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ANALYSIS

Redefining Russian Nationhood in a Global Context

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between nationalism and imperialism in modern Russian nationhood from a scholarly perspective. It explores the influence of historical legacies on contemporary Russian state ideology and its impact on international relations, in particular under Putin's regime. The analysis also considers alternative national identities, such as Russian ethno-nationalism, and their implications for the future of Russia's national identity and geopolitical stance.

Introduction

The tapestry of Russia's sociopolitical landscape presents a labyrinth of paradoxes that warrant deeper examination and critical reflection. This inquiry examines the foundational underpinnings of Russian identity, contesting the notion of Russia as a cohesive nation-state and exposing the ideologies that historically underpinned its identity. Notably, only in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did the discourse advocating the conceptualization of Russia as an ideocratic colonial empire begin to fully gain traction within academic circles.

Central to this investigation is the deconstruction of the statist conception of Russian identity, which is deeply rooted in the ideals of centralized authority and imperial expansion. The post-Soviet notion of the Russian nation, ostensibly formulated as a "civic" and "non-ethnic" construct aimed at preserving unity within a diverse territory, has been inherently problematic. This model has resulted in feelings of marginalization and existential threat among both ethnic minorities within Russia and ethnic Russians themselves, primarily because of the ambiguous and nebulous boundaries inherent in the top-down notion of the Russian nation. Moreover, this inquiry transcends mere critique to explore alternative conceptual frameworks for comprehending and organizing the expansive breadth of Russian territory.

Drawing upon a diverse array of international scholarship, including voices from within Russia itself, this research endeavors to shed light on historical precedents and theoretical paradigms that challenge conventional narratives of nation-building within the Russian context. In this pursuit, we will seek to procure the insights of leading international scholars whose theories of nation and nationalism offer valuable lenses through which to comprehend the complexities of identity formation. Furthermore, we will provide a glimpse into the annals of Russian history to scrutinize whether the modern conception of the Russian nation has ever truly materialized—an inquiry that contests narratives of Russian exceptionalism and continuity.

This research aims to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of Russia's multifaceted reality. In so doing, our objective is not only to critique entrenched narratives and power structures but also to lay the groundwork for envisioning a more inclusive and equitable future—one that transcends the framework of statist nationalism and embraces the diverse cultural fabric of Russian space. Given the pressing realities of Russia's external aggression, the imperative to reimagine the foundational tenets of Russian nationhood becomes increasingly salient.

What Makes a Nation?

An exploration of the theoretical underpinnings surrounding the concept of nation and the process of nation-building, in particular in the Russian context, necessitates an examination of the stability and malleability of the nation-state construct in the contemporary context.

Benedict Anderson's seminal work, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," provides a foundational framework for understanding the nature of nations. Anderson posits the notion of the nation as an "imagined political community," wherein individuals, despite their limited personal acquaintance with fellow citizens, construct a shared sense of belonging and solidarity. His delineation of nationalism as a narrative of national genesis underscores the role of collective imagination in fostering a sense of belonging irrespective of the underlying inequalities and disparities. Anderson's scholarship revolutionized the conceptualization of nations and nationalism, asserting them as modern constructs rooted in collective imagination rather than immutable primordial entities. Thus, according to him, nations are not immanent; they were previously imagined, and nothing prevents the imagination from constructing them in the future (Anderson 2006).

In recent decades, the dichotomy of "civic" versus "ethnic" nations and nationalism has risen and fallen. The champion of this approach, Michael Ignatieff, discussed the concept of a supposedly good "Western" civic nationalism that has to overcome old-style "Eastern" ethnic nationalism and build a new kind of civic identity that is based on shared values and a sense of com-

munity. His work reflected a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in modern nation-building efforts, in particular in the context of diverse cultural and linguistic identities, similar to Russia. His writings have influenced academia and a leading Russian ethnologist and former Nationalities' Minister of Russia, Valeriy Tishkov, who directly participated in defining the Russian nation in the post-Communist period. Ignatieff discussed imperialism and humanitarianism in the context of nation-building, highlighting the dual nature of an empire in the modern world. Ironically, such reflections by a leading Western thinker empowered the Russian argument of becoming a "liberal empire" in the 1990s and early 2000s that is entitled to impose certain values through long-term nation-building, including with the use of military force. Russian leaders and intellectuals at that time instrumentalized this argument while brutally "pacifying" Chechnya and drew parallels with the Western invasion of Iraq that Mr. Ignatieff himself initially supported (Ignatieff 1998).

The dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism, although historically influential, fails to encapsulate the multifaceted nature of national identities. The evolving landscape of nationalist theories attests to the entwinement of cultural dimensions and political representation in contemporary nationhood. Rather than subscribing to a rigid dichotomy, contemporary scholarship underscores the nuanced interplay between civic and ethno-cultural elements in shaping national identities. Attempts to construct nations solely around universalist principles divorced from historical contexts have been insufficient, as evidenced in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bosnia. The complexity of nationhood, it appears, necessitates a holistic approach that acknowledges and integrates diverse cultural and historical realities into the fabric of nation-building endeavors (Kymlicka 2001; Jusdanis 2001).

Nation-Building and Minority Rights

In "Politics in Vernacular," Will Kymlicka underscores the limitations of liberal orthodoxy in comprehending nationalism, attributing this deficiency to its oversight of the intrinsic nexus between the state and culture. He contends that the fallacy of a culture-neutral state obstructs the understanding of why national minorities advocate for political autonomy. Thus, he challenges the prevailing notion that a state can divorce itself from cultural affiliations in its pursuit of democratic principles or economic expediency (Kymlicka 2001).

Another prominent scholar of nations and nationalism, Gregory Jusdanis, in "The Necessary Nation," criticizes recent rejections of the holistic thesis of culture, arguing that although scholars rightfully questioned its exaggerated authority, dismissing culture entirely has led to a skewed theory of social change. He emphasizes the importance of addressing identity, language, ethnicity, race, tradition, and the preservation of difference to comprehend the emergence of nation-states. He argues for the importance of nation-building in the modern age by emphasizing the nation as a protector of cultural difference and a catalyst for the development and societal progress of modern societies. He offers a sweeping defense of the nation in this context, highlighting its role in safeguarding what is dear to people as they enter a competitive world (Jusdanis 2001).

Moreover, Kymlicka delves into the dialectic of nation-building and minority rights, emphasizing the imperative of integrating minority groups into the nation-building process. He asserts that respecting autonomous culture- and nation-building processes is indispensable for both national majorities and various minority groups within a liberal-democratic state. In the Russian/Soviet context, as we shall explore further, nation-building was predominantly dictated by the state bureaucracy in pursuit of internal and external objectives. Paradoxically, Western debates have been invoked by post-Soviet Russian imperial nationalists and bureaucrats to justify the suppression of minority nationalism and hinder the development of a Russian ethno-cultural or political identity that is autonomous from the state. This phenomenon, as Kymlicka illustrates, exemplifies the adoption of the rhetoric of civic nationalism to undermine minority rights and suppress distinct national identities (Kymlicka 2001).

Historical-Cultural Context of Russia's Nation-Building

The implications of nation-building in Russia have attracted considerable scholarly attention, prompting an inquiry into its historical roots and the extent of its uniqueness. Historically, Russia was a latecomer in the nation-building trend that started in Western Europe in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods. By the late 18th century, when a nationalist fervor permeated Russia, it had already established itself as a sprawling continental empire with an ethnically diverse ruling elite and population (Sergeyev 2017). The absence of a robust nationalist movement, as elucidated by Geoffrey Hosking, can be attributed to the omnipresence of the monarchy, which hindered the development of a cohesive nation-state. The Russian autocracy "was generated by the needs of the empire and had to be reinforced as that empire came increasingly into conflict with nation-building." According to Hosking, the process of state-building in Russia obstructed nation-building, leading to a political landscape characterized by autocracy and backwardness (Hosking 2001).

During the reign of Emperor Nicholas I, after the failed Decembrist uprising—a precursor to Western-style popular nationalism—the Russian autocratic monarchy appropriated the concept of nationality. The triad of Official Nationality, encapsulating orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality, epitomized the Russian state's ideological foundation. This nationalist-imperialist ideological synthesis, aimed at consolidating autocracy while emphasizing national unity and religious orthodoxy, entrenched the state's central role in defining Russian identity (Riasanovsky 1959; Sergeyev 2017).

The Bolshevik Revolution marked a significant departure from traditional imperial paradigms, ushering in a new era of nation-building intertwined with ideological imperatives. Although the Soviet regime ostensibly championed the rights of various nationalities, it paradoxically imposed a centralized bureaucratic apparatus that curtailed genuine autonomy. Soviet nation-building was a convoluted process in which the state alternated between encouraging cultural expressions and suppressing nationalist sentiments deemed counterrevolutionary. The complexities of Soviet nationality policies highlight the paradoxes inherent in attempting to forge a cohesive national identity within an ideologically driven multinational state (Slezkine 1994).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 unleashed a wave of nationalist sentiments across the former Soviet republics, propelling the redefinition of national identities. In post-Soviet Russia, the challenge of constructing a coherent national identity within the framework of a vast and diverse federation became increasingly pronounced. The rise of ethno-nationalism and regionalist movements underscored the fragmented nature of Russian identity, complicating the state's efforts to foster a unified national consciousness. The resurgence of ethnic Russian nationalism, alongside the assertion of minority nationalism, presented a formidable challenge to the post-Soviet Russian state, exacerbating internal tensions and contestations over national identity (Smith 1996).

Imperialist Nationalism of Putinism

The evolution of Russian nationalism under Vladimir Putin's regime has been marked by a strategic appropriation of historical narratives and ideological constructs. A recent report by Maria Snegovaya, Michael Kimmage, and Jade McGlynn identifies the ideology purported to be the official national doctrine under Putin. This ideology, known as Putinism, is grounded in imperial-nationalist statism, Russian exceptionalism, and a historical narrative of struggle against the West. It promotes a robust, steadfast state and exalts Russian greatness while espousing anti-Western sentiment and traditional values. Putinism emphasizes an ideology of imperial-nationalist statism bolstered by notions of Russian greatness, exceptionalism, and historical antagonism toward the West. This ideology serves to bolster the ruling class's grip on power, in particular after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its significant rupture with the West (Snegovaya et al. 2023).

One significant challenge to Putinist ideology arises from an alternative Russian ethno-nationalism. The dual nature of official glorification and tangible state shortcomings has fueled widespread discontent, which nationalist figures—both pro- and anti-war—have adeptly exploited. Revolutionary and ethnic nationalism poses a vulnerability for the conservative statist-imperial nationalism of Putin, which struggles to address these ideologies comprehensively. Ethnonationalism presents a more mobilizing ideology, undermining the narrative of Russia's polyculturalism and challenging the notion that Russia's strength lies in its inherent diversity (Snegovaya et al. 2023).

Pathways for the Future: Deimperialization and Regional Identities

The complexity of constructing a cohesive national identity in Russia is evident when it is juxtaposed with other European nations. Despite the evolution of nationalist ideologies and the historical context of Russian imperialism, modern nation-building remains elusive in Russia. The potential future deimperialization, renationalization, and Westernization of the expansive North Eurasian region could present a pathway for the self-determination of various ethnic and regional communities as well as for redefining the Russian identity itself on a new basis, which would reflect a modern democratic nation-state model (Etkind 2023). However, without a coherent narrative and the cultivation of a new national identity, this scenario could remain wishful thinking.

The pursuit of nonauthoritarian and nonimperial foundations within Russian cultures is imperative for the democratization of that vast space and for the redefinition of its identities. Russian history bears witness to numerous instances of popular resistance against authoritarian and unjust rule as well as the autonomous existence of diverse Russian communities. Shifting away from a Moscow-centric view, a reimagined nation would prioritize the experiences and rich diversity of Russian regions economically, culturally, and politically. This applies equally to various national 'minority communities within the current internationally recognized Russian borders as well as to the Russian ethno-cultural heartland. For example, the region of Pomoriye in Northwest Russia, with its distinct identity and deep ties to Europe, although popularly regarded as a "reserve of a genuine Russian "culture," could become one of the cornerstones in reshaping Russian or post-Russian identity (Terekhov 2023).

Conclusion

The redefinition of Russian nationhood in a global context involves navigating the relationships among nationalism, imperial legacies, and modern state ideology. While Putinism currently shapes Russia's national identity, alternative nationalism presents both challenges and opportunities for the future. The integration of diverse cultural and historical realities into the fabric of nation-building is crucial for constructing a cohesive and inclusive Russian or post-Russian identity. As Russia continues to challenge the international and domestic order by instrumentalizing its imperialistic notion of nationhood, the interplay between these forces will determine its path on the global stage.

About the author

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ANALYSIS

Defining Inclusivity, Defying Ethnonationalism: Empirical Study of Decolonial Activism Among (Non)Russian Anti-War Initiatives

Khanda Namzhil and Alfira Tuktash

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Abstract

This essay is based on a broader study on decolonial activism that emerged in response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and is led primarily by Indigenous peoples of Russia, immigrants, people with interethnic identities and their allies. Although a large amount of research has been conducted on Russian anti-war movements, there is essentially no academic literature on decolonial activism among (non)Russians. Thus, this paper seeks to fill this gap, dispel the misconception that links decolonial activism to ethnonational movements, clarify the primary characteristics of activism, and demonstrate how it addresses the structural problems facing Russia as a state and a society which go well beyond the existing regime.

Introduction

While there are a significant number of studies on Russian anti-war initiatives, decolonial activism among (non)Russians[1] has received virtually no coverage in academic publications. Moreover, decolonial activists constitute a large group and range of initiatives that create a distinct discourse against Russian imperialism. They also initiate cross-border dialogs beyond nation-states and build solidarity with various Indigenous and nonrepresented communities around the world. For the past two and a half years, decolonial activists have done a tremendous job and have gained recognition not only from various international organizations[2] but also by building connections with activists from Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asian countries.

This research, which forms the basis of this essay, is a part of a larger study on Russian anti-war initiatives, which also included decolonial initiatives as a part of the anti-war movement (Unscorched Earth 2024). This essay aims to reiterate the main findings of that study pertaining to the decolonial initiatives while drawing more attention to the underlying context from which activism is emerging. The aim is to uncover the systemic nature of racialized practices of Russian politics stretching beyond the actions of the official authorities. We propose that directing criticism only toward Russia's current authoritarian regime is not sufficient for opposing the atrocious war unleashed on Ukraine as well as prosecutions and human-rights violations within Russia. According to the decolonial activists, it is imperative to the struggle with Russian imperialism to turn the gaze toward "colonial attitudes" (Golova and Selivanova 2024, 22), which permeate political discourses even of the Russian mainstream oppositional forces.

While Russian authorities label individuals, organizations and initiatives that go against the official party line as "foreign agents", "undesirable" or "extremist" organizations, decolonial initiatives are being exposed to the additional marginalization from the Moscow-centric Russian opposition. The terms "decolonizators" or "magistrates of decolonization" used by Russian oppositional elites in a derogatory manner are often strikingly similar to the rhetoric of the Kremlin, which makes far-fetched accusations that the primary goal of decolonial activists is to divide the country. In less charged situations, the representation of decolonial activists in forums, conferences and meetings of opposition in-exile is generally minimal. We believe that the general confusion of decolonial activism with separatist aspirations, lack of acknowledgment of the still-on-going Russian colonial project, and, more broadly, lack of recognition of systemic racism in Russia are all parts of the phenomenon Botakoz Kassymbekova (2024) coins as "imperial innocence", which denotes Russia's absence in public discourse, as well as of academic scholarship, of colonization and, thus, obstructs Indigenous peoples and people from Baltic states, Belarus, Caucasus and Central Asian countries, Moldova and Ukraine from asserting structural and lingering coloniality, which cannot be attributed entirely to the faults of the current regime. As Svitlana Matviyenko, Sitora Rooz, and E. Vincent posit (2024), "it is crucial to see the Russian war in Ukraine as an overdetermined multi-vectoral war" (44), where tragically, "the subjects of the empire are instruments

1 (Non)Russian is a term actively used by activists as a labeling practice and refers to the various ethnic identities of activists, including Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation, immigrants, people from Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Baltic states, along with ethnic Russians.

2 Over the past two years, Indigenous peoples of Russia have presented their cases during the thirtieth annual session of the OSCE and the 2024 meeting of the PACE.

of imperial reproduction" (48). This essay, thus, is not intended to point fingers and accuse opposition in complicity but rather to advocate for a more multifaceted understanding of decolonial activism within the more complex issues of current Russia as a state and a society.

Design of the Study

The presented findings are based on 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with decolonial activists either representing different initiatives and/or working individually. However, the specified number of interviews covers more projects, initiatives and sites, as the same activists can participate in several alliances. The interviews were tailored to answer questions such as what decolonial activism among Indigenous and other (non)Russians is, how it is emerging, and how it arises in the web of alliances within the general anti-war field and beyond. The sampling strategy utilized for the study comprised purposive sampling, where the activists to be interviewed were selected based on the researchers' observations and via referrals from other activists. While we name outwardly decolonial and larger media platforms, all of the study participants and their initiatives are anonymized for safety considerations.

Given the perpetual underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples of Russia in the political, economic, and cultural life of the Russian Federation, it is imperative to underscore the positionality of the authors in this type of study. The authors are Indigenous and decolonial scholars who are well-acquainted with activist circles, which makes it possible to uphold one of the main tenets of decolonial activism — "nothing about us without us". Additionally, since anti-war and decolonial activism is frequently prosecuted by the Russian state (Doxa 2024), trust and reciprocity between activists and researchers are imperative for gathering data and implementing any study, in general. The study's prime objective is to contribute to the work of decolonial activists, which benefits the communities they advocate for, and as such, the authors of the text do not claim any neutral knowledge the study proposes.

Analysis

Decolonial activism is a vast field in terms of the diversity of practices and forms of activism. As an umbrella term, decolonial activism includes collective initiatives, individual activists and all those who combine both formats. By the latter, we mean collaborations, where artists, scholars, graphic editors, lawyers and journalists work together with the support of larger decolonial media platforms, such as Asians of Russia, Beda media, the Yurt Community, Indigenous Russia, and so on. These diverse initiatives and individual activists work in the fields of journalism, legal support and advocacy, conduct social research, create analog and digital art projects, and contribute to language revitalization and environmental advocacy. It becomes evident from the interviews that the relationships between decolonial projects and activists are noninstitutional in nature but rather emerge in a horizontal and bottom-up manner. Most initiatives have emerged and continue to emerge from group chats, informal gatherings, and grassroots efforts. Many have a similar story: people meet at anti-war protests and rallies, events, and conferences and then create chat rooms where they formulate further courses of action.

Decolonial Activism Versus Ethno-National Movements

As a rapidly emerging field, decolonial activism among (non)Russians is enshrouded with myths and misunderstandings about its very nature, particularly with respect to their involvement in ethno-national movements. This dangerous misconception leads to preemptively ascribing nationalistic roots to the decolonial initiatives. While ethno-national movements — many of which date back to the Perestroika era and the 1990s (Goode 2011; Giuliano and Gorenburg 2012) — are very straightforward in expressing their course toward territorial independence, decolonial initiatives have consolidated in response to the full-scale invasion and focus their advocacy against Russia's imperial and colonial projects, manifested in cultural, political and epistemic inequalities, and not strictly advocating for the necessity of territorial secession.

The confusion becomes even more solidified when these movements become lumped together at different conferences and forums and presented under the same banner while being fundamentally different in their goals and approaches. Separating themselves from ethno-national aspirations, decolonial activists underscore the need to understand the inherently different cultural and historical backgrounds and economic and political dependencies of various Indigenous regions of Russia before advocating for their independence. According to our analysis, this line of argument emanates from the recognition of potential danger it can exhort on the people and especially activists living in Russia. Additionally, decolonial initiatives differ from ethno-national movements by placing less emphasis on their respective ethnic identifications. Instead, they prioritize dialog and allyship between different underrepresented groups, focusing on the convergence of the collective experiences of Russian colonialism while accounting for contextual differences among groups.

Although we posit that there is an urgent need to differentiate between ethno-national movements and decolonial initiatives, it is important to acknowledge that sig-

nificant progress, appeals and collective action have been achieved in cooperation between the two. Throughout the interviews, the attitudes toward ethno-national movements varied, whereas some expressed the importance of collaboration, dialog and unity for furthering collective objectives.

Radical Inclusivity and Solidarity Beyond Ethnic Identities

We argue that decolonial activists contribute to the public discourse about the future by advancing the principle of radical inclusivity. While the right-wing turn and the popularity of conservative movements around the world are increasing xenophobia and migrantophobia, decolonial activists emphasize the importance of intersectional approaches and mixed experiences, especially regarding class, race, mobility background, gender, and ethnicity. Increasing waves of forced mobility driven by war conflicts, climate change, extreme poverty and increasing numbers of stateless people around the world are undermining and rendering meaningless the social categories of belonging that were created by nation-states to reinforce territorial boundaries (Sharma 2020). Decolonial activists problematize questions of "pure" identities and essentialism by proposing other non-ethnic-centered categories for solidarity: experiences of oppression and inequality, resistance to capitalism, horizontal communities, and nonviolent communication.

As an example, a collective letter condemned the rise of migrantophobia in the Russian Federation following the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in Moscow in March 2024. After observing racist acts of violence against innocent people on the streets (Latypova 2024) and police brutality against people designated as suspects, the activists drafted a letter "Why it is important to speak out against migrantophobia and racism", which explains how systemic discrimination in Russia, which has existed for decades, hinders the strengthening of civil society. Behind this manifesto, as behind other letters by decolonial activists, there is an enormous invisible work of coordination, discussion and implementation of a people-first language. Importantly, this letter was drafted with the goal of making it possible for anyone who is willing to speak out against the normalization of torture and discrimination in Russia to join. There are dozens of collective and individual signatures under the letter, which we understand as demonstrations of solidarity across regional, state, ethnic, religious and other boundaries.

Challenging Epistemic Injustice

One of the lacunae of the social research that decolonial activists address is epistemic injustice, which "marginalizes embodied and direct knowledges of Russian imperialism and the agency of affected societies" (Hendl et al. 2023) and manifests in the way that local histories and voices of the subjugated are silenced and denied as legitimate sources of knowledge. Talking about their motivations for doing podcasts about their native cultures, making films, writing articles and creating comics, our conversation partners first recalled the moments when they realized that there was nothing in Russian mass media production that represented them, both visually and in terms of decentralized narratives. Second, by discovering and articulating their concerns, they turn to local sources, such as what constitutes local and Indigenous knowledge—bodies of observation, written and oral knowledge, and place-based practices of storytelling. In their search, they find stories of mass repression in the imperial and Soviet periods, of victims of colonization, of those who formed resistance, whereas in Russian-centric corpuses of scholarly texts, they are represented as rogue actors or outlaws.

Epistemic injustice does not only manifest itself in cultural practices. One of the most pressing problems faced by activists is the colonial gaze promulgated in journalistic texts. Prominent oppositional media in-exile have been instrumental in reducing the brutality of the Russian military in Bucha to a racist slur about "fighting Buriads" (Jonutytė 2023, Nomads 2024). For example, through thorough analysis of the participation of ethnic minorities in the war in Ukraine, Vyushkova and Sherkhonov (2023) conclude that racialized discourses pertaining to "certain ethnic groups such as Buryats, Chechens and Tuvans have attracted particularly high media attention" (127).

Realizing these shortcomings of journalistic expertise, decolonial activists began to analyze, write materials, run campaigns, and create media platforms themselves. One example is the Baymak case (Yusupova 2024). Big media did not report the case or blindly repeated the verdict of the court, which convicted activist Fail Alsynov in "inciting inter-ethnic hatred" for the expression *"bez khara kalyk"*, which in Bashqort language means "we are plebs here" but was translated as "we are black people" by the prosecution. More than a hundred outraged fellow citizens who came to the square to support the activist were charged by the court with an act of extremism (Situation 2024, 7). While this blatant injustice was discussed by Bashqort people, decolonial activists have succeeded in giving this case public traction as a case of political repression and the violation of many civil rights, including the right to freedom for peaceful protests.

Conclusion

Decolonial activism is a broad spectrum of advocatory practices involving various initiatives, organizations, media platforms, formal and informal communities, and individual activists. We propose that decolonial

activism among (non)Russians is an emergent phenomenon that transcends ethno-national borders and heteronormative discourses. Conceiving of activism as emergent is not to say that resistance to Russian colonialism is in its advent, as it has been in place through various liberatory movements and individual defiance of various scopes from the very beginning of Russian imperial expansion through various geographies. Rather, this form of resistance includes translocal, cross-republic and international solidarity of those sensitive to perpetually marginalized identities such as women, queer and transgender people, people with disabilities, and immigrants. Additionally, decolonial activism among (non)Russians in its present form has started emerging as an anti-war movement, taking its roots in an unequivocal criticism of Russia as an imperial power and defining its goals as uncovering the lingering, although often hidden, colonial project, permeating the actions of the official Russian authorities and, unfortunately, the discourses of certain oppositional forces.

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Khanda Namzhil is a PhD candidate in the field of Cultural Anthropology.
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ANALYSIS

Imperial Sentiment, Subaltern Rhetoric: Russia on the Scale of Imperial/Colonial Difference[1]

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Abstract

The article discusses a hybrid positionality of Russia on the scale of imperial/colonial difference where Eastern European subjects compensate for the resentment that arises from their peripheral standing by subjugating weaker neighbors striving to acquire recognition from the hegemon and improve their status in the existing cultural hierarchies. Having interiorized the logic of catching-up development, imposed on Europe's East, Russia has transitioned from a peripheral empire (catching-up imperialism mimicking the hegemon) to a global disruptor (questioning the supremacy of the hegemon and modifying the matrix of differentiation). Seeking to improve Russia's geopolitical standing and secure its power grip at home, the Kremlin leadership simultaneously evokes imperial and subaltern sentiments through the tropes of humiliation and unrecognized greatness, which are linked in Russian messianism. By framing the stakes of the war as normative and global, it garners support in the so-called Global South around shared grievances and the figure of a common enemy. This normative geopolitical bid manifests a hegemonic struggle played out in an identitarian way.

Russian War as a Hegemonic Struggle

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 produced a global geopolitical challenge and an epistemic shock: it shook the tenets of the existing security order but also contradicted the basic premises of dominant rationality. Even on the eve of this disruption, multiple observers repeatedly discarded the probability of large-scale warfare, as it allegedly contradicted Russia's national interests. This perceived irrationality of the Kremlin's actions was superficially explained through the psychological profiling of Russian leadership. Such projections of Western rationality and worldview—or "Westplaining", to use some authors' terminology—preclude the recognition of a coherent war strategy that discursively and performatively targets Western hegemony. Russia attempts to rhetorically discredit the so-called collective West as hypocritical, i.e., not living by its proclaimed values and serving the interests of ruling elites (cf. Korablyova 2023). Hence, it discards its normative power as a template for Ukraine and other aspiring democracies. This rhetoric is well received not only in non-Western settings but also among vulnerable social groups inside Western societies, which loosens their internal unity and fuels the rise of populism. Second, it demonstrates the Western incapacity to solve the issue, thus weakening its geopolitical weight by exposing it as an impotent military power and an unreliable ally.

Finally, it calls for a new world order where (1) the West is fragmented and marginalized and (2) national sovereignty, rendered as the rulers' autonomy to impose their will on the population, prevails over international institutions, values, rules, and regulations. The latter objective presents the ongoing war as a hegemonic struggle, which explains the conflict's potential for expansion over other regions and domains. It also highlights that the bid is normative and geopolitical, going far beyond the disputed territories or other particular matters.

The Russian invasion started in 2014 as the "Donbas Spring" campaign in reaction to the Maidan uprising in Ukraine ousting the President from office: it aimed to curtail a precedent of the successful manifestation of the political agency of Ukrainian citizenry and the mobilizing force of EU integration as a vehicle for democratization. The annexation of Crimea served as a testing ground to demonstrate the inefficiency of international law and institutions. The following eight years of "active measures", or hybrid warfare, in the West and gradual reorientation toward the rising non-Western powers marked the Russian trajectory from a peripheral European empire to the militant vanguard of the rising "rest". Public debates around the full-scale invasion signaled a comeback of the postcolonial vocabulary and its tentative acceptance toward Eastern Europe. The war urged the revision of Europe's complex imperial past, which was long overshadowed by the Cold War rivalry.

Eastern Europe Through the Postcolonial Lens: Entangled Experiences, Hybrid Positionalities

Russia's all-out invasion of February 2022 was quickly dubbed "a colonial war" in the West. Timothy Snyder

1 Some fragments of this essay were published earlier in: Korablyova, Valeria. 2022. "Russia vs. Ukraine: A Subaltern Empire Against the 'Populism of Hope'". *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Studia Territorialia*, 2: 39–60. https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2023.3

argues that "Putin took a pronounced colonial turn when returning to the presidency a decade ago. In 2012, he described Russia as a "'state-civilization,' which by its nature absorbed smaller cultures such as Ukraine's" (Snyder 2022). Indeed, the Russian war of aggression demonstrates an urge to recapture Ukrainian land, which corresponds to the logic of imperial territorial expansion. The newly acquired (occupied) lands in Ukraine were immediately and forcibly assimilated: billboards with iconic figures, such as Pushkin and Suvorov, were erected in the streets of Kherson under Russian occupation, and special summer classes with a Russian curriculum were set up for local children. The forced relocation of Ukrainians to Russia and the legally questionable adoption of Ukrainian children by Russian families are examples of the extraction of human resources to fill some demographic gaps in Russia.

However, applying the postcolonial approach to this part of the continent requires significant methodological refinements. Even if such attempts started developing potently in the 1990s and produced several fruitful categories, e.g., a "subaltern empire", "reverse orientalism", "internal colonization", etc., their integration into broader academic contexts remained problematic. There are several methodological and political reasons for this encapsulation and, in some cases, even discreditation of the Eastern European intellectual tradition of postcolonialism.

In the classical cases of maritime empires and their overseas colonies, the metropole and its dominions are initially defined by geographical and racial distance, whereas hybridity emerges in their continual interaction. In European land empires, shifting borders, fluid identities, and seemingly absent racial differences blur various dividing lines. Individuals and groups could change their status in the power hierarchy, often by adopting the hegemonic identity and contributing to imperial projects of subjugation of their compatriots. Hannah Arendt called this the parvenue effect. Ethnic othering is often imbricated with class exploitation and regional inequality, which complicates the picture even further. Drawing a clear-cut line between a periphery and a colony, an oppressed and a collaborator, and an ideal-typical taxonomy of colonial subjugation are not idle tasks in the Eastern European context.

Moreover, the same ethnic/national subjects might act as dominators and subalterns in different historical contexts toward different counterparts. Hybrid positionality is a norm in Eastern Europe, and it is defined in nonbinary terms. What Attila Melegh calls "the East–West slope of merits" (2006) exposes a gradual scale—or a mixture—of "civilization" and "barbarism", "domination" and "subalternity". When a certain matrix of difference becomes hegemonic, the symbolic distance is enhanced: the Slavic pedigree (Kalmar 2022), the Ukrainian language (Riabchuk 2021), or an unshaved beard (Etkind 2011) become visible markers of subalternity, anchors for othering. However, the matrix might change, and the signifiers may be rearranged.

The intense and entangled coexistence of several empires and their multiple peripheries/colonies creates cultural hierarchies of both. Subalterns engage in mutual othering, attempting to improve their position through subjugating a weaker neighbor, and empires may not be on a level playing field. Manuela Boatcă (2012) distinguishes heroic, i.e., hegemonic empires (France, England), decadent, or declined empires that have lost their superiority (Spain, Portugal), and peripheral actors, some of whom might have imperial experiences and aspirations. This hierarchy of empires triggers rivalry for normative superiority that might result in catching-up imperialism (mimicking the behavior of the hegemon) or a hegemonic struggle (questioning the supremacy of the hegemon and modifying the matrix of differentiation).

The structure of domination in Eastern Europe is at least tripartite: the imagined "West" is the main significant Other that wields the symbolic power of recognition on the basis of its cumulative political, economic, and cultural clout. Late twentieth-century revisionist interpretations of Europe's complicated colonial legacy vis-à-vis the Global South did not concern themselves with the states on Europe's eastern periphery, which were largely perceived as second-rate European nations. Ironically, the recent rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe was in part fueled by that perception, and it further reinforced this perception. The imperial/colonial difference in Europe seems to suggest only the catching-up logic of development for its eastern part, in which the frustrations generated by catching-up democratization and modernization can lead to rebellious catching-up imperialism. Russia is pioneering the latter and seeking like-minded allies within the EU while increasingly garnering recognition in the so-called Global South.

Within this complex of imperiality arising from subalternity, Russian aggression starts off as resentful imperialism. It subsumes all or part of neighboring states in brutal violation of the existing international order. In that way, it allegedly mimics the hegemon's modus operandi. Russian history provides multiple examples of keeping up with the great powers by mimicking their behavior within the hegemonic logic imposed by them. In the history of Russia, that logic has included the logic of antiquization in medieval times (rebranding Russia as an ancient empire rooted in Kyivan Rus'), the logic of industrialization and technological progress in the twentieth century (the armaments race and the space race in the Soviet Union), and the logic of "responsibil-

ity to protect" in the post-Cold War period (taking military control of areas with Russian speakers while sidestepping international institutions).[2] Russia's quest for hegemony has always been accompanied by attempts to prove that it is "a better Europe," superior to the "rotten" states of the West that have allegedly betrayed European ideals. Russian messianism assuages the humiliation of lagging behind the West and displaces the hegemon in its alleged "hegemonic decline."

Russia has sought to establish its identity as an equal power in its competition with the Euro-Atlantic "West." Madina Tlostanova calls it "the Janus-faced empire" because it is itself "Orientalized" by the West. She notes that Russian policy toward its subalterns is influenced by a "caricature secondary Orientalism," by which it attempts to compensate for an "inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe" (2008, 2). The importance of Ukraine to Russia's self-identity exceeds that of an internal colony that simply provides resources for imperial adventures. It also represents an "internal West" that must be subjugated, controlled, and incorporated to prove both the empire's grandeur and its Europeanness. Without the westernmost lands of the former Russian empire, contemporary Russia is a largely Eurasian entity with vast natural treasures but less symbolic capital.

In the wake of the current war, Russian officials have made repeated references to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 as justifications for Russian aggression. These comparisons go beyond instrumental whataboutism. They are the standard of true hegemony that Russia aims to live up to. The inherent paradox of this strategy of legitimization is aptly described by Tlostanova: "It is symptomatic for the subaltern empire, which even claiming the global spiritual and transcendental superiority is still looking for the approval and love of the West" (2008, 2). On the one hand, the Kremlin attempts to rise above international law, by which it wants to manifest Russia's sovereignty. On the other hand, it seeks recognition from the West. By that token, it inadvertently reinforces Russia's subordinate position and its normative dependence on the Other.

Molding the Identity of Wartime Russia: The Tropes of Humiliation and Unrecognized Greatness

The speech by Vladimir Putin that aired on the day of the full-scale invasion fits neatly into the logic of Russia as a resentful peripheral empire. At first glance, it is striking that the speech, delivered as multiple rockets were striking Ukrainian targets across the country, barely mentioned Ukraine at all: its name popped up only in the sixteenth minute of the 28-minute speech, with a reference to the Donbas. The speech focused instead on the U.S.-led collective West, calling it an "empire of lies" and identifying its neglect of Russia as the casus belli. The structure of the speech is indicative. Putin started from a place of resentment and a sense of humiliation. His word choices ("hypocrisy," "arrogance," and "cynical deception") reflect political psychology and postcolonial studies rather than international relations realism. Putin blamed the United States and its "satellites" for succumbing to "a state of euphoria created by the feeling of absolute superiority, a kind of modern absolutism, coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves." He also implied that the West's disdain of Russia is based on a "monopoly on civilization" it allegedly claims: "the so-called civilized world, which our Western colleagues proclaimed themselves the only representatives of" (2022a).

Putin listed the U.S. interventions that bypassed international institutions and resolutions. For him, the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 was a turning point, the most traumatic international event since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He proceeded with the cases where the Russian authorities could "rightfully" secure their power and support their loyal allies by taking military measures in Chechnya, Syria, and, most recently, Kazakhstan. Defending that understanding of sovereignty is the ultimate goal of the war in Ukraine — the right to use violent means against dissenting entities within Russia or its neighbors, without constraint by foreign partners. The necessity of preserving Russia's "sphere of influence" is hard-wired into the undisturbed authoritarian governance of the country. The claims of Russian strength, which are not yet duly recognized by Western counterparts, conclude with a poorly veiled threat to anyone who dares to intervene in the Kremlin's military adventure.

Putin's entire discourse described the position of Russia as an unhappy Western subaltern — largely self-colonized — that aspires to a hegemony of its own and that has enough resources to obtain it. However, this desire for recognition from the hegemon fixates Russia's subalternity. Putin concluded his speech with two points that illustrated this inherent contradiction. On the one hand, he affirmed one of his favorite notions,

2 Quite symptomatically, Ukraine was in the crosshairs of all of those attempts: 1) the intellectual elites from Kyiv helped in rebranding Muscovy into the Russian empire in the eighteenth century, and they promoted the legacy of Kyivan Rus' and Christianity to prove the ancient roots of the empire (Plokhy 2017); 2) the exploitation of the agricultural potential of the fertile Ukrainian lands through forced collectivization and confiscation of grain crops provided the material foundations for Stalin's project of industrialization, even if it resulted in the mass famine in Ukraine known as the Holodomor (Snyder 2016); 3) the Russian leadership compares its recent military interventions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine with interventions of the United States in the Middle East and North Africa (Čanji and Kazharski 2022).

namely, that Russia is simply defending its sovereignty by unleashing warfare on Ukraine ("It is our strength and our readiness to fight that are the bedrock of independence and sovereignty"). Yet, he described this decision with self-pitying rhetoric about being forced into action by circumstances ("We had no other choice. . . . They did not leave us any other option" (2022b).

Such simultaneous invocation of national pride and humiliation sets the tonality of ramifications of the standoff replicated by top officials at the meeting of the Security Councils, talking heads on federal TV and opinion leaders in social media. Overt paradoxes of positioning Russia as bravely disrupting the liberal global order and, at the same time, feeling cornered by the West (manifesting agency vs. a fatalist worldview), describing Ukraine as inherently adversarial but also eternally Russian, waging defensive warfare on another country's territory, and many others, seem to prove the esoteric nature of this military adventure, increasing above any standards of rationality, being opaque to reasonable explanations but also resistant to logical counterarguments. Rare but important anthropological studies (Burtin 2022) have demonstrated that the Russian population has interiorized the nodal tropes of Russian greatness and martyrdom, messianic self-sacrifice, and—most likely and most importantly—the delegation of decision-making and political agency to the ruler and retreating to the private domain with the sense of learned helplessness.

Resonance in the Global South: Declining Western Hegemony

Putin's claims that the Western states allegedly "have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people" (2022b) and turned it into "a theatre of potential military operations" of NATO resonated with traumatic experiences in the Global South. It is discursively framed as ubiquitous fatigue from U.S. hegemony when many crave to change it but only Russia dares to do so. This weaponization of anticolonial discourse creates a situation in which "those speaking in the name of the oppressed at the global level are often responsible for the most extreme oppression locally" (Morozov 2013, 18). Moreover, this anti-Western upsurge seeks to create a world where local oppressions are tolerated and legitimized as authentic rights of regional leaders. The underlying belief is that democratic values are just a smokescreen that veils ruthless Western imperialism; therefore, the Russian proposal to revive the great powers club is neither regression nor cynicism but is allegedly a more robust and honest move. It is an attempt to performatively establish an order governed by "strength" and "readiness to fight" (Putin 2022b): those who dare to violate international norms might acquire a new hegemony.

Crucial shifts in the overall rhetoric of Vladimir Putin from February to November 2022 deserve attention: he moved from eschatological militant messianism to what might be called "pragmatic sovereigntism". In the beginning, all the Kremlin mouthpieces from Solovyov to multiple YouTube bloggers were transmitting dystopian pictures of the future, where only Russia had a special mission to save the world against the Nazi threat/U.S. hegemony. Later, ramifications from the Kremlin, however, maintained a more positive tonality of global collaboration in the emerging multipolar world, where Russia is a reliable ally of alternative power centers (China and India) and a defender of global subalterns. The most striking shift was from a conservative vocabulary to a leftist vocabulary: Putin's speech on the Valdai forum was full of references to an anticolonial struggle, responsibility, and even an ecological mindset. The title "A Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone" clearly invoked left-wing intellectual tradition. In campaigning for the application of democratic principles to international relations, Putin claimed that it is the West that is intrusive, while "we mind our own business […] hoping that pragmatism will prevail" (2022d).

A plausible explanation for such a dynamic could be at least twofold. While having failed to persuade the West of the legitimacy of their demands, the Kremlin found a receptive audience in the so-called Global South, which consequently pushed them to enforce the postcolonial rhetoric well received there. There is no coincidence that while giving a speech on the occasion of the "accession" of newly annexed lands, Putin spoke about centuries of Western colonialism back to the Middle Ages, providing a list of Western atrocities from Indian tribes in America to Africa and China when "entire nations [got] hooked on drugs and purposefully exterminated… for the sake of grabbing land and resources, hunting people like animals" (2022c). On a deeper level, however, Putin seemed to follow in Zelensky's footsteps, invoking positive tropes of a shared future, solidarity, and responsibility, thereby visibly modifying the overarching tonality from gloomy dystopian messianism ("Who needs the world if there is no Russia in it?") to future projections of constructive coexistence on the basis of the shared values of peace, security, and justice.

Sociological surveys demonstrate polar opposite reactions to the Russian war and its rhetoric in the West and the "rest" (Garton Ash, Krastev, & Leonard 2023). With all the internal nuances and differentiations, most respondents in the Euro-Atlantic world believe that the all-out invasion demonstrated Russian weakness, whereas non-Westerners see the Kremlin's strength in it and expect the rise of a multipolar world as a result. Emotional mobilization seems to be around

the shared sense of historical humiliation and the common enemy figure. To date, the Marxist prediction of the international solidarity of the oppressed has failed to materialize. Ideological restructuring of the global public is largely identitarian, whereas values and principles retroactively justify the chosen stances. Opportunism rules on both sides of the emergent cleavage, yet the West and Ukraine are called to pay the price: the former with its hegemony and the latter with its existence.

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ANALYSIS

Postcolonial Meets Post-Soviet: At the Crossroads of Divergent Voices and Layered Silences

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Abstract

The academic debate around the applicability of postcolonial hermeneutics to Ukraine that resurfaced in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion does not take place in a vacuum: it unfolds as part of a broader inquiry that has emerged following the so-called "imperial turn" in the study of the post-Soviet space. The heterogeneity of this space is profound, although its common denominators, such as the continuous subjugation of its many constituents by Russia, cannot be overstated. This article pertains to the genealogy of the application of postcolonialism to "all things post-Soviet" and discusses different scholarly perspectives in this regard, including those critical of the region's postcolonial credentials. Ultimately, it argues that the merger of the two "posts," in addition to theoretical innovation, requires self-reflexivity and a nuanced sensitivity to the lived realities on the ground.

Genesis of the Debate

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that David Chioni Moore's 2001 article, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," was the ultimate contribution that initiated a serious discussion around the postcoloniality of what he terms the post-Soviet sphere, namely, the Baltics, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (Moore 2001, 112). Although isolated propositions regarding the potentially postcolonial situatedness of certain countries in the region were published even earlier in the 1990s and came mostly from within the field of Slavic studies (e.g., Pavlyshyn 1992), this article by Moore, which was the first attempt to lay the ontological and epistemological groundwork for the inquiry into the intersections between the two "posts," came from outside the academic disciplines concerned with the Eastern European context: David Moore, a professor in International Studies and English, specializes in literary interactions in the Black Atlantic world (Macalester College 2024).

Needless to say, this was not the first scholarly work that adopted labels such as "imperial" and "colonial" (along with the related "post" and "neo" terms) when referring to the Soviet Union/Russia. Such discussions already took place as early as the 1960s. However, as Estonian scholar Epp Annus (2018) posits, at that time, these denominations were mostly employed for political purposes, given the context of the Cold War, and did not substantively address the conceptual nuance behind them: "In all these texts, 'Soviet colonialism' remains a mere buzzword, gesturing toward the imperial nature of the Soviet enterprise and discursively connecting it to other burning issues of the day" (86). Among others, studies of this kind include "Russia and Her Colonies" by Walter Kolarz (1953), "The Last Empire" by Robert Conquest (1962), and the edited volume "Crisis and Continuity in World Politics: Readings in International Relations" by George A. Lanyi and Wilson C. McWilliams (1966), which contains a section titled "Soviet Colonialism: Does It Exist?" (Annus 2018, 86).

The editorial by David Hoffman titled "The Soviet Empire: Colonial Practices and Socialist Ideology," which appeared in the Russian Review journal in 2000, was one of the first publications to explore the study of Soviet colonialism "in the context of Soviet studies" (Annus 2018, 59), although academics from various fields, including John Comaroff (1991), Marko Pavlyshyn (1993), Yuri Slezkine (1994), Dominic Lieven (1995), and many others (Annus 2018, 75), had substantively dealt with the matters of Soviet colonialism shortly after the dissolution of the USSR. Katherine Verdery's 1996 article "Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe" is also often acknowledged as being among the first to investigate whether postcolonial studies can be applied in "postsocialist" settings (Owczarzak 2009, 5). Among the seminal works that provided a solid foundation for postcolonial analysis of the region are Larry Wolff's "Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment" (1994), Maria Todorova's "Imagining the Balkans" (1997), and Ewa Thompson's "Imperial Knowledge" (2000) (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 11–12), which initially examined how the West has shaped the region's "colonial difference."

However, the pivotal moment of uncertainty in the community of post-Soviet studies scholars regarding their potential alliance with the postcolonial school of thought emerged after 2001 and continues to yield insightful, although increasingly contradictory, results.

The sense of "discursive confusion" and "paradigmatic uncertainty" (Annus 2018, 60) persists in the field in regard to incorporating the postcolonial conceptual toolkit into Eastern European and post-Soviet studies.

Concerning the basic ontological premises that David Moore conveyed in his foundational article, which, according to most scholarly accounts, started the conversation around the global applicability of postcolonial theory, the following must be mentioned.

First, while recognizing that postcolonialism was initially aimed at critiquing Western powers, he asserts that the West did not "monopolize" colonial activity: what he described as the post-Soviet sphere has been "unquestionably" suffering from Russian subjugation "for anywhere from forty to two hundred years" (Moore 2001, 115).

While Moore does not seem to be highly concerned with the conceptualization of Russian/Soviet dominance in the region – treating it as a given and as a starting point for his theorizing – his call for imagining the post-Soviet space in postcolonial categories has prompted a vast array of inquiries that look into matters of definition from a historical perspective and discuss Russian/Soviet influence in a comparative manner. For instance, scholars have been wondering where (and when) in the region, the conduct of this hegemon most resembled "classic" colonialism, where it can be described as imperialism, where it manifested some alternative forms of dependency, and which of the states could merely be described as "occupied" by it. One of the most insightful and historically situated analyses of the latter kind is exemplified in a chapter from the already mentioned monograph by Annus (2018), titled "Can a Modern Nation State be Colonized?," which is a reference to Nancy Condee's (2006) prominent question, "How white must one be to be occupied?" (830).

Moore recognized the vast heterogeneity within the spaces "traditionally" considered as postcolonial and within those belonging to the post-Soviet sphere. He acknowledged that the uncritical expansion of the scope of applicability of the concept "postcolonial" can lead to it becoming stripped of its analytic power. Despite this, he suggested that the "postcolonial" label could aptly describe the societies previously under Russian/Soviet influence in the aftermath of 1989 and 1991, similar to how it was employed to describe South Asia after 1947 and Africa after 1958. He proceeded to compare the conditions of the post-Soviet sphere with those of sub-Saharan Africa (Moore 2001, 114). "East is South," he famously declared. However, "South does not speak East, and East does not speak South" (Moore 2001, 115). Therein, he implied the so-called "double silence" between the postcolonial and post-Soviet strains of research.

An important observation pertaining to the silence on postcolonial studies' part lies in the fact of the genealogical indebtedness of postcolonialism to early Marxism, which led to the relatively uncritical perception of the USSR by theorists of postcolonialism and their reluctance to, in any way, "equate" the conduct of the Soviet Union to that of Britain or France (Moore 2001, 117). Since Moore noted this tension—admittedly, he was the first scholar to credit Marxist ideological embeddedness of postcolonialism as a primary reason for Russian/Soviet being a "blind spot" in theorizing—many more scholars have joined him in this assessment, including but not limited to Mircea Martin, Rodica Mihăilă, Christina Şandru, Violeta Kelertas, Karl E. Jirgens, Vytautas Rubavičius, and Kārlis Račevskis (Ştefănescu 2022, 155). Bogdan Ştefănescu, aside from the "ideological embarrassment" pertaining to the Marxist backbone of much of postcolonial theorizing, also outlines epistemic and contextual reasons for the persistent reservations in the field against a "comparative approach to Western and Soviet coloniality" (2022, 143). Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen posit that in the newly emerged states after the USSR dissolution, "[p]artisanship against communism bore so many analogies to anticolonial resistance that indeed it may look like postcolonialism's puzzling omission not to comment on it" (2023, 11).

Notably, Moore (2001) does not outline any specific propositions regarding the methodology of postcolonial analysis: he merely argues for the expansion of the scope of postcolonial theory to account for the entire post-Soviet space based on the premise that "Russia and then the Soviet Union exercised powerful colonial control over much of the earth for from fifty to two hundred years" (123). His suggestion regarding the rationale behind the application of postcolonialism in these cases can be narrowed down to not judging whether a certain country is "postcolonial or not" but rather asking "if postcolonial hermeneutics might add richness to studies of place or literature X or Y or Z" (Moore 2001, 124).

Interestingly, David Moore revisited his influential 2001 essay in a recent article published in Ab Imperio. In this 2024 statement, the author further contextualizes his earlier proposals regarding the incorporation of the post-Soviet into postcolonial discussions in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He attempts to contribute to the conceptual clarity in the debate and raises questions about the proliferation of the term "postcolonial" in the late 1980s-early 1990s and ponders its temporal relation to the fall of the Soviet Union (Moore 2024, 43).

Additionally, the scholar has refrained from further framing the status quo of the intersection between the

two "posts" as a double[1] silence, instead exemplifying the single silence (within the postcolonial camp) with the reactions of the Global South as well as West-based leftists toward the war between Israel and Palestine as opposed to the Russian-Ukrainian war:

> Large swaths of Western European and US academics, university student populations, and progressive cultural institutions have rallied to the Palestinian cause, protesting the horrific Israeli actions in Gaza, in a way far broader and more intense than that mustered for Ukraine. […] [T]here is no comparably broad West-South postcolonial constituency for the liberation of Ukraine from imperial-colonial subjection. (Moore 2024, 58)

Divergent Perspectives

In one of the rare instances where established postcolonial thinkers have contributed to the "post-Soviet" debate, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2006) suggested that there are no grounds for "gatekeeping" the postcolonial toolkit; however, the adaptation of its "travel" to other spaces should be meticulous and align with widely recognized indicators of the colonial condition. "Every postcoloniality is situated, and therefore different," she posits (Spivak 2006, 828). Thus,

> When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, "colonizer" and "colonized" can be used. The consequences of applying them to a wide array of political and geographic entities would be dire if colonialism had only one model. (Spivak 2006, 828)

In response to Spivak, Nancy Condee seeks to answer the question "Are we postcolonial?" by differentiating among various regions within the post-Soviet space and scrutinizing the "postcolonial" label. She argues that despite formal alignment with the situation "on the ground," this concept may inadequately capture the self-ascribed identities in those spaces. As an example, she references the Central European reluctance to adopt this term (Condee 2006, 830).

Elaborating on the possible reasons for the discursive and paradigmatic anxiety that has permeated the intersection of postcolonial and post-Soviet studies, Epp Annus (2018) highlights the issue of disciplinary divisions within the field: some departments (e.g., literature and culture studies) seem more eager to explore new approaches than others (e.g., history), which creates a sense of discontinuity and sporadicity. Additionally, given the vast realm of political implications that follow from invoking postcolonialism, there appears to be a reluctance in this regard, among, for instance, Baltic and Central European countries, who "consider themselves too European (and too white) to fit the postcolonial paradigm" (Annus 2018, 61). Concerning this, the scholar aptly notes a vicious circle:

> One needs to enter the zone of postcolonial thinking in order to rid oneself from orientalizing prejudices (that the colonized are necessarily darker-skinned, less developed, and inferior), but these very orientalizing prejudices suppress one's will to enter the zone of postcolonial thinking – and, in fact, challenge its claims to urgency or validity. (Annus 2018, 62)

Czech scholar Radim Hladík (2011) uses the label "post-socialist" to describe the Central and Eastern European space and adopts the framework of Edward Said's "traveling theory" to make sense of the varied instances of "acceptance" or "resistance" to incorporate the post-socialist into the postcolonial space. Like many others writing on this topic, he attributes the emergence of the debate on the potential synergy of the two "posts" to the knowledge vacuum that emerged in relation to the region formerly known as the "Second World" in the aftermath of the Cold War and the respective necessity for "theoretical restructuring of the academic field" (Hladík 2011, 562).

While providing an analysis of the receptiveness of scholars within the field of Central and Eastern European studies to integrate the two "posts," Hladík also explicates his own positionality: postcolonial theory cannot be merely "superimposed" on the post-socialist space without being transformed in some way (2011, 586): he warns against simplifications that can result from the merger of these schools of thought. For example, while liberation movements were instrumental in shaping nationalisms in "traditional" colonies, many nations now considered post-socialist had relatively established notions of their national identities long before their incorporation into the USSR. Therefore, he explains that the anti-Soviet/Russian sentiment in post-Soviet European nations "bears little resemblance to the troubled identity of a post-colonial subject fascinated with its former colonizers" (Hladík 2011, 576).

Hladík suggested that the scholars' national background and the "geographical focus" of their research are

1 Because, according to his assessment, scholars of Eastern and Central Europe have been productively engaging with postcolonial theory over the past two decades, only a one-sided silence now persists.

likely to determine their receptiveness to applying a postcolonial lens to the region, which in turn influences the volume and substance of scholarship produced. He noted that although numerous studies designate "Central Asia […] the best candidate for postcolonial denomination" (Hladík 2011, 581), it seems somewhat unexpected that most of the respective literature focuses rather "on the Soviet Union's purported European colonies"[2], such as the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine (Hladík 2011, 582).

A focal point in contextualizing Eastern European and "East Central European" regions alike is their liminality or in-betweenness, best postulated by Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen in their recent edited volume titled "East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century." Although the authors focus on East Central Europe, we believe that many ontological propositions, given the intersections in historical experiences and cultural connections, can also be applied to understanding the situatedness of the broader Eastern European space.

Scholars note that the peripherality of Eastern and Central Europe has been riddled with contradictions: while there has always been a strong sense of belonging to Europe (and, after the USSR's dissolution, the notion of "return to Europe" and "nostalgia for Europe" (Boym 2001, 221, as referenced in Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 4–5) has been prevalent), the inferiority related to "eastness" or lesser "Europeanness" has also been (and remains) a distinct feature of the region's self-imagination.

It is well known that East Central Europe did not explicitly participate in the imperialist scramble led by Western European countries. Even though there were continuous dependencies on the Prussian/German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires until the end of World War I, those countries did not see themselves as colonies as "the concept of colony was reserved to non-European territories" (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 2). However, the history of East Central Europe involves participation in imperial conquest through the medium of labor migration: for instance, the region's population supplied labor to empires' occupation, management, and law enforcement in the colonies. Despite acting as transnational "Europeans" and assimilating with the colonial ruling elite, East Central Europeans maintained "shades of difference" in the colonial context (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 3).

Bridging the historical imperial with the contemporary (neo)imperial modalities of power, one cannot help but notice a continuum. While participating in the colonial conquest of Africa, East Central Europeans did not share the same "shade of white" as Western Europeans. Currently, despite some nations' formal inclusion—or the anticipated inclusion of "Eastern Partnership" states—in the European Union, which many consider to possess characteristics of an imperial power (Behr and Stivachtis 2016) or even a "neo-medieval empire" (Zielonka 2007; 2008), there persist racialized, patronizing conceptions of East and Central European countries in the dominant Western European discourse. Fruitful empirical research[3] has begun to emerge recently in this regard, suggesting the notion of peripherality of Eastern and Central European whiteness in relation to their counterparts from the European "core" and addressing the racial dynamics within the region.

Kołodziejczyk (2009; 2010), as reaffirmed in Kołodziejczyk and Huigen (2023), proposed an "inherently comparative" postcolonial framework for sensemaking of the European periphery:

> It is only through the exposure to difference understood as: (1) relationality through analogy, (2) partial similarity, and (3) a challenge to the established theoretical or literary canons perpetuating their monolingualism that postcolonial studies can look beyond its established theoretical grounds of the binary metropolis/(post) colony. (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 15)

The necessity of subverting the prevailing binary categories in knowledge production within the postcolonial realm appears to be a recurring methodological issue raised by scholars at the intersection of the two "posts." Indeed, not only is the familiar juxtaposition of the (Western) metropolis and (non-Western) colony challenged when the Eastern European variable enters the equation, but the (neo)colonial and (neo)imperial dynamics within the region are also brought to light and can be explored once the prevailing binary that suggests that only Western nations pursued imperial and colonial conquests is overcome.

Harsha Ram (2006), among others, proposes "a renewed focus on the regions of the Eurasian periphery"; in his view, openness to embracing postcolonialism is necessary to decenter Russia as the ultimate representation of all things (post-)Soviet (833). Like many other scholars, he does not explicitly deem the USSR an empire but rather proceeds with a more moderate postulation of its potential imperiality:

2 Notably, the South Caucasus is also severely underrepresented in scholarly discussions about the postcoloniality of the post-Soviet space (Bibilashvili 2022, 62).

3 For instance, see Baker et al. (2024) and Safuta (2018).

> If the Soviet Union was an empire, it was one that combined an exceptionally violent and coercive centralism with a paternalistic internationalism whose relation to the peripheries of the USSR was by no means purely exploitative. The subsidizing of republican economies, the indigenizing of regional party structures, and the fostering of national cultures from the Uzbek to the Armenian were pursued in tandem with the ostensibly homogenizing vision of "Soviet man." (Ram 2006, 832)

Similarly, for Hladík (2011), the challenges in framing race as a "key mode of subjection" in Soviet imperial conduct present an important caveat in terms of the applicability of postcolonialism, "especially in Central and Southern Europe, where the satellite states were run by indigenous elites, which sometimes attempted to shake off Soviet control" (577).

While for some scholars, the phenomenon of early Soviet korenizatsiya appears to be one of the nails in the coffin of hypothesized Soviet imperiality, for others, it does not pose a significant methodological challenge in terms of ascribing imperiality to the USSR. After all, the aim of applying postcolonial theory in this context should not be to erase all differences between Eastern and Western European experiences of imperial and colonial othering. The ambiguities of imperial and colonial conduct here should be further examined, and, as it appears, comparative transimperial and transcolonial studies can help bridge the gap between the forms of (post-)Soviet coloniality and imperiality and the more "traditional" colonial and imperial conduct exercised by Western powers.

Russian Sonderweg Repackaged

A distinct reluctance to explore the postcoloniality of the post-Soviet space has been observed within Russian academia, at least in the more or less "classical" understanding of the debate that emerged in the region in the 1990s-early 2000s (Chernetsky 2006). Instead, some controversial strains of research regarding Russian identity and statehood have emerged, best represented by Alexander Etkind (2011) and Viacheslav Morozov (2015).

Etkind's notion of the so-called "internal colonization" of the Russian Empire has sparked debate among experts on the region. In the assessment of authoritative decolonial feminist scholar Madina Tlostanova, Etkind's theorizing is "reductionist and blind toward the experience of the real colonial others of the Russian empire, those marked by racial, religious, cultural, and not merely social differences," and what causes most concern in her view is the "distortion of race in the Russian/Soviet context" (Tlostanova 2015, 274). Both Tlostanova and Chernetsky (2003; 2006) agree that Etkind's framing perpetuates the coloniality of knowledge and denies agency (and therefore, a potential for decolonization) to the borderlands of the Russian/Soviet empire. Among the many problematic instances of comparison of Russia's experience with that of other empires, he invoked the equation of Russian so-called "internal colonization" with the British colonization of the Americas (as opposed to India), which has led to additional criticism based on not differentiating comprehensively between the notions of internal and external colonization (Morrison 2013, 455–56).

Building on Ektind's (2011) theorizing, Morozov[4] posits that "Russia has successfully colonized itself on behalf of Europe but has been unable to assimilate" (2015, 11) and calls for the recognition of Russia as a "subaltern empire" trapped in a liminal position between the West and the East. Both the ontological propositions put forward by this author and the conceptual vocabulary he employs (e.g., "Russian enigma") align neatly with the exceptionalist view of Russian history and identity. This approach does not contribute to the decolonization of Russian minds but rather directs the gaze of the external observer—the primary target audience of such writings—away from Russian imperial identity and its real-life ramifications for millions of subjugated peoples.

It does not seem coincidental that scholarship rendering the Russian colonial/imperial experience as exceptional predominantly stems from Russian academics. This notion of a Russian Sonderweg, an utterly "unique" imperial experience incomparable to those of "classic" European imperialist/colonialist nations, is disturbing. Exceptionalist Russian voices that find critical

4 Considering the inseparability of the text from its context, we feel compelled to mention one of the most recent developments in the academic career of Viacheslav Morozov. After nearly 15 years of teaching at the University of Tartu, he was found guilty on June 18, 2024, of acting for and on behalf of the Russian intelligence service against the Republic of Estonia. The indictment stated that Morozov collected information on Estonian domestic, defense, and security policy, as well as on individuals and infrastructure related to these areas. He reportedly passed on information about Estonia's political situation, allied relations, integration, and social inclusion to the Russian intelligence service ("Antigosudarstvennaya deyatel'nost" 2024). According to the Director General of the Estonian Internal Security Service, Morozov was recruited by Russia in the early 1990s while he was a student at St. Petersburg State University and undergoing training at the military department (Mürk 2024).
While we do not suggest a causal relationship between the nature of his indictment and the content of his research, as this would be speculative, it may nevertheless be worth contemplating the potential political ramifications of his academic work and how it could ideologically align with the interests of the Russian state.

acclaim in Western academia contribute to reproducing hegemonic modalities of knowledge dissemination that deny agency to the truly oppressed constituents of the (post)imperial space. Essentially, this reflects their imperial mindset remodeled to align with contemporary socially accepted standards of knowledge production. It indicates that fundamentally, nothing has changed: Russia remains the mysterious Other for Western-based intellectuals in the fashion of ideational categories solidified during the Cold War, although the current appetite for knowledge about the Other is being satisfied with repackaged notions of imperiality that fit into the Overton window. Instead of confronting their historical legacy, Russians are once again presenting themselves as having a unique trajectory that distances them from the "evil" Western powers and gives them discursive leeway to juxtapose themselves with the Western (neo)imperialist agenda and justify their own policies (however marauding and blood-seeking they may be), further upholding the hypocritical continuity of an "anti-imperialist empire" pioneered during Soviet times.

The Limitations of Postcolonialism

Madina Tlostanova, who has written extensively[5] on the matters surrounding postcoloniality of post-Soviet space, posits that postcolonial discourse, with its roots in anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist critiques, may not fully capture the complexities of the post-Soviet experience (Tlostanova 2012, 130). The scholar instead advocates for a "decolonial option," which focuses on disrupting the hierarchical continuities of knowledge and subjectivity rather than merely studying colonial legacies. Tlostanova (2012) criticizes the tendency characteristic of postcolonial theorizing to maintain a strict subject-object dichotomy in research, which results in the imposition of Western theoretical frameworks onto non-Western contexts (134).

However, all criticisms of the application of postcolonial frameworks for understanding the Eastern European context are situated differently. Among others, Neil Lazarus (2012) is skeptical because postcolonial studies, in his assessment, are driven by a form of "third worldism," which views the West as a monolithic oppressor. He argues that this perspective has hindered a nuanced understanding of the contemporary world system and obscured the specific dynamics of capitalist development and exploitation that underlie colonial history (Lazarus 2012, 120).

Lazarus is also concerned about the "premature anti-Marxism" within post-Soviet critiques, which tend to reject Marxist analysis outright due to its association with Soviet oppression. He suggests that the specific historical experience of Soviet rule should not necessarily discredit Marxism as a whole (Lazarus 2012, 121). Bogdan Ștefănescu (2022) regards this criticism as indicative of a distinct ideological bias: "In spite of the show of impartiality and historical precision, Lazarus is taking an ideological stand which conditions his scholarly accuracy, and which he made clear from the very beginning in the abstract that precedes his article" (156).

Nevertheless, not all scholars who sympathize with Marxism have a negative assessment of the potential intersections between postcolonialism and post-Soviet studies. A prime example of an alternative opinion is an influential 2009 article by Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery. The scholars contextualize postcolonial and postsocialist frameworks as having emerged from historical periods marked by profound political transformations—the end of colonialism and the collapse of socialist regimes, respectively. Therefore, they suggest that these "posts" share critical commonalities, including their reactions to imperial and authoritarian structures (Chari and Verdery 2009, 10–11).

Framing the Discussion

To summarize the debate outlined in this article, we find it useful to refer to the following conceptualizations of the scholarly discussion at the intersection of the two "posts."

According to Radim Hladík, there are two main "camps" of scholars arguing for the merits of the application of the postcolonial lens to the issues of "post-socialism." On one side of the continuum are those who argue that the postcolonial theory itself needs not to be transformed in a substantial way but rather that "our perception of post-socialism needs to transform and acknowledge its fundamentally post-colonial character" (2011, 586); he subsequently names Eva Thompson as one of the proponents of this strain of thought. On the other side of the spectrum are those who posit that the (postcolonial) theory should not necessarily be transformed to account for other experiences, such as those of the post-socialist space, but this is because "the substantial difference" between these "precludes anything but tentative comparisons" (Hladík 2011, 586).

Kołodziejczyk and Huigen (2023) describe the debate on postcolonialism in Eastern and Central Europe in a twofold manner, albeit distinct from Hladík. One approach within the current scholarly discussion on the topic presupposes post-Soviet states as postcolonial, arguing that their experiences under Soviet dominance or as Soviet satellite states align them with globally recognized postcolonial conditions. This viewpoint also extends to earlier European imperial dynamics and uses postcolonial status

5 See, for instance, Tlostanova (2008; 2012; 2015; 2019).

to address national identity reconstruction and the legacy of colonial oppression. The second approach acknowledges the region's history of subjugation under European colonial power structures but uses postcolonial theory as a tool for critiquing and reevaluating historical narratives and identities rather than reinforcing nationalistic discourses. While these perspectives sometimes merge in critical analysis, they often lead to opposite outcomes: one reinforcing nationalism and the other questioning and critically subverting it (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, 16–17).

Finally, Epp Annus (2018) outlines four primary areas of scientific interest that characterize the situation in the interdisciplinary field of inquiry of postcolonial (post-)Soviet and East and Central European studies, namely, "1) studies of Soviet colonialism, 2) postcolonial studies of postcommunist societies, 3) studies of Russian internal colonization", and "4) postcolonial research into the Tsarist era, especially some important attempts to move from the Tsarist to the Soviet era within the framework of a joint project" (62).

Conclusion

The notion that the post-Soviet experience can be meaningfully analyzed through a postcolonial lens presents us with a set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological challenges. The legacies of coloniality and imperiality in the region are far from being remnants of the past: they continue to shape reality on the ground, and the scholarly exchanges on this matter are an inseparable element of this impact.

The debate outlined above is not only academic but also deeply political. Invoking one's postcoloniality unequivocally comes with a set of policy claims that can be, depending on the context, reactionary, emancipatory, or a mixture of both. What is clear is that conventional binary categorizations are hardly adequate to capture the vast number of phenomena surrounding the Eastern European in-betweenness.

In the context of this ongoing discussion, it appears that applying postcolonial theory to the post-Soviet space requires more than theoretical innovation and a willingness to break the canon. It demands immense self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher as well as sensitivity to the lived realities of people within these regions. Exploring postcolonialism as an analytical lens requires us to listen to the voices and, importantly, silences overlooked by mainstream accounts.

About the Author

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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