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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Sibgatullina, Gulnaz, Sudha Rajagopalan, Milena (Mila) Rossokhatska, Davlatbegim (Dilya) Mamadshoeva, Olga Burlyuk, Diana Kudaibergen, Kostia Gorobets, and Tereza Hendl. 2026. "Cultural decolonization and sustaining decolonial approaches." *Central Asian Affairs* 13 (3): 317–34. <https://doi.org/10.30965/22142290-bja10092>.

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Cultural Decolonization and Sustaining Decolonial Approaches

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Received 20 November 2025 | Accepted 3 April 2026 |

Published online 19 August 2026

Editorial Commentary¹

This third and final dialogue of the special forum approaches decolonial studies as a field that has gained significant public and academic visibility in recent years, while also reflecting critically on the consequences of this popularization. The conversation centers on the contributors' personal and scholarly engagements with Soviet Central Asia, contemporary Ukraine, and transnational experiences of socialism, exploring how decolonial approaches are appropriated, stretched, contested, and at times resisted across scholarship, artistic practice, state narratives, and lived experience. Through these reflections, the contributors demonstrate that decolonial thinking cannot be separated from the complexity of lived realities: historical, geographical, and personal perspectives inevitably expose contradictions in how individuals and communities encounter empire, progress, violence, and belonging.

The discussion further reflects on how decolonial language circulates across academic, cultural, activist, and policy spaces, often shifting meaning in the process. Decolonial frameworks can open important analytical and political space for marginalized experiences, silenced histories, and alternative forms of knowledge. At the same time, the dialogue emphasizes the need to approach decolonization critically and reflexively, recognizing that every theoretical framework also highlights certain experiences while obscuring others. The decolonization of one community or historical narrative should

¹ Authorship note: This section reflects a collective discussion held during the workshop. The order of authorship follows the sequence in which contributors spoke during the session, rather than alphabetical order, while recognizing that each contribution carries equal weight in shaping the discussion.

not come at the expense of denying or erasing the lived experiences of others. In this sense, the contributors approach decoloniality not as a fixed doctrine or moral certainty, but as a flexible and contested practice whose value lies precisely in its openness to plurality, disagreement, and competing historical truths.

Rather than offering a singular framework or political conclusion, this dialogue foregrounds tensions between positionalities, academic disciplines, political commitments, and the everyday realities of working in, with, and against structures of power. It invites the reader to remain attentive to ambivalence and contradiction, recognizing that decoloniality is not a finished theory but an ongoing practice shaped by where we speak from, whose experiences are centered, and whose remain unheard.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: In this third and last session, we focus on the aspect of culture and sustaining decolonial approaches. Let's start by discussing the frameworks you use to analyze hierarchies and inequalities. Most of us work on the history of the Soviet Union, Imperial Russia, or contemporary developments in Ukraine, Central Asia, and Russia. Given the theme of this panel, I would like to start with the first question, formulated rather in a broad terms: Do you use any decolonial frameworks, and if so, in what way?

Milena Rossokhatska: I would like to begin with a brief clarification: I will primarily speak from the perspective of my current doctoral research, which examines the political use of decolonization in Ukraine, particularly within the sphere of memory legislation. When I refer to the imperial context, I mean a broad historical and political framework in which one state extends its power over another, predominantly controlling resources and exerting political and cultural influence. This dynamic produces deeply asymmetric relationships. In the case of contemporary Ukraine, public and political discussions on empire focus primarily on acknowledging Russian domination—a domination framed as spanning the Tsarist period, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. Current memory legislation consolidates these historical periods, presenting them as a more or less single, continuous “Russian regime.” I find this approach particularly striking, as it deliberately constructs a coherent narrative of uninterrupted imperial subjugation by the “Russian regime,” while simultaneously leaving other imperial experiences largely outside of the state narrative.

Yet this legislative memory discourse largely omits Ukraine's incorporation into the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, more broadly, leaves out the country's multi-imperial past. While regional histories sometimes address these other imperial experiences, they remain marginal in the current state-led discourse. Instead, much of the current conversation revolves around Russia's cultural

dominance, in which Ukrainian culture has historically been perceived as subordinate. This reinforces a familiar dichotomy: Russian culture is presented as dominant, Ukrainian culture as secondary—a perception widely acknowledged in both public and scholarly narratives.

My research seeks to understand this selective construction of the past by examining the legal and political discourse of decolonization in the context of Ukraine's current war. I examine the growing awareness, among both the Ukrainian state and society, of imperial legacies, and how they are being addressed amid the realities of a full-scale invasion. One of my central observations is the striking duality in Ukraine's national discourse. On the one hand, particularly within memory legislation, Ukraine is cast as an enduring victim of Russian imperialism. This framing presents Russian domination as a continuous process, which, as I have already mentioned, incorporates the periods from the Tsarist Empire, through the Soviet Union, to the present-day Russian Federation, positioning Ukraine as a target of uninterrupted colonization. This perspective underscores historical suffering and ongoing vulnerability. On the other hand, there is a strong and deliberate emphasis on reclaiming and celebrating Ukraine's own cultural heritage. Rather than centering solely on oppression, this narrative foregrounds Ukraine's rich intellectual and artistic traditions. It highlights the contributions of Ukrainian artists, scientists, and thinkers as evidence of a cultural presence that persisted even under domination and is now being actively reasserted. This reclamation serves as a counterweight to the victimization narrative, challenging entrenched perceptions of Ukraine as culturally secondary to Russia.

Overall, my primary concern is understanding how decolonization is understood from within, rather than exclusively through external frameworks. While I acknowledge the persistence of cultural hierarchies and power structures, I am equally interested in how decolonization itself can become institutionalized in a way that generates new hierarchies and new forms of authority. This raises a key question: should the goal of decolonization be to dismantle hierarchies altogether, or to critically recognize and analyze them? My work leans toward the latter. Rather than seeking to erase hierarchies in the abstract, my work focuses on making them visible, interrogating their functions, and examining how they shape Ukraine's position in historical narratives and contemporary geopolitical discourse.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: Thanks, Mila. That's a good point about how ethical frameworks are not just used by communities but also by states, as we see in Ukraine. This narrative is already deeply embedded in society and is employed by various actors. I completely agree on the importance of highlighting

hierarchies. Now, I'd like to turn to Dilya. Perhaps you can discuss your research and any parallels or differences with what Mila has described.

Dilya Mamadshoeva: I think it's important to briefly introduce my PhD project because everything I discuss stems from that research. I am studying the experiences of Soviet Central Asians abroad, particularly their connections with Afghanistan. I use the term "Soviet Central Asian" deliberately to clarify that my study does not focus on Afghanistan itself. There are multiple ways to define Central Asia, but my project focuses on how people from the region experienced life abroad, how this shaped their understanding of their own societies, and how it influenced their perceptions of others. Afghanistan is a particularly interesting case for comparison, especially from the perspective of the bordering Tajik and Uzbek republics.

From the 1950s onward, the Soviet Union promoted the idea that Central Asia represented a successful model of socialist anti-colonialism for the "Third World". I am curious what this narrative meant for those living in the region, especially those who went abroad to implement Soviet-Afghan development projects. I use decolonial and postcolonial approaches broadly as a way to understand power dynamics and hierarchies. The concept of "development" itself is deeply hierarchical. "Development" as a discourse categorizes societies as either "developed" or "underdeveloped," reinforcing power imbalances. There is extensive scholarship on this, but I find the tension particularly compelling.

Many Soviet Central Asians were convinced of their own advancement, only to experience contradictions when working in Afghanistan. They expected to be superior but their encounters in the country made them reconsider that. This raised a question among them: were they really more advanced? In other words, real experiences Central Asians gained in Afghanistan made them question the "progress" of their republics. Hierarchical imaginaries of "developed Soviet Tajiks" turned out to be not as rigid as they initially seemed, challenging their perceptions of Afghan society. This fluidity fascinates me and underscores why decolonial approaches are essential: they help us critically examine how these hierarchies are constructed, experienced but also sometimes shifted.

The Soviet Union itself presents a paradox: on the one hand, it fits the classic definition of an empire—a multi-ethnic state governing through difference. On the other hand, it was the world's largest self-proclaimed anti-imperialist power. This contradiction is fascinating. Figures like Rashidov, the First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, rose in the Soviet hierarchy by leveraging the language of such Soviet internationalism. This rhetoric was

shaped not only by Moscow and Tashkent, but also by global decolonization movements.

So, I am particularly interested in how Soviet Central Asians engaged with this contradiction. I explore the experiences of some Soviet specialists, such as irrigation engineers from Uzbekistan, who were deployed to Afghanistan. These were not high-ranking officials but rather mid-level specialists who are not widely known nowadays. What did Soviet anti-imperialism mean to them? How did they perceive their role abroad? Decolonial approaches help expose these complexities, revealing the tensions between ideological narratives and lived experiences.

Sudha Rajagopalan: I am a Soviet cultural historian and growing up in India it was easy to believe that the Soviet Union was a relatively benevolent, multi-ethnic state, but over time, I have had to unlearn that perspective. Hierarchies and inequalities appear differently depending on where we are positioned as researchers. As a Russianist from India who later studied in the U.S., my work emerged from frustration with Western Cold War historiography. The dominant narrative framed the Cold War as a struggle between two superpowers, with the rest of the world as passive recipients of influence. Non-aligned nations were barely acknowledged. When I moved to the U.S., I found this perspective highly problematic. Western audiences often ignored the Soviet Union's connections beyond the West. Yet, from an Indian perspective, the Soviet Union was quite open. Soviet audiences consumed Indian films, and cultural exchanges thrived, often more so than in the West. Different epistemic hierarchies become evident depending on where we are situated culturally.

My research addresses and decenters some presumed knowledges about the "Soviets and the rest." I explore India's ties with the Soviet Union through cultural exchanges—films, material objects, and oral histories. I focus on how people remember ideological constructs and how these constructs unravel in lived experience. When speaking to individuals, the rigid categories of "communism" and "capitalism" often dissolve. People say, "Soviets were nice, but I don't know what communism was," or "Capitalism seems fine, but Americans are ignorant." The reductive binaries of the Cold War discursive framework are meaningless when seen from the point of view of people's everyday lives and their translational cultural encounters.

This connects with the decolonial approach. While critical and popular geopolitics are not always framed as decolonial, they inherently challenge epistemic hierarchies. Certain states are seen as producers of knowledge, while others are deemed irrelevant; critical geopolitical scholarship allows us to

challenge that. A decolonial perspective insists that other lived histories matter, and these narrativized lived experiences go against the grain of the Cold War binary. By centering voices outside the dominant Cold War narrative, we disrupt simplistic dualities of East vs. West, communism vs. capitalism; this is decolonial work because it upsets the conventional zero point or epistemic center of Cold War histories.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: While we are all colleagues at the University of Amsterdam, none of us, I would say, is strictly decolonial scholar: we often present ourselves as historians, cultural studies specialists. That makes this discussion an opportunity to explore these tensions. Before 2022, we may have occasionally engaged with decolonial debates, but now our specific research fields are being reconfigured through these debates. Hence, here is the second question: For those of you, recently started incorporating decolonial frameworks, can you share an example of how this perspective revealed something new in your research?

Milena Rossokhatska: For me, the most interesting part of engaging with decolonization is that it exists on multiple levels—as a grassroots movement, as an intellectual endeavor, and as something that can be used pragmatically by different actors. In fact, what I find most compelling is precisely this pragmatic dimension. In my own research, I look at how decolonization is lived and expressed while also tracing how the various actors can appropriate the discourse, integrating it into their own political narrative.

Ukraine is a particularly telling example. In 2023, just after the full-scale invasion, it became the first country in the region to adopt memory legislation that explicitly uses the term decolonization. Several bills were introduced to parliament in 2022, and one was passed into law in 2023. The title prominently features the word decolonization, yet the text offers no clear definition of what the term means. This absence is not trivial: it creates an ambiguity, allowing the state to frame a wide range of policies and symbolic acts as forms of decolonization. As a result, the concept becomes fluid, open to multiple and shifting interpretations, and highly adaptable to political needs.

In a way, the Ukrainian state is now moving to institutionalize decolonization and deploy it as a political tool. It is increasingly embedded in the discourse of national security management, where decolonization is presented as necessary for the state's survival. This can be seen as a significant—or even bold—claim to be enshrined in legislation, and one that, in my view, directly reflects the realities of a country engaged in a raging war. Yet this framing also reorients the historical lens by casting Ukrainian history almost entirely through a colonial narrative. It produces a stark binary: one side as the

oppressor, the other as the oppressed. Such a framing, coming from the government, reinforces a one-sided interpretation of Ukraine's past, positioning Russia as an unchanging and continuously hostile adversary.

This marks a significant development in Ukrainian memory politics. Before 2022, and even more so before 2014, Ukraine's memory policies were more multi-vectoral, characterized by continuous discussions and competing interpretations of the past. However, now, it is possible to see a clear shift toward the official unification of historical interpretation, at least from the government's standpoint. This approach creates a sense of linearity between past and present, where history is, however, read primarily through the prism of current events, leaving little room for nuance or competing narratives.

Dilya Mamadshoeva: Yes. It's about the construction of that "Other," but also about relations within the community itself. Certain paradigms can help or sometimes flatten complexities. I really liked how you, Mila, framed your interest in how decolonization is understood by the subjects of your research. That really resonated with me. Maybe it's also because I come from anthropology, where I learned the importance of "emic" perspectives. There's so much to say about epistemic justice—what happens when we take something we observe in the world or something we are told by others, objectify it, and then turn it into scientific knowledge. And what happens to that knowledge afterward?

That's what fascinates me about my own project. I'm interested in how the people in my sources—those I've spoken to, or those working for the institutions whose documents I study—understood and evoked the notion of "empire" in their own activities in the late Soviet period. Perestroika in particular was such a radical shift in public discourse. In the 1990s, you suddenly had Soviet Central Asian intellectuals openly comparing the Soviet Union to other empires, saying things like: 'Look at the cotton monoculture in Central Asia—this is colonialism, just like in other imperial contexts.'

What struck me recently is how some contemporary critiques of the Soviet Union sound eerily similar to those perestroika-era debates. Take Tajik intellectuals, for instance. Some of them wrote articles lamenting: "We've been Russified, we no longer speak our language. Walk through Dushanbe, and all you hear is Russian." These statements remind me of today's critiques about "linguistic and cultural loss brought by Soviet rule".

But as a historian, it is of course important to contextualize and set the differences in those criticisms. Perestroika was a particular historical context, it differed from the situation nowadays. This is where postcolonial sensitivities matter to me; they make me question and contextualize these claims while also acknowledging their concern with hierarchies. Who were these statements meant for? What political vision did they advance? How exclusive was

that vision? For example, those Tajik intellectuals who wrote about “russification” during the perestroika spoke primarily from the perspectives of the capital city: they did not bring up that the rest of the republic rather spoke Tajik and Uzbek languages.

Similarly, I was in Moscow working with the Communist Party archives, and I came across an Uzbek Communist Party congress filled with what we would now associate with postcolonial critique—talking about culture, resource extraction, environmental degradation—all things we still debate today. The speech was given by Islam Karimov. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Karimov used such rhetoric for his own goals of authoritarian nation-state building. This case reminded me that political elites construct their own decolonization narratives, just as Mila pointed out. This doesn’t delegitimize them, but we have to situate them in context. This helps me to understand if such calls for post-colonial or decolonial critique are the political projects I myself want to embrace. I sympathize with some of those narratives, and politically, it matters to reconstruct them. But I don’t want to reproduce a one-dimensional story. After all, Putin also makes occasional references to some anticolonial sensibilities—while pursuing different imperial ambitions in practice. That’s what makes the discussions on empire and colonialism so complex yet fascinating.

There are so many interpretive minefields in this work. Decolonial sensitivity gives you a lot, but it doesn’t give you easy answers, especially when working with historical material. As historians, we construct narratives, but we have to be especially careful about the gaps we bridge. This also ties into something you mentioned, Mila: the gap between historians and social scientists. I came to history from social sciences, and at first, I didn’t feel the gap. But then I started noticing it. Maybe that’s something we could talk about later. That’s something I really appreciated about this workshop. I’ve had the chance to speak with colleagues I see often but did not know the details of their research. It’s fascinating how the term ‘decolonial’ shifts meaning depending on the context and its associations.

Sudha Rajagopalan: I might slightly disagree with your question, Gulnaz, where you said that many of us do not work explicitly with decoloniality. I have, but one of the problems I see in the field of decoloniality is that it often requires engagement only in the exact terms that contemporary scholars use. Some of us, however, have been doing decolonial work for about 20 years, and our approaches may differ.

So what is my decolonial framework? Both of my monographs have been about lived experience. I am interested in how people actually experience historical phenomena. Often, through oral histories or qualitative research,

preconceived assumptions fall apart and epistemic hierarchies are upset. We've discussed the idea of bringing in theory and fitting cases to it. Ideally, theory should emerge from practice. While theoretical literature provides valuable frameworks, the most significant insights come from the way people articulate their own experiences. Their words and interpretations are crucial because they reveal subjectivity—not as a singular entity but as a multiplicity, a polyphony, sometimes even a disharmony of perspectives.

When transitioning from an imperial to a decolonial paradigm, we sometimes forget that the latter can also become hegemonic, dictating what to think, how to think, and how to frame discussions. For me, the most rewarding aspect of my research has been engaging with people's own language and descriptions rather than imposing an external analytical framework. For example, in my recent book on Soviet objects and their travels to India and Cuba, I examined how people in these countries encountered and understood these items. In India, where there was no formal trade, people randomly came across Soviet objects. In Cuba, trade was structured, making for a different story. In India, however, the dominant discourse suggests Indo-Soviet friendship, portraying a seamless ideological bond. Yet, when I spoke to people, a different picture emerged. They described these objects as random items from the Eastern Bloc, sometimes only later realizing they were Soviet. They were often surprised that these objects worked, suggesting a lack of inherent admiration for the Soviet model. Yet, despite this ambiguity, people still expressed a sense of friendship.

This kind of affect—this ambiguous, murky emotional landscape—can only be accessed through direct engagement with people's narratives. If I had relied solely on official state discourse—what Indian leaders said during visits to the Soviet Union, or what Brezhnev declared in India—I would have missed this nuance entirely. What my research has revealed is the complexity of emotions in historical encounters, and how ideology does not always translate neatly into lived experience. This 'decolonizes' how our knowledge of the Cold War years has unfolded. Something we haven't fully discussed yet but that I think is crucial is the importance of exploring these gray areas, these ideologically murky in-between spaces. Emotions offer one of the best ways to access them. That, to me, is one of the key strengths of a decolonial framework.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: Being part of an institution, it's important to critically examine discussions happening in the field. So, my third question is driven not so much by the desire to critique the ongoing developments in our fields, but by the recognition of existing tensions: We see different groups agreeing and disagreeing about the extent to which the decolonial framework—largely developed in Western universities with a focus on former overseas colonies—can

be applied in different geographical and historical contexts. Some concepts and ideas are certainly useful, but there is also space for us to create our own approaches. Based on your particular experiences, do you see limitations in applying decolonial frameworks, however you define them? We've already discussed the benefits, but what about the constraints?

Dilya Mamadshoeva: In 2013, while studying in Bishkek, I had some incredible conversations, discussions about decolonization that weren't necessarily framed in academic terms but were unmistakably present in the air. These conversations emerged naturally, especially among those working on feminist causes or engaged in activism related to gendered violence and feminist causes more broadly. Feminist activists complained about the condescending attitudes given by the Western gender experts; they complained how their experiences and proposals were dismissed as irrelevant. Later it became clear to me that you couldn't seriously engage with feminist organizing without reading someone like Chandra Mohanty, but more importantly, without speaking to women who had lived through the Soviet period and had actively fought for their rights. The Soviet Union didn't simply grant these rights; they were demanded and struggled for.

At the same time, in Bishkek I also first encountered the notion of the "Great Russian chauvinism" and early Soviet attempts to grapple with imperialism. This period of learning was transformative. I read Safarov for the first time; a stark contrast to my post-Soviet school education, where such discussions were largely absent. Suddenly, I was exposed to a perspective that deeply engaged with the meaning of imperialism and its historical impact on Turkestan. This allowed me to see that postcolonial and decolonial inquiries feel very natural in our context and there is a vast longer history of such discussions to work with and to draw on.

Yet, despite the richness of these discussions, I sometimes feel that certain debates lead us into deadlocks rather than opening up new possibilities. I think this is partly because our ability to sustain meaningful, sensitive research is increasingly constrained by larger structural challenges—research budget cuts, especially the ones planned here in the Netherlands, precarious academic employment, and the broader instability of academic institutions. In some ways, this precariousness even makes me wonder: is it worth trying to resurrect certain academic projects? Or is it time to explore new avenues, to step outside academia and engage with the world in different ways (beyond artistic interventions)? In particular, I see the tendency of speaking of decolonization primarily in ethnic terms; something that reminds me a bit of decolonization being reduced to ethnic nationalism. Such narratives are problematic:

they essentialize ethnic differences and make other aspects of societal differentiation invisible. Class is absent. However, I remain cautiously optimistic. What frustrates me is not the intellectual trajectory of these discussions but the broader crisis in academic infrastructure and the pressures it places on meaningful research.

As for the discourse within Russia, one of the questions I keep returning to is whether there is a way to break free from the dominant Eurocentric frameworks that shape national self-understanding and historical narratives. Most of the discussions I see still operate within those constraints. But I think it's important to leave these questions open—as provocations, rather than final conclusions.

Sudha Rajagopalan: My problem is with the phrase “application of a framework” in general. It feels like we are simply replacing one set of rules with another. We reject one system, throwing out the baby with the bathwater, only to introduce a new baby in another bath of water. If we understand decolonization or decoloniality as a condition where multiple stories must exist, where there is no single center or periphery, but instead, multiple voices, then I would rather not speak of decolonial frameworks at all. Instead, I would talk about opening up our minds and our field to the possibility of multiple, sometimes dissenting, voices. Do I see benefits? Of course. But to me, the downside is the way decoloniality is sometimes framed as a binary choice: are you engaging with it or not? This feels disciplinary, a kind of policing that we were supposed to avoid in moving beyond pre-decolonial models.

What's really important to me is that when we talk about practice-oriented and community-generated stories, we recognize the necessity of deep contextualization. There is a core to decolonial thought that is undeniable: epistemic centers exist, as do material, economic, and political centers, and these need to be addressed and dismantled. But the goal should not be to replace them with new centers; we should aim for an open field, a polyphonic space with many voices, free from rigid policing. People will sometimes express ideas in ways we do not expect or even want to hear. But that is their voice. How do we reconcile this when discussing decoloniality? Some truths may be politically inconvenient, but should we still allow them to be heard?

One major example of this is the real fact of contradictory historical experiences. Often, one history is privileged, demanding collective attention. And when decolonial frameworks emerge in response, they too seem to privilege one kind of history re-telling over others; those who experience that same history differently seem to be silenced, when in fact what we have to appreciate is that our historical experiences do not negate each other's histories. They simply have to co-exist.

A key example of this is the response of the global South to the war in Ukraine. Many in the West struggle to understand why countries in the global South do not respond to the war in the same way. It's not because they want this war, nor because they believe Ukraine deserves this aggression, but because their historical vocabulary is different. This stems from this very cohabitation of differently experienced histories. The Soviet Union, despite its orientalist discourse and role in perpetuating coloniality, also facilitated opportunities that other imperial powers did not. In my research, for example, people have told me that while they aspired to study in the West, it was the Soviets, not the British or the Americans, who first made it possible for people beyond the elite to go abroad and pursue a PhD. This historical reality shapes how some in India and Cuba, for instance, view the Soviet legacy. At the same time, many of these individuals unequivocally condemn Russian imperialism and the war. Their emotions and perspectives are far more ambivalent and ambiguous than a singular narrative might suggest. Recognizing these complexities, allowing multiple histories to coexist should be the true goal of decoloniality, rather than turning it into a new hegemonic framework of its own.

Tereza Hendl: I was just thinking while you were speaking that I wish we could approach these discussions in a way that accounts for complexity without overriding the perspectives of those whose lives were concerned. Because it's difficult to hear that the USSR enabled decolonial agency—it absolutely did, strategically, in certain places—while at the same time brutally oppressing people on the ground it colonized. What I miss in these conversations, especially when speaking to people from the global South, is the recognition of genocide, the many, many genocides that were perpetrated within the Soviet-occupied space. Earlier, we spoke about how this creates such a problem for finding solidarities or even basic understanding. Engaging in these debates often means being exposed to genocide denial, to the erasure of lived, sociohistorical, and intergenerational traumas. And yet, people theorizing from these global South positions would never accept having their own traumas denied.

For example, I recently started attending a reading group on Palestine in Berlin, and I was relieved to find some people willing to stand against different forms of imperialism and colonialism simultaneously. But I had to stop going. The things that were said about Russia and Ukraine in those spaces were absolutely traumatizing and misguided. I didn't want to expose myself to it anymore. And that's such a shame, because there was potential for solidarity. I kept trying to say: if we recognize in this space that we cannot speak about Palestine without engaging with Palestinian voices, then how can anyone speak about Ukraine without engaging with Ukrainian voices and agency? And how can you tell me that my own historical experience of Soviet occupation

does not count when we discuss Europe's East? But instead, I was repeatedly told that I just needed to read more Marx. Which is quite absurd when one knows that he wasn't exactly famous for an equitable approach to the societies across Europe's East and beyond. Plus telling us—in a contemporary German leftists space, trying to be decolonial—that we need to read a German theorist to understand our own East-European histories is troubling on so many levels, especially with regard to the legacy of German colonialism and Aryan racism.

Sudha Rajagopalan: No, absolutely. But this mindset comes from the belief that there can only be one history at a time. Yet reality is so polyphonic, so complex. We need to recognize shared precarity, shared histories, and the fact that contradictions exist—that we can have contradictory pasts and still move beyond them to acknowledge shared trauma. The historical empathy that I often find missing is what's most important. The flip side of this conversation is that, for some of us, it's difficult to express how the Soviets were enormous enablers of our agency as transnational citizens in a way that our former colonizers never were. But that part of history is silenced in some contexts, just as other histories are silenced elsewhere. If we could move past these binaries—past the silencing of one narrative to replace it with another—we might better understand shared precarity and trauma. I think that would be more useful than talking about the decolonial framework as a fixed construct. Frameworks always make me uneasy because they end up policing boundaries rather than opening space for critical engagement. Our positionalities determine how we view our histories, and frameworks stemming from one positionality run the risk of comparable frameworks emerging from others.

Milena Rossokhatska: At first glance at the discourse on decolonization, particularly in relation to Ukraine, it could seem that the topic had only recently entered academic debate, since there is relatively little scholarly engagement with decolonial or postcolonial theory, for that matter, before 2022. However, a closer examination reveals that the discussions linking the questions of empire and colony to the case of Ukraine can already be traced back to the early 20th century, and were later taken up again in the 1990s by scholars engaging with the emerging field of postcolonial studies, particularly with the works of Fanon and Said. However, what struck me was that many of these discussions seemed somewhat apologetic. Many scholars attempt to fit Ukraine into existing postcolonial frameworks. For instance, depending on the author, Ukraine was defined as a colony, a non-colony, or a quasi-colony. Much of the debate was spent justifying why Ukraine did or did not fit these existing theories, rather than moving directly to analysis. In my view, this reflects a certain limitation: scholars from the region often feel compelled to justify their position before they can advance their own argument. At the

same time, there are Ukrainian authors who are taking a different approach, developing new concepts and interpretations within postcolonial theory. For instance, Tamara Hundorova has introduced terms such as “post-Chernobyl” or “post-totalitarian” to describe aspects of Ukraine’s historical and cultural experience. Although these contributions add richness and specificity, they also create tension with the broader field of postcolonial studies, as they necessitate continual explanation and negotiation within established theoretical frameworks.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: Now I would like to open the discussion to have input from the others.

Kostia Gorobets: Just to briefly jump in regarding Ukraine and decolonization. I have also encountered arguments suggesting that it’s not appropriate to use the term “decolonization” in this context. Some scholars argue that it’s more accurate to speak of “de-imperialization” because historically, each time Russia colonized Ukraine, Ukraine was often more developed—intellectually, economically, and culturally—than Russia. This contradicts traditional colonial models where a dominant power extracts and develops a less advanced region. This creates significant limitations in applying conventional decolonial concepts. Additionally, the political misuse of these narratives is striking. On the one hand, the Ukrainian government is adopting decolonization laws, while on the other, it is employing rhetoric that frames the conflict as one of ‘barbarism versus civilization.’ How do these two discourses coexist?

Diana Kudaibergen: That was the issue at the Stockholm conference last year. I felt terrible bringing it up, but during a decolonial discussion, many Ukrainian scholars were emphasizing how they wanted to be part of the European Union and how Ukraine is culturally superior to ‘barbaric’ Russia. I pointed out that this seemed contradictory; how can we discuss decolonization while still using a civilization-versus-barbarism framework? People were upset with me, and I felt like I was policing the conversation. I didn’t want to shut down discussion because I believe in polyphony, but at some point, I had to ask: How does a decolonial conversation coexist with claims that Ukraine has “better culture” than Russia?

Olga Burlyuk: I just wanted to return to something from earlier, namely that we need regional solidarities. Truth be told, for my generation and up, having gone to school in Ukraine, we were not taught much about other countries in the region. There’s always this assumption that just because something happening in the region is in the news, I must know everything about it simply as a “person from the region”. But the reality is, I’ve only been to a couple of neighboring countries, and beyond that, I haven’t been taught much. This lack of knowledge contributes to ignorance, which in turn fuels blind belief in

certain narratives. Ignorance and arrogance often go hand in hand. When we talk about solidarity from our allies, there's so much work to be done in just familiarizing ourselves with each other's histories, struggles, and contexts. We need to understand where we stand in relation to each other, whether we are reinforcing harmful narratives or dismantling them. There is power in doing this work collectively. Right now, we are all doing it separately, and we remain unaware of each other's work. The war has, in some ways, brought us together; suddenly we realized that colleagues were working in parallel, experiencing similar struggles but in different contexts. This realization of commonality was striking.

Another point: someone earlier mentioned searching for literature and not finding much scholarship. We need to remember that academics are not always the defining thinkers of their time. Look to literature! Take 1992, for example: there were crucial writings happening outside of traditional academia that shaped key conversations. I was running a book club assignment with my students, and there was a French male student who read *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko. He had to write a review and make a book poster. I stood there thinking, I need to re-read this book too—because I had read it long ago, as a student, but clearly I missed some crucial parts. I had first read it in law school, but now I realized I needed to revisit it. The student highlighted a line from the book: “Your only options are to die or to not exist”. There are many such quotes in the book that feel like they could have been written this morning, yet they were written over 30 years ago. I highly recommend reading the book. It speaks deeply to the experiences of being Ukrainian, and the complexities within that identity.

Kostia Gorobets: I think there's something we need to problematize. When we study the populations of the elite, we often assume that if they don't articulate something in specific theoretical terms, they don't experience it. But that's not necessarily true. Just because someone doesn't know the word “coloniality” doesn't mean they haven't lived through it. If you listen to what they tell about their experiences and compare it to a framework defining coloniality, you'll likely find a direct match. So, part of the issue is the lack of vocabulary, not the absence of experience.

Olga Burlyuk: This connects back to what Diana was saying in the opening: what is the vocabulary we use to describe ourselves? The absence of specific terms doesn't mean that coloniality wasn't there. It doesn't mean that people didn't experience it. For example, my mother never framed her experiences in terms of coloniality. She wouldn't have said she thought in terms of decolonial frameworks in the 1980s. But she did say, “They treated me like shit in

Moscow, and I couldn't wait to leave." And when she got to leave Moscow, she knew she had been experiencing racism and racialization—she just didn't have the words for it at the time. So, I think we need to differentiate between the idea that something wasn't perceived as something and the reality that people lacked the terminology to express it in academic terms. It's not that these experiences didn't happen—it's that they weren't always framed using the language we now recognize.

Gulnaz Sibgatullina: I observe the evolution of discourses advanced by minority groups in Russia. Since 1991, discussions have largely focused on language preservation, heritage protection, and the safeguarding of national culture. However, since 2022, these conversations have begun to adopt the language of decolonial struggle, opening up new connections and perspectives. While the core grievances of most minority groups remain unchanged from the pre-2022 period, the shift in discourse has facilitated a broader recognition of shared struggles. As Olga mentioned earlier, this evolving language has allowed different groups to see and acknowledge one another, identifying the institutional foundations of their common challenges. For instance, Tatars have started to recognize the struggles of Buryats, fostering a sense of solidarity across minority communities.

Diana Kudaibergen: That connects to an earlier point I wanted to make: our decolonial thought did not originate in elite universities. We appropriate this discourse now, but I first encountered it in an artistic studio. That's my main question: if the artistic communities I work with are so much more interesting, progressive, and innovative in creating this language, then why do they need us to theorize it? My artist friends always say, "Well, why don't you write something about it?" But I don't think they actually need it. Even though there is a thriving field of decolonial thought in Kazakhstan, for instance, I still quote people in my forthcoming book who push back against it, saying, "Why talk about decoloniality? We were never colonized. We were almost as good as Russians."

There's also this perception among certain groups, especially among privileged urban elites, that they were not colonial subjects but nearly equal to Russians. In Soviet Central Asia, cities were colonial fortresses. Gaining residency in places like Almaty was extremely difficult if you weren't Russian. In the 1970s, the Indigenous population of Almaty was restricted to 15%, and by the 1980s, it increased to just 20%, which caused uproar within the Communist Party. I traced archival records that confirm this dynamic: it wasn't just imagined; it was a structural reality. Many people who previously held privileges under Soviet rule lost them after the empire collapsed, and they now feel

disconnected from Moscow. I quote many who are nostalgic for Soviet-era conceptualism, for the occasional trips to Moscow, for the feeling of being *almost* Russian.

My main point is that Soviet propaganda was a key component of coloniality and decolonization. The Soviets often depicted colonized peoples from Africa, Latin America, and South Asia as backward and underdeveloped. And this still impacts the worldview of older, conservative elites in Central Asia today. Many reject decolonial narratives because they don't want to be associated with the imagery of impoverished, illiterate, "third-world" countries. Paradoxically, within the Soviet hierarchy, Central Asians were racialized as "lesser," yet they were granted a form of status because they spoke perfect Russian, attended cultural institutions, and had access to Soviet privileges. This created a painful, complex legacy—one that still persists today. I hope that someone writes a paper from the perspective of these subjectivities. These individuals still exist, and they are the ones who gaslighted me against engaging with decolonial thought when I was a student.

Even in literature, I see this tension. I've examined anti-colonial literature from Central Asia that focused on African experiences, and there is more sympathy toward African struggles. Some Central Asian writers drew parallels between their histories and the Congo or other post-colonial settings. But there's also an undercurrent of distinction: "We are more literate; we have a written language; we are not like them." That is the dark side of Soviet decolonization—the part that remains deeply unresolved.