaginary does not lead to clearer or more accurate representation; instead, it produces representational noise. Visual culture compensates for this ambiguity by drawing on alternative imaginaries—orientalised, Balkanised, or vaguely Eastern—further complicating their symbolic position.

This condition corresponds closely to what Robert A. Saunders (2020, 2) calls a “representational crisis” in the post-socialist region. For Saunders, the post-Soviet region is marked by a persistent inability to stabilise its external image, resulting in a proliferation of competing narratives, branding strategies, and geopolitical framings. This crisis does not stem from a lack of representation, but from an excess of incompatible representations that undermine one another.

The concept of representational crisis is particularly useful for understanding why Central and Eastern Europe functions as a noisy geopolitical label. Rather than converging toward a shared symbolic identity, the region accumulates partially overlapping and contradictory imaginaries—Slavic, Orientalised Eastern, Mitteleuropean, post-socialist—none of which achieves definitive dominance. Self-colonising dynamics further intensify this crisis, as regional actors selectively adopt or reject these imaginaries in pursuit of recognition, legitimacy, or geopolitical alignment.

Because these imaginaries are structurally incompatible, they cannot be banalised in the sense described by Billig. Banal reproduction depends on stability and repetition without friction. In Central and Eastern Europe, repetition produces contradiction rather than coherence. Visual cues clash instead of quietly reaffirming a shared understanding, exposing the instability of the category itself.

This representational crisis has significant implications for contemporary visual culture and for generative AI systems. AI image-generation systems encounter Central and Eastern Europe as a label saturated with historical discontinuity, uneven inclusion, and internalised hierarchies. When forced to resolve this complexity into a single image, they default to dominant or statistically salient imaginaries, producing exaggerated, hybrid, or internally inconsistent representations. These outputs do not simply misrepresent the region; they visualise the representational crisis itself, translating long-standing geopolitical uncertainty into algorithmic form.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES: CONFLICTING IMAGINARIES IN AI-GENERATED FACES

In June 2023, I conducted my first experiments with AI image generation using Midjourney V4. Approaching the platform with the naïveté of a humanities scholar and without the reflexes of an experienced AI user, my initial aim was modest and discipline-specific. I was researching the regional costume of a particular Hungarian region, focusing on nineteenth-century garments and their contemporary adaptations within fashion design. To support this work, I prompted Midjourney to generate images of nineteenth-century Hungarian dresses from the region in question.

What emerged from these early experiments was unsettling. While the garments themselves appeared visually convincing (I had trained Midjourney with archival images), the faces of the figures bore little resemblance to Hungarian historical or contemporary visual self-representations. Instead, they consistently displayed features aligned with a generalised Slavic physiognomy. The dissonance between dress and face was striking. Rather than illustrating Hungarian regional specificity, the images seemed to collapse cultural difference into a broader Eastern European visual type. This moment (figure 1) became the initial trigger for the research developed in this article.



FIGURE 1. An AI-generated image of a young male figure in folk dress from Tapolca, Hungary (Midjourney V4).

At the time, I lacked both the technical vocabulary and the methodological tools to fully interpret what I was seeing. Only retrospectively did it become clear that these early outputs already exemplified the dynamics later conceptualised as epistemic cultural flattening and noisy labelling. The system did not “misread” Hungarian culture; it reproduced a statistically dominant geopolitical imaginary in which Hungary was visually absorbed into a Slavic framework.

Three years later, and equipped with greater familiarity with AI image-generation systems and informed by critical scholarship on popular geopolitics and representation, I returned to Midjourney to conduct a systematic study. This second phase of research was designed to move beyond anecdotal observation toward comparative visual analysis. However the methodological approach adopted here is deliberately limited in scope. The study does not aim to approximate a fully systematic prompting protocol or to produce statistically generalisable findings. Instead, it operates as an *analytical probe*, using controlled prompts to surface recurring representational tendencies. As such, the results should be understood as *indicative rather than exhaustive*, and as contributing to the formulation of hypotheses about how generative AI systems engage with culturally unstable or contested categories.

The study focused on twenty countries: Albania, Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine. For each country, four images were generated using standardised prompts that varied by gender and dress. The prompts had the same structure for all the countries:

- /IMAGINE female model in folk dress from [country]
- /IMAGINE male model in folk dress from [country]
- /IMAGINE female model in contemporary dress from [country]
- /IMAGINE male model in contemporary dress from [country]

This resulted in a total dataset of eighty AI-generated faces. The use of standardised prompts allowed for controlled comparison, ensuring that observed differences could be attributed to representational tendencies rather than prompt variation. All the images were generated in August 2025 using the same Midjourney version (V7–Alpha) and default settings. While exact reproducibility is limited due to the stochastic nature of the system, prompt consistency was maintained across all cases.

This study focuses exclusively on images generated using Midjourney. The decision to rely on a single generative AI system was deliberate and theoretically motivated. The initial aim of the research was not to conduct a comparative evaluation of image-generation platforms, but to test a first hypothesis: whether generative AI systems reproduce conflicting geopolitical imaginaries of Central and Eastern Europe through visual representation. The early exploratory results already indicated the presence of systematic patterns rather than isolated anomalies.

Given that these patterns aligned closely with established theories of popular geopolitics and representation, repeating the experiment across multiple platforms was not considered necessary for demonstrating the structural nature of the problem.

Limiting the study to a single platform also ensured internal consistency. By controlling for technical variation, the analysis could focus on representational tendencies rather than platform-specific affordances. The goal was not statistical generalisation, but qualitative insight into how geopolitical imaginaries become visually encoded within generative systems.

Visual stereotypes were identified through qualitative visual analysis. The analysis focused on recurring phenotypical and aesthetic markers understood as culturally coded signifiers rather than biological traits. These included skin tone, facial structure and proportions, eye shape and colour, hair colour and texture, as well as the overall stylisation of facial features. Additional attention was paid to the interaction between face and costume, including how traditional dress appeared to activate ethnicising visual cues more strongly than contemporary clothing.

Further indicators included facial expression, perceived age, and the degree of stylisation or exaggeration applied to features associated with regional belonging. Patterns were identified through comparison across countries, genders, and dress types, allowing for the detection of consistent visual regimes rather than isolated instances.

The results revealed a clear and consistent pattern: *the ethnicising bias was significantly stronger in images depicting folk dress than in those depicting contemporary clothing*. In folk dress images, faces were more likely to display exaggerated or stereotypical features aligned with dominant geopolitical imaginaries. Contemporary dress, by contrast, tended to produce more neutral, globalised faces that adhered more closely to Western fashion imagery and commercial modelling conventions (figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Comparative AI-generated images of female models in contemporary dress and folk costume from selected countries included in the study (Midjourney V7 – Alpha).



Hungary provides a particularly illustrative case. In images generated using the folk dress prompt, Hungarian models were overwhelmingly rendered with features associated with a generalised Slavic imaginary (figure 3). This bias was notably absent—or at least significantly reduced—in images depicting contemporary dress. In those cases, Hungarian models appeared closer to Western European visual norms, suggesting that the ethnicising effect was activated specifically by the invocation of tradition and folklore.

FIGURE 3. AI-generated female models in Hungarian folk dress and contemporary dress (Midjourney V7–Alpha).



Romania exhibited a different, yet equally telling pattern. In both male and female folk dress images, the system frequently mobilised facial features associated with an orientalist or far-eastern imaginary (figure 4). This coding positions Romania symbolically closer to Europe's imagined eastern frontier, echoing long-standing Balkanist and orientalist narratives. Even in contemporary dress, traces of this visual displacement persisted, though they were less pronounced than in the folk costume outputs.

FIGURE 4. AI-generated female models in Romanian folk dress and contemporary dress (Midjourney V7–Alpha).



FIGURE 5. *AI-generated female models in folk dress (Midjourney V7–Alpha); left: Austria; right: the Czech Republic.*



By contrast, countries such as the Czech Republic and Austria were consistently rendered through a Mitteleuropean visual framework (figure 5). Faces appeared lighter, more familiar, and aligned with Western European aesthetic conventions across both folk and contemporary dress prompts. Here, the invocation of tradition did not trigger the same degree of ethnic exaggeration. Instead, folk dress was integrated into a visual regime that maintained symbolic proximity to the European centre.

These findings support the argument that generative AI systems do not apply bias uniformly across regions or representational modes. Rather, they selectively activate different geopolitical imaginaries depending on contextual cues embedded in prompts. Folk dress functions as a powerful trigger for ethnicisation, encouraging the system to draw on historically sedimented visual stereotypes. Contemporary dress, in contrast, aligns outputs with globalised fashion imagery, dampening regional specificity.

Importantly, these patterns cannot be explained solely by the content of the training data. Instead, they reflect the representational crisis and noisy labelling that characterise Central and Eastern Europe within transglobal visual culture. Countries such as Hungary and Romania, whose historical trajectories do not align neatly with dominant Slavic or Western frameworks, are especially vulnerable to representational displacement. Midjourney resolves this ambiguity by defaulting to the most statistically salient imaginary available.

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As always, there is nothing new under the sun. The visual representations produced by generative AI systems do not introduce unprecedented distortions, but reactivate long-standing cultural and geopolitical imaginaries. When Midjourney attempts to flatten Central and Eastern

Europe into a coherent visual category, it encounters the difficulty of representing a region whose history has never been even, continuous, or symbolically stable.

This article has shown that the biases observable in AI-generated images of Central and Eastern Europe coincide with a deeper representational crisis that predates digital technologies. Shaped by shifting borders, imperial legacies, ideological ruptures, and asymmetrical inclusion within Europe, the region has long occupied an unstable position within transglobal visual culture. Its global visibility has been structured by competing imaginaries—Slavic, Orientalised Eastern, Mitteleuropean—none of which has achieved lasting dominance.

Generative AI systems do not resolve this instability; they make it visible. Trained on datasets embedded in these conflicting traditions, AI systems reproduce epistemic cultural flattening by translating geopolitical ambiguity into simplified visual tropes. What appears as algorithmic bias is therefore not a technical failure, but a statistically optimised reflection of historically sedimented imaginaries.

In this sense, AI does not misrepresent Central and Eastern Europe so much as mirror the unresolved tensions that have long defined its image. The challenge lies not only in AI design, but in confronting the cultural and geopolitical conditions that these systems so efficiently expose. The contribution of this article lies not in providing a definitive empirical account, but in making visible a representational problem that remains underexamined. By framing Central and Eastern Europe as a noisy label within AI-generated imagery, the analysis opens a line of inquiry that calls for more systematic, comparative, and technically informed future research.

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