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Editorial Commentary¹

The first session brings together scholars of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia who use decolonial thought in their work on Soviet legacies. The aims of the session are to assess the state of the field and to interrogate the potential and limitations of working with and through existing decolonial feminist and epistemic justice frameworks—which have been developed *from* and *for* other contexts—for theorizing Russian and Soviet imperialism.

When prompted to reflect on what the pressing unanswered questions in studying Russian imperialism are, the participants discuss the need to distinguish between *imperial logics* and *colonial practices*, to open the grossly omitted questions of land use, borders and ecological imperialism, and to center the Indigenous voices of the affected populations in the debates on Russian imperialism. While the essence of decolonial thought lies in resisting Eurocentric knowledge production and centering subaltern, Indigenous, and local ways of knowing, being, and loving, these fundamentals are compromised in much of the scholarship on the region, which reproduces Western-dominated perspectives and Russia-centric frameworks. A need for a shared vocabulary developed *from within*—to frame and explain our experiences, to communicate with the allies, to connect (to) various global debates and conversations without reproducing the hierarchies—is the red thread in the discussion of epistemic injustice and epistemic violence.

In discussing the utility and limits of the existing categories such as global North, global South, global East(s) and their relevance in doing research on the region and talking about the subject of Russian and Soviet imperialism, the participants are skeptical. Instead, the participants insist on the concepts being articulated, negotiated, and accepted from within and appeal to a need for strong (and new) solidarity networks that would reach and be understood across contexts. (Coincidentally, forging such solidarity dialogues and networks was the aim of the 1st International Conference of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub “Between Peripheries: Critical-Relational Security from CEE and the Global South”, which was held on 22–25 January 2026 at Tallinn University, Estonia. The editors and contributors of this special forum presented their work and actively participated in the conference.)

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.

Finally, in turning to the structural changes in academia necessary for a more just knowledge production, in thinking about decolonization as a practice, the participants speak of embedding our work in and within global contexts and conversations, as well as of refusal—of refusing to be “spoken about us without us”, refusing the existing unjust and extractive academic practices. Since publications are a core currency in academia, the value of *writing*, writing *a lot*, writing *collectively*, and writing within *a citation politics* that would allow decolonial scholars of the region from the region to cite each other into existence is emphasized. Fundamentally, while acknowledging the deep structural constraints, participants believe in human agency and the need for each of us to make the most of the academic positions we occupy, “to stand where we sit”. By addressing conceptual and methodological tensions central to current debates on decolonization and the place of the study of Russian imperialism therein, this session paves the way for questions raised in sessions two and three.

Olga Burlyuk: In the first session of today’s workshop, we will discuss decolonial thought and the Soviet legacy. It is thus an entry point for the remainder of the conversation. The floor will go to Assel Tutumlu, Diana Kudaibergen and Tereza Hendl, and there will be room for collective discussion afterwards. Straight to the first question: What is a pressing unanswered question in studying Russian imperialism? We all approach the topic from rather different disciplinary and geographic entry points. You are welcome to interpret the questions within your own area of expertise. Russian imperialism—we can scrutinize it in the past, present and future. Soviet legacies—the countries in the region are often described as “post-Soviet states”, and the elephant in the room is: is post-Soviet still a relevant marker? Should we use these labels and categories? What do we stand to win from the continued use of these, and what do we stand to lose? I pass the floor to Assel, followed by Tereza, followed by Diana.

Assel Tutumlu: So, what is the pressing unanswered question in studying Russian imperialism? What is important to me is to distinguish between imperial logic and colonial practices, even though there is a lot of overlap. I think, if we unpack those, we can see a much bigger picture and a very nuanced one; particularly, this distinction can separate the economic system of extraction that continues in the economic realm from the socio-political context in which we operate. Unfortunately, up until today, what we see written about colonial practices and the colonial extraction is often associated with the leftist anti-capitalist ideas that expropriate and extract resources, appropriate wealth and Indigenous cultures, and so on. For example, I’m very happy that we’ve had the book *Rentier Capitalism and its Discontents: Power, Morality and*

Resistance in Central Asia written by Baliyar Sanghera and Elmira Satybaldieva (2021). Their book is a necessary contribution. But it is also written from a very Gramscian perspective; it critiques the system but does not necessarily discuss the agents. And I was thinking: if we separate the imperial and the colonial practices, then we immediately get into the question of land that is operated by the specific agents—a view that is sorely missing in our discourse. It is, indeed, an omitted question in our literature, at least in Central Asia. It does exist in South American discourses, in decolonial and postcolonial discourses. But for some reason, we do not speak about it in the region. And if we look at the land, land, as a symbol, is very important for the officials, for the regime. I think all our official documents in Kazakhstan revere the land. They make it sacred. They make it historically important. At the same time, land is also very important for national patriots, who, instead of claiming the need to preserve the Kazakh nation, call for the need to preserve the Kazakh land, which is often associated with the need for independence and strong ethnic and linguistic boundaries of the specific people living on it in line with their own cultural traditions. According to them, the culture of the land and the people of the land need to be preserved and passed on. And yet, when we think about it, it's never been scrutinized from a colonial perspective. And here I wanted to raise the question of land and its use, the functions, and outcomes, which are very much embedded in the logic of settler colonial processes that were practiced by the Russian Empire and later expanded by the Soviet Union. I think when we start to see the land from the perspective of settler colonialism, we begin to see many different continued practices that fall into the same logic of extraction with the specific agents in charge of making these decisions. By shifting the gaze from the structural forms of capitalism, the settler colonial lens zooms on the companies, officials, facilitators and all the tactics they use via legal and illegal forms of operation.

For example, we continue to exploit natural resources and grow foods that are unsustainable to our climate without thinking of who benefits from this, why do we perpetrate such activities despite their devastating impact on our future. This perspective helps us not only to understand the legacies of the Soviet past, such as the impact of concentration camps and the Virgin Lands project on ethnic structure of the population, on the nature of infrastructure, on the environmental disasters with flooding, drought, and locust infestations experiences by the Northern regions, but also the continued practices of extraction, which no longer belong to the state, but to specific individuals in charge of land and land distribution. Postcolonial frames help us to see land beyond the mere symbolism and beyond the structural systematic practices freed from the responsibility of concrete individuals.

Another thing that may be important is to look at the borders, how they were artificially drawn and how now, because of the way the borders are drawn, we have issues that are completely regional but which we address with national approaches. The imperial dynamics of postcolonial societies are crucial here. On the one hand, we have water scarcity in Central Asia—the problem that is unfortunately again looked at from the national perspectives, and only when absolutely pressed, the regional rulers are taking actions, thinking: “okay, we probably need to cooperate again on that, rather than having conflict.” The legacies of the imperial maps prevent us from recognizing the common predicaments we are facing today and will be facing in the future. On the other hand, the imperial frame helps us to address things which, to my surprise, nobody really addresses from either the official, or critical perspectives. The news that Russia rents territories the size of Montenegro in Kazakhstan to test its weapons, for example. I think this is one of the things that needs to be raised that indeed is very important. So that’s the colonial practice, when distinguished from the imperial practices explains the power distribution and internal and external dynamics in a much-focused format. Therefore, it is our responsibility as scholars to define the colonial, imperial practices and frames in the post-colonial/postcolonial, and post-Soviet contexts.

Olga Burlyuk: In Ukraine, we have a saying: “The state is theirs; the country is ours”. And this too is the focus on the land! So long as we are still on the land, it’s somehow ours. I see some powerful parallels with what you, Assel, just said. I have worked with colleagues on the political myths that are emerging in Ukraine in the context of the war, for the article *A Superhero Army, a Courageous People and an Enchanted Land: Wartime Political Myths and Ontological Security in the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine*. And one of the myths is the enchanted land: the land is on our side, the land is fighting with us, to the point that it was extremely freezing in the first weeks of Russia’s full-scale invasion. As if the land was on our side trying to freeze the enemy out. I hope we come back to this point later. I now pass the floor to Tereza. What is a pressing unanswered question in the work that you’re doing?

Tereza Hendl: I look at epistemologies, and for me, the question that still has not been answered is: where are the voices of the affected populations in the debates on Russian imperialism? And I am not thinking about it in our own circles, but at the level of international and global debates, because still now, two and a half years into the full-scale invasion, I am seeing the same old practices unchanged. And it’s this persistent idea that you can theorize our societies from some Western-dominated perspectives and structures in academia and through Russian-centric frameworks and debates. And it’s this

ongoing reality that, even in 2024, I still am not seeing being dismantled and critically reflected. And we're saying it again, and again, and again, for years and decades—and it still has not shifted. I often think that these are some parallel worlds, and we are speaking into voids. And you can speak, and speak, and speak—but until there is someone particularly reflective who wants to hear it, and wants to start acting on it, we are still missing each other in these parallel debates.

We wrote an article on epistemic imperialism ((*En*)*Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of “Westspaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*) in which we say very concretely how structures in academia need to change and how they need to center Indigenous voices and the voices of the (de)occupied and what it means in employment, because you actually have to start employing the people in the positions where these concerns are debated, and that has not happened yet. We need to address these very practical concerns that are unsettling because they unsettle the institutions and how they work and who is working, not working and dominant within them. And not many insiders, I think, want to do that, because then you must give away power. Because this is not just some abstract discussion; we are demanding that the power dynamic is shifted and the debates become more just, the structures become more just, we are recognized as knowers of our own socio-political context and our own histories. For example, practices like Westspaining that are still ongoing and need to end. And to go even further beyond the West, I am often in discussions with people who have worked on decoloniality for decades from different perspectives, and it always strikes me how our regions are exempt from these same reflective practices. You would not imagine that someone within genuinely decolonial debates would discuss decolonizing societies, for example, in the global South (and I know how imperfect this term is) in a way that would speak over the voices of the people who are decolonizing. And yet, this is constantly done when it comes to Central Asia and to Europe’s East, when we talk about our occupations. Our regions, societies and experiences are often spoken about, without engagement with our voices, scholarship and perspectives, and through Russian and Soviet-centric sources that replicate imperial lines of thought. And this is also my issue with the concept of “post-Soviet”: I want to distinguish that we were Soviet-*occupied*, not Soviet. The concepts and the descriptions of our histories and our spaces would look very different if they were defined by people who lived through them. We need to have embodied knowledges that will be central in these debates, and not the other way around.

Olga Burlyuk: Thank you, Tereza. You made me think when you said, where is the dialogue with African scholars and perspectives from Africa on Russian

imperialism? That takes us to the next question of this panel: Where do you see yourself in the broader discussion? Is there room for dialogue, and who are our allies? We'll come back to that in a bit. Diana, what is the pressing unanswered question in studying Russian imperialism for you?

Diana Kudaibergen: I read one unpublished paper recently, and the ending basically said, "can we please give the Soviet women the right to say whether sex was good in Soviet Union?" And the author was, of course, criticizing certain works that only partially look at the issue without interrogating how Soviet experience was uneven and often domineering and quite atrocious in different parts of the empire. I read that line, I thought, Yes, thank you! I've been saying it for a very long time – "give post-imperial subjects of the Soviet empire their right to speak up about their experiences". And this is my issue with all my disciplinary colleagues who often say that the Soviet Union was "liberatory" to us, Central Asians and other post-imperial subjects. Soviet propaganda of decolonization and "giving" equality to everyone. What about our embodied experience of growing up either in the imperial times or during its immediate aftermath? What about the experiences of my colleagues in Central Asia and the Caucasus?

If we speak of Central Asia, in the wider Soviet Union discussions it remains marginalized and is continuously discussed or mentioned *en passe* forging it further into its peripheral status, just like during Soviet times. And that is one of the biggest problems today: even to insert ourselves into decolonial discussions. The way things stand now, Walter Mignolo goes on Twitter and says that Ukraine needs to give up territories and find a dialogue with Russia, not understanding that Russia is the oppressor and the colonial oppressor at that. The question remains: can Ukrainians, Central Asians, and other postcolonial subjects speak? Can we write theories and conceptualize from our own histories and perspectives without getting policed for "getting the Soviet empire point wrong"? Who takes this powerful position to establish the dominant discourse, framework, and ways to conceptualize our experiences? To dwell on our post-colonial moment?

Another thing that I have been fighting for is the language of how we describe current conflicts: that Russia is doing a colonial war in Ukraine, it is not just a full-scale invasion. For me, what is lacking is the type of vocabulary, and how we change that vocabulary is epistemological at its core. On the other hand, I wonder, who are we to prescribe this vocabulary to people who, back home, are doing all these things and living through them and exactly producing the embodied knowledge we are talking about? For me, it continues to be the biggest paradox: We do need the vocabulary to find allies in other fields and to explain our experiences, but how do we then not return these vocabularies

back to home and become this authoritative voice that we do not want to be? Part of me thinks that we do need this vocabulary, because when you go into all these big, even decolonial conversations, your region is often marginalized, sometimes even erased. We often find ourselves at the margins. One of the postcolonial scholars from India once was bemused at me when I told them I was going to Prague to a decolonial panel discussion about Soviet experiences in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. They asked me, “You have decolonial discourses out there? Why? Were you colonized by someone?”

There should not be all these central/peripheral perspectives. I don't like the word periphery, but nevertheless, you do feel like you are on the periphery because people don't even consider that you were colonized in the first place! Russia is a great state, they say. For them, the Soviet Union was a fantastic utopian project that actually “brought civilization” to us, “gave” us equality. The fact that I have an education, many post-colonial scholars have told me, is precisely because of the Soviet Union and because my mother and everybody on the female side of my family had the chance to be educated. Otherwise, we, of course, would have been working in the fields or being sold as brides. To many who didn't live through the realities of Soviet colonization, it translates as Soviet utopia, picture perfect.

For me, it's this question of how do we translate it, then? Not to ourselves, because we understand it very well, but to everybody else. Russia is a part of a big imperial-colonial project. And I do agree with Assel's remark earlier that the two need to be separated. How do we translate it to them? How do we insert ourselves into that debate on empire? Because the Soviet experience of coloniality is inevitably part of the debate on empire and how different empires masked to portray themselves as liberatory projects.

And even if you break the first wall, many still see it as a hierarchical thing. The Baltic states were not really colonized; they were occupied. Ukraine was the second brother, so it wasn't really colonized, some narratives go though that's also debatable. But all these people in Central Asia, hm ... And they don't even know how to differentiate us! Some of the people I am in conversation with outside the region do not even know what the difference is between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. I say “I am from Kazakhstan, but I used to work in Kyrgyzstan”—and for people, it's the same thing, it's like going from Amsterdam to Rotterdam, you know, it sounds the same to some, but of course, it is not the same. Central Asian states are also not all the same. Pot-ai-to/pot-ah-to. Every time I hear it, it's the type of epistemic violence that obviously does not translate to how I feel when I am in the region or how the people around me feel in the region. And the fact that people take it very lightly is another big problem. For me, it's the question of vocabulary and

epistemologies, because they do not even feel like there is a necessity to go into this granular approach of understanding that Central Asian states are very different. The experiences of Soviet occupation are very different. So just trying to break that knot is a big, big issue.

My second point is on this idea of “post-Soviet”, because for me, the two are connected: our lack of vocabulary and the continued use of “post-Soviet” that comes out from this lack of vocabulary. It stems from the necessity to put us and our experiences on the map. But “Soviet” for the West was always Soviet Russia. We were never part of the picture. And the same thing goes with the “post-Soviet”. When they talk about post-Soviet, there is Moscow that is clearly defined and Russia, which is rarely discussed as “post-Soviet”, and then the rest is this ambiguous big black hole that the people in big Western media, when they write something about protests in Kazakhstan, problems on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they just say “this post-Soviet Asia” or “this post-Soviet brink of what is not Moscow”. I think that’s also part of epistemological violence, what I call colonial gaslighting. Russia is inserting itself so well into all these debates. It plays on the same field as these outsiders who try to continuously violate our presence and violate our agency because Russia is saying, “Of course they are post-Soviet! Of course they are nobodies! Of course they are periphery! But not the Russian regime, okay?! Russia is central” in these discussions.

Post-Soviet is murky, ambiguous. It is used to describe the space that is “too complex” to identify on its own terms, but it is necessary to identify it on its own terms. Our experiences of the multiple “post-” are not the same. Post-colonial is distinct here as well, postsocialist has its own contextual localities and differentiations, and post-Soviet is a type of term that is supposed to amalgamate it all and say pretty much nothing but that we were once Soviet and now our states are corrupt and non-democratic.

Olga Burlyuk: Land, language, dialogues, and the scale and the outreach of these. Is this a unique phenomenon, Russian imperialism? Is it unique to the so-called post-Soviet space, or is it more global? Some of you may know, Vjosa Musliu and I co-edited a special issue on the politics of knowledge production in the debate on Russia’s war against Ukraine (*The responsibility to remain silent? On the politics of knowledge production, expertise and (self-)reflection in Russia’s war against Ukraine*). And there is a contribution by Andriy Tyushka titled “In crisis we trust?”, looking at eight years that everybody has been writing on “the Ukraine crisis”. And the author argues that this denial of calling this a war, calling it what it is, has effectively led to knowledge distortion. The vocabulary we use continues these logics and disables us from stepping out of them. What would be the new vocabulary that would be necessary? And

where can our vocabulary meet their vocabulary? When we're looking at the dialogues, must we fight even for the right to use a shared vocabulary? And here is my second question: global North, global South, global East, or global Easts (plural) – Do we find these binaries productive for us to talk about our research subjects? Where do you see yourself and your work on countries in the region within the broader academic debates? And where and who are the main allies?

Assel Tutumlu: If we look at the history of decolonial discourses, they often begin in internal conversations, like the one we are having in this workshop. But the idea is that the terminology, the concepts must come from within, be negotiated, adopted, and accepted within the community before we can then go out and fight individually. Right now, there is a kind of parallel conversation made by individual representatives of the community on social media. It pushes us to understand who is who in this debate and where the boundaries are located, so that we can have internal solidarity when the other is othering us. And I think this is a relatively fruitful thing. But to create this solidarity, we need to have internal, regional conversations in fora created by scholars who work on this region. So, for example, we have RUTA Association for Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asian Studies in Global Conversation² critiquing the imperial and colonial frames that are used within the academic language. On top of that, we have had an amazing spirit that appeared year after year through a mentorship program that we run for Central Asian scholars called the Usta Mentorship Programme,³ and you really get to see how these scholars, usually women, come together and support each other. We also have writing marathons and joint publications, share different opportunities, and celebrate each other's progress. I think where we need to start is from within. And having these conversations, opportunities, projects enables us to support each other and to "stand where we sit": to do the best in our own positions, whether we are maximizing it through teaching, writing, citations, solidarity support networks, and really creating more initiatives to have these conversations, to inspire and engage others. This is just a matter of time. It's a matter of time before things change. We need to do our best to establish those solidarities, start projects, and really gain that academic legitimacy for our own discourse, concepts, and agency. I think that's the way to go.

Tereza Hendl: Oh, I wish I would see it as a matter of time! But it's probably also my discipline, because I am in philosophy, and that's the most white male-dominated scholarship there is. And it's Western dominated, and there

² <https://ruta-association.org/>.

³ <https://www.ustamentorship.com/>.

is a very special intersection of Westsplaining and mansplaining that affects some of us who are minoritized in the discipline, and it is unbelievable. You really want to pinch yourself: what kind of century is it? Wake me up when it's over! We need to have solid solidarity networks. This is why I started founding them, as you know. Because your own corner is often so maddening and epistemically unjust that you simply must find a different reality, it's impossible to be in the one you are embedded in and stay sane.

And it always fascinates me how across global scholarly communities we're so behind when it comes to Europe's East and Central Asia. The critical reflexivity that exists elsewhere does not apply to our concerns, regions, or debates. And that warrants a long overdue change, the same caution and learning from direct knowledges needs to be done in every part of the world, without exception. The way you posed the question, I will probably go directly into thinking about the terms because I often struggle with the divisions like global North and global South, also because I do not see where we get within them. And I know that people within those categories struggle with them, too. For example, I sit in a group of philosophers who work on global health, and most people come from countries that would be clustered in the global South. They still use the term, but in plural. I think this is particularly important because, for example, in the past I worked in places such as so-called Australia, despite the Indigenous land was never ceded. And there you have Indigenous populations within the global North, and these are some of the most structurally oppressed, disempowered, and genocided populations—clustered under the global North! How do you account for that?! And I have been in conversations and collaborations with some Indigenous scholars, and we have written about how this is so often not understood that, for example, the US or so-called Australia are colonial settler states in the present. Within Europe's East, we also need to get to know and read Indigenous scholarship and be more critical of what much of the West still is and what it does to the people who are Indigenous on those lands. I think those are solidarities that are very difficult to build, in many ways, because we are also not understood across these contexts. Our histories and socio-political conditions are different from the West, and much of the West has been supremacist and extractive toward Europe's East. But then, I always have an issue with being clustered with our other oppressors. So, I am also quite critical of the concept of the global East; it does not differentiate between occupiers and the occupied. And we had this issue as well when we were clustering our regions in some of the epistemically reparative initiatives that we co-founded. Who wants to be in what region? Nobody wanted to be with Russia because it has oppressed our ancestors for generations. And so, they need to stand on their own. But then what about Indigenous populations

within Russia? I see a lot of injustice, epistemic injustice, or rather epistemic violence being done to Indigenous people colonized by Russia, who are being framed as Russian when they do not identify that way because they are from Indigenous nations. Many of whom demand sovereignty and independence, and I hope they will have it, just like us.

Diana Kudaibergen: I will also start with a practice in my classes. I don't use global South and global North. When we discuss important contemporary global sociological problems, I always try to say that there is no global South and global North because once you actually start looking into these complex issues, and particularly the climate crisis was really useful for this, you see that the inequalities are so structured that you can be in the state of New York, but as a Latinx or Black woman of a working class, you would be the first one affected by the rising sea levels. Or, you know, you'll be the first one to be forced to move out. Climate refugees is also a deeply structured and unequal thing. The grid of the global South, the post-Soviet periphery, "Russia's backyard," and others are part of the same old colonial vocabulary and mapping. It is a way to talk about things, places, people, and experiences that are not dominant or central, that are not in the major focus of the power and dominant discussions.

So, as somebody coming from the field where we constantly need to find new words, I'm very explicit in saying that this vocabulary may not always be useful. For me, this is the continuation of the colonial language just masked under a different attire. And another problem with a lot of these power practices, colonial practices, is that it can always mask itself under something different by trying to say, "I'm not really colonial, I'm trying to bring you all this peace and happiness and so on", but actually you are being underlying colonial. For me, this differentiation might be useful for some people in some of these disciplines. But I am standing wholly against it. I think it's much more interesting to look for the concepts and ideas of how people describe themselves. So, I try not to say Latin America because that has a colonial background to it. I try to say South America, Central America, because that's how they use it in their vocabulary. For Central Asians, we struggled and debated with Central Asia itself for a very long time. Looking into the conceptions of selfhood, I think, is more important and interesting to explore. For me, it's about trying to look for these complexities and not fearing them. I really like my ongoing collaboration on steppe knowledge. It goes back to how the steppe experienced colonialism and all these types of quite diverse histories. Yet the steppe remained what it is. It can be divided by colonial fortresses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and now with the contemporary border controls, but its essence and what it represents to the local people remains the same.

I think if we come not from just the very prescribed geopolitical perceptions, but from the regional perspective: what is the steppe perspective? If you're standing in a place where the borders never existed, but now they separate the two communities that are incredibly interconnected, what will that produce? And maybe it will no longer be Central Asia. Maybe it will be something else. I think there is a very interesting perspective to look from the geography, from the space where you are based.

Olga Burlyuk: Fascinating. I already see certain threads emerging. First, we need to complicate these labels and say that they don't tell us much at all. What about the Indigenous within the global North? What about the classes within the rich countries? What about the borders? They don't make any sense! There is this great line I read in a novel: "Borders crossed people". We are always thinking in terms of people crossing borders, but in our region, and not only in our region, it is "borders crossing people". Just look at the map of Africa! Everything is in a straight line. And between Belgium and the Netherlands, you have villages within Belgium that are encircled, because once upon a time, they had voted to be the Netherlands. And the other way around. If you zoom in on the map of the Dutch-Belgian border, you will see these little bubbles.

Then, regional dialogues, looking internally, looking in solidarity. I do want to be the devil's advocate and say: I've done this in conversations with others, and they say, it's too complicated. "Your story is too complicated. The story of the Russian imperial war in Ukraine is too complicated. You cannot do it in 30 seconds on TV." But I can do it in 30 seconds on TV! "They are out to kill us." Very simple. Two seconds! I didn't even need the 30 seconds! So, I'm thinking: is there added value in appropriating these terms just to make our story understandable to others? It's the same logic, but in a different context, which has different sensitivities and a different history that you were never taught. Is there any value in that?

And that brings us to the third question: Decolonization is not a metaphor. It's a practice. We all know what needs to be done. Where do we begin, though? You have already suggested that we begin with the land. We begin with the vocabulary. We begin with transnational dialogues. With recognizing that it's the same patterns at work in completely unrelated contexts. But I would also encourage you to think: where do we begin structurally, within academia? Do we begin with research projects? Do we begin with publications? Do we begin setting up new associations? Do we begin lobbying for jobs and making a point of joining every hiring committee in our departments so that we have a say on who gets hired? Assel, the floor is yours.

Assel Tutumlu: I think that we will talk more about Diana's book about networks, *The Kazakh Spring: Digital activism and the challenge to dictatorship*,

later. Look at all these revolutions that happened in Eastern Europe. They happened because of solidarity networks. I'm a very strong believer in the fact that there is a power of meaning, and you can have multiple parallel projects that you can do together when you have the right people driven by ideas. I am a firm believer in human agency against the regimes that operate in a very vicious way towards academics and ordinary citizens. And so, I would say: Do whatever is possible in the position you are in. The mentorship program, for example, started out of conversations, and we ran it for free, just going through our own networks and asking people to join, while getting overwhelming support and solidarity from people from all parts of the world. And it was very easy for us to organize, but it created wonderful things. I understand we are all busy, we have families, and so on. But take up as little as you can do. And only through this extra effort do things start to move and change around.

Personally, I think the absence of academic freedom is really concerning, particularly because the regime usually targets the interlocutors and not the authors, or the co-authors who are in more precarious conditions. We need to be careful, cognizant about this, and really build support networks from within. One thing that I think we need to all work on is to have some kind of financial backing for it done by us, independent scholars who are committed to making a small difference at a time.

Olga Burlyuk: I vote for you! Thank you. I see a problem with that, though. It runs on our human capital, and we are not an infinite resource. Yes, we do it and we make it part of our work, but how can we fit the structure so that this work is recognized and does not come on top of our regular workload? I mean, there is only so long that you can work at 150%. The question is, how do I make it part of my 100%? Personally, I feel the responsibility to engage. I want to share an anecdote. I spoke at a public lecture on how the war impacts research at a Dutch university a few days ago. Three female Ukrainian scholars spoke on this, including me. And in the Q&A, somebody comes forward with a question: "This responsibility to engage you all spoke of, where does it come from?" How do I come back to that in a gracious way? ... I went with, "People don't *make* choices. People *have* choices. I don't have a choice in this situation. I've got to do it." And that's the dynamic of this group today, it seems. You just need to have that critical mass of people who are driven by the idea. They share the cost, and then they put their own 10%. But 10% of ten people is 100%. I now pass the floor to Tereza.

Tereza Hendl: I do firmly believe that we need structural changes. Yes, decolonization is not a metaphor; it needs to be an action. At the same time, I really appreciate a lot of Indigenous scholarship that was written on how decolonization is not possible because you cannot undo the past, but you can

create some kind of better future, do some kind of decolonial gestures towards trying to redress the harm and make up for the wrong, and then not repeating that all over again and not replicating the same oppressive structures. And it's difficult. Where do we start? There are so many levels and layers of complexity. And now I am speaking particularly from the perspective of Europe's East, and I really appreciate a lot of work that's being done on the ambiguous position that we are in, because historically we both have been oppressed as well as upheld structures of oppression. And you are in this trap of not being fully European and being a secondary sort of human, racialized 'Eastern European', and also inter-generationally affected by the legacy of German Nazi imperialism, Aryan racist ideology, violence, and dehumanization. But then, over generations, if you migrate somewhere and if you are quite white, then you can perhaps blend in if your name or accent isn't too obvious. Likely, if you were a Roma, you could never blend in like this. So, that's another issue: we are much more diverse within our societies than the homogeneous perception of Europe's East.

Also, I'm happy that we have mentioned that we think about it as something in and within the global context and conversations. A lot of how decoloniality is being thought within our circles in response to the escalated Russian invasion of Ukraine is now focusing almost solely on the region. I understand why this is being done, also because Ukraine urgently needs to be de-occupied and decolonized in practice, not just theory. Still, our debates on decoloniality need to be broader and done in the global context. Yet, especially those who were thrown into them recently will need the luxury of time for thinking and rethinking, and many of us – and I mean Ukrainians in particular – do not have the conditions and safety important for that ... But in terms of moving forward, I'm trying to think in terms of refusal and how we refuse being spoken about us without us, refusing these unjust and extractive practices. And again, this refusal has been conceptualized in Indigenous scholarship, especially in North America, and I am trying to think how we can have debates on refusal from within our traditions of thought, being informed and inspired, but not extractivist toward those Indigenous knowledges, indeed, from a very different socio-political context.

Olga Burlyuk: Thank you so much for bringing in refusal. I think this is one of the tools that's underutilized simply because we are so eager to engage, and there is so little room for us to make a difference that we jump at every opportunity. There is little opening—and you go, and you teach a course, and a guest class, and supervise that PhD student. And you go to a conference, and co-author, and read, and review ... Diana, the floor is yours.

Diana Kudaibergen: Academia has a very specific currency, and it is publications. As academics, we know that our research has to be disseminated through different and various forms of publications and other forms of sharing and communication. We can write or present ideas differently: in the form of podcasts, public talks, collaborative work, summer schools, public teaching, and so on. Publications do not start and end with the Web of Science. It would be just too limited. Yes, it is important to write and publish. For years in our writing marathons for Central Asian scholars, I've been preaching the idea that we all need to write books because I also think that everyone I meet in the field is doing absolutely fascinating research and is adding to the enormous gaps we have in the reading lists, syllabuses, and overall discourse. Superb comparative studies between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, the research about bazars in Uzbekistan, comparative work on Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, the whole field of mining, illegalities, political economies of authoritarianism, and many decolonial writers whom I met through Elmira Kakabayeva's fantastic course "Family Ethnography". If you start reading these works, you just get super excited about how much great work is being done and how much of it needs to be published and shared widely.

I am all for the overflowing shelves of books written by Central Asian or other decolonial authors and all for the collaborative, collective work of writing, discussing, debating, and contemplating that we are doing here. Collective work is, in particular, super valuable. You need to see how much you change, but also that not all your initial ideas make sense, that sometimes you make mistakes, and you need to discuss these mistakes or evaluate your points from different angles to figure out how to change that. And we have to remember for whom we write. The audience is a crucial point of any writing or any academic work. Who is the reader? I think that is also one of the crucial questions.

Olga Burlyuk: Publications as a core currency, which, unfortunately, is the case. The question is then: how can we write as a collective? There are two things I wish to mention. What you, Assel, were talking about is situational connections: depending on the context, you connect with people, and if you have a big network, you always have somebody to work with. But I must think of a formal academic collective called The Yugoslawomen+ Collective.⁴ They are six scholars from former Yugoslav republics, they are a fixed collective, and they write together. And I was wondering if there was room for that in the work we do.

⁴ <https://yugoslawomenplus.net/>.

Then, on the importance of putting things on paper, as Diana was saying: this is precisely what we did in our article on epistemic imperialism ((*En*)*Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of “Westsplaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*)! Citing each other into existence. It’s a 16,000-word article, of which about 6,000 is bibliography. And I personally wrote the cover letter to the journal editors: “We kindly ask and request and insist that you leave it there, because that’s the point of the article to provide a reading list for those who keep saying, ‘Where are the voices? Where is the literature? Who are these people?’ Here, you have 11 pages of references.” And then the article got the awards, and I started getting congratulatory emails from colleagues across the board. And I am positive that suddenly my work became much more legitimate in their eyes than it was a month before the prizes, even though it is literally the same piece of research. We are disrupting. I would like to open the floor for others to comment.

Dilya Mamadshoeva: Just a brief consideration for the environment. I very much like the notion of the land that Assel spoke of, but I think we also need to unpack it a little bit and talk more, for instance, about the resources of the land or the water. I do a lot of history on how resources are constructed, for whom they are constructed. I would like to bring to the table the notion of ecological imperialism.

Sudha Rajagopalan: I wonder what the audience is that we want to speak to, because I think about this in terms of not only post-Soviet spaces, but also in terms of India and its place in global historiography and the kinds of vocabulary that we use here. If I were to go and teach a course in India, I would have to substantially adapt the way I speak about this. This is not a language that is being used there. I wonder then, what is my own positionality as a global South person in the West? What vocabulary am I embracing? For whose purpose? For what audience? And if I cannot speak to people back home in the same way that I can speak here, then I am not sure what I am doing with all this. Also, in terms of the global South/global North, not looking at them as geographic categories as much as conditions might be helpful. You know, as moral, social, and epistemic conditions, in which case they are everywhere.

Olga Burlyuk: I think we have opened the doors and windows to many of the topics that will come back throughout the remainder of this workshop. Thank you all!