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# (En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of “Westspaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

On February 24, 2022, the world was surprised by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and, perhaps even more so, by Ukraine’s fierce resistance to it. In this article, we examine mainstream and feminist International Relations (IR) debates that have emerged in response to Russia’s invasion, as well as the older debates revived through them. Building on decolonial and feminist scholarship, prominently centering feminist debates from Europe’s East and Central Asia, we argue that dominant Western IR debates on Russia and Ukraine are shaped by inter-imperiality. We trace issues of epistemic injustice, epistemic imperialism and coloniality of knowledge production in mainstream IR and see them replicated in feminist debates, including from global South perspectives. We conclude with a contemplation on the structural changes warranted across academia to eliminate the coloniality of knowledge production about Ukraine and fellow societies as well as Indigenous nations affected by Russian colonial and imperial violence.

**KEYWORDS** Epistemic imperialism; coloniality of knowledge; International Relations; feminism; Ukraine; Russia

Russia’s 2022 full-fledged invasion of Ukraine is many things at once ... The incompatible logics of sovereignty (Ukraine’s) and imperialism (Russia’s) are at the loggerheads in this conflict. (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 1)

Staying away from the issue of arming people who have no choice but to defend themselves is not about feminist values.  
(Anna Khvyl in Tsyymbalyuk et al., 2022)

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On February 24, 2022, the world was shaken by the news of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What had been openly in the works for months under the guise of "military exercises," and systematically in the making for years and decades, came as a surprise to much of the West, which then concluded that "the situation escalated" because "Putin has gone mad." Locking the agency and therefore responsibility with *one man*, Vladimir Putin, invoking insanity and so implying that no analysis could have foreseen this occurrence *rationally*, and classifying it as a *sudden* turn of events in discord with earlier patterns of behavior – this claim is but an attempt at disguising failure to see what has been in plain sight. It is coupled with unwillingness to listen to those who did see, too.

The scale, viciousness and brutality of the invasion, the genocidal violence toward the civilian population, as well as the extremity of Russia's official rhetoric surrounding it are indeed *shocking*; but they should not have been *surprising* knowing the nature of the regime in Russia, its position on Ukraine and its past practices in Ukraine and elsewhere (particularly, in other countries and nations in the post-Soviet region, including in the Russian Federation itself) (for more see Oksamytna, 2023a). As an ironic joke in Ukraine has it, "Today is day N [insert appropriate number] of a 3-day special military operation in a 9-years long war that has lasted for centuries." Having repeatedly failed at locking Ukraine-post-1991 in a subjugated relationship or at installing a puppet government, Russia has first invaded Ukraine in February 2014, when it annexed Crimea and instigated an armed conflict in Ukraine's eastern-most provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk under the pretense of local separatism. Given the mild international response and the apparent failure of the said acts of aggression to paralyze Ukraine as a state or demoralize Ukrainians as a nation/society, the Russian regime continued the rhetoric of denying Ukraine's statehood and dehumanizing Ukrainians, preparing the ground for the future full-out invasion (see Gaufman, 2022; Yermolenko in The Ezra Klein Show, 2022).

Meanwhile, Western scholars and analysts proceeded to find causes and solutions for what has been labelled in media, politics and academia as "Ukraine crisis," "Ukraine conflict," "Ukraine war" and variations thereof (Koval et al., 2022; Tyushka, 2023). These labels render Russia "the one who shall not be named." While not quite as extreme as Putin's reference to "the resolution of the Ukraine question" in his speech on February 25, 2022 (as cited in Akopov, 2022), these labels mis-locate Ukraine as the site of the problem to be solved and therefore the source of the possible solutions, (un)intentionally leading to knowledge distortion and victim blaming (Tyushka, 2023).

Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion came perhaps as an even bigger surprise to Western countries than the invasion itself (Khromeychuk, 2023; Oksamytna, 2023a). Ukraine was forecast to stand no chance in a military confrontation with Russia and "have only a few hours left." And so, Ukraine

was advised to surrender, while the West was advised to refrain from supplying arms to Ukraine: both so as to “stop violence and save lives.” In this respect, writer Oksana Zabuzhko quotes a conversation she had in spring 2022: “As a European Slavistics scholar guilelessly said to me, ‘who knew it would come to this, we all had thought it would be over in three days!’” (2022b, p. 130, auth. translation). Just like the remarks on Putin’s insanity, these claims obscure (if not indemnify) Russia as the offender and render it acceptable for Russia to pose an existential threat to Ukraine and exercise genocidal violence against Ukrainians. They also ignore Ukrainians’ experience of resistance to the Russian invasion and occupation, including most recently since 2014, as well as the high morale of the Ukrainian army, the extraordinary mobilization of Ukrainian civil society in face of a threat and the reach and strength of Ukrainian diaspora world-wide (see Martsenyuk & Brik, 2023). All in all, the analytical and scholarly responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have exposed “ingenious argumentative alliances” between offensive realists and epistemically unjust pacifists, who both—in calling for a quick ceasefire, surrender and otherwise Russia-sensitive solutions—“symptomatically deny the agency of Ukraine in but subtly distinct ways” (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 2), as we further explore in this text.

In this article, we take a closer look at mainstream and feminist IR debates on Ukraine that have emerged in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion as well as the older debates revived through them. We ask: how have these debates treated the voices, knowledges, socio-historical experiences, scholarship and perspectives of experts from Ukraine and fellow societies who have been directly affected by Russian imperialism? When we look at these debates, what kind of power dynamic can we identify within them? Building on decolonial and feminist scholarship, prominently centering feminist debates from Europe’s East and Central Asia (Hendl, 2022; Kassymbekova, 2017; Khromeychuk, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik, 2021; Sonevytsky, 2022; Tlostanova, 2010, 2021; Yurchenko, 2020), we argue that dominant Western IR debates on Russia and Ukraine are shaped by inter-imperiality (Doyle, 2020; Parvulescu & Boatcă, 2020), involving Ukraine being simultaneously theorized through Western-dominating perspectives and Russia-centric frameworks.

In our analysis of this dynamic, we build on Maria Sonevytsky’s account of epistemic imperialism, which she defines as “the hubris of believing that what one knows or studies from a privileged perspective, as within the Anglophone academy, can be exported wholesale to contexts about which one knows little or nothing” (2022, p. 22). We argue that in both mainstream and feminist IR debates, we observe the imposing of Western-dominating and Russo-centric perspectives on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in ways that commonly ignore or erase Ukrainian perspectives and agency and, more generally, apply a reductive and oppressive notion of geopolitics. In particular, through the debates we trace the power dynamic of epistemic

injustice, undermining Ukrainians in their capacity as knowers, framing them as incapable of producing reliable knowledge about their lived reality and treating them as objects rather than subjects of knowledge production (Fricker, 2007; Kurylo, 2023).

Overall, all these power asymmetrical patterns fall into a larger frame of coloniality of knowledge production, with the Western monopoly of knowledge among the key manifestations of the coloniality of power (Tlostanova, 2010, p. 20). Below we investigate these patterns and we end our article with a contemplation on the structural changes that are warranted across academia to eliminate the coloniality of knowledge production about Ukraine, fellow societies and Indigenous nations that have been occupied and colonized throughout the history of the Russian and Soviet empires and the contemporary fascist Russian “Federation.” In doing so, we continue the discussion on the pages of this Journal as to “what we got wrong” with regard to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

The citation politics in this article is in line with our critical emancipatory approach: rather than citing and amplifying the voices we critique and which have dominated the debates on our societies and concerns while at times replicating Russian propaganda, we cite those who review and critique them with us, centering the perspectives of epistemically marginalized scholars with embodied experience of Russian imperial violence. Furthermore, we understand “debate” as reaching far beyond the constraints of Western-centric academic publishing and thus also cite debates among academics published in various formats and on various platforms, including op-eds, blogs, public talks and even Twitter threads.

We, the authors—separately and collectively—have been researching the matters discussed in this article for years in our respective sub-fields (IR, feminist security studies, sociology, political philosophy, public and global health ethics, gender studies, European studies, Ukrainian studies, and Central Asian studies), and we have been deeply immersed in the debate on Russia’s war on Ukraine since February 2022 due to our respective academic and personal positionalities (coming from the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan and Ukraine). Our argument in this article thus draws on many more sources than the multiple pages of bibliography and includes also personal (participant) observations from academic events and expert discussions with academics, analysis of general discourse, questions asked to us in various academic fora, conversations with colleagues and each other, as well as lived and multi-generational experiences with Russian imperialism. Overall, we aim at a decolonial approach, which critiques and strives toward de-colonizing what has been affected by coloniality, *as well as* an anticolonial approach, with the objective of preventing future colonial oppression and erasure, be it in debates, academic infrastructures or politics and material life more generally. We rest at nothing less, as our shared struggle against Russian imperial violence and its minimization, normalization, appeasement and enabling is ongoing.

## Mainstream IR debates: Old-new concerns over West-Russia relations without Ukraine

The mainstream IR debates on the Russian invasion of Ukraine have brought into the spotlight core realist concepts that intellectually formed this Western-centric discipline during the Cold War. Besides being profoundly gendered and uncritical, the current debates have reproduced the colonial narratives of Ukraine and Russia's war characterized by Western-centrism and domination. As we demonstrate below, this is apparent in the binary conceptualization of the world through "the West and Russia" or "NATO and Russia." The denial of agency to Ukraine apparent in such IR debates<sup>1</sup> fits within the legacy of coloniality in how Russia and the West have been treating Ukraine. Feminist scholar Maria Mayerchuk and social philosopher Olga Plakhotnik (2021) use the concept of coloniality understood as a fundamental matrix of power, operating through the control of four interrelated domains: economy, authority or governmentality, gender and sexuality, and production of knowledge and subjectivity. In line with this conceptualization of coloniality, they develop a critical perspective on two main regimes of colonial power that create a particular framework for marginalization and subjugation of Ukraine. First, Russian imperialism that claims Ukraine as its "little" province. Second, the hegemony of Western imperialism that treats Ukraine as a partially modernized but not fully civilized periphery of Europe, which has been distorted by the Soviet regime and then "left to the normalizing processes of democratization and Europeanization" (Suchland, 2011, as cited in Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik, 2021, p. 126). Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik (2021) build on the work of anthropologist Maria Sonevsky, who elaborates:

Between these two rival imperial centres, Ukraine appears as a quintessential borderland, a buffer, a threshold, the closest "elsewhere" to a European or Russian "here." Its "wild" peoples and territories, observed by so many outsiders, have been tempered by its proximity to those "civilized" observers. (Sonevsky, 2019, p. 4; see also Musliu & Burlyuk, 2019)

In economic terms, for both imperial centers, the main value of Ukraine has been to provide a cheap labor force for construction, agriculture, care work and sex service for first-class Western and Russian citizens (Katona & Zacharenko, 2021; Yurchenko, 2020).

This multi-polar oppressive dynamic points toward inter-imperiality, referring to "multiply vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires," including "not only the materialities of empires that have accrued over millennia but also the forms of relation through which communities have struggled amid empires" (Doyle, 2020, p. 4). The inter-imperiality, that has involved Russian and Western—in particular German Nazi-colonial conquest, domination and genocides,

has affected Ukraine's history and society (Andriewsky, 2015; Beyrau & Keck-Szajbel, 2012; Gorbunova & Klymchuk, 2020; Lower, 2005; Palko & Férez Gil, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the recent full-out invasion of Ukraine by Russia has triggered an immensely strong unity among Ukrainians, who have been collectively refusing the status of a buffer periphery and insisting on the right to self-determination and de-occupation from Russia, much to the collective shock of the West (Khromeychuk, 2023; Martsenyuk & Brik, 2023; Musliu & Burlyuk, 2019; Zabuzhko, 2022b).

### ***Westspaining and the myth of Ukraine's powerlessness***

From the early days and weeks of the invasion, Western scholars and opinion makers, mostly conventional male scholars, have rushed to provide their military expertise and views on the causes, consequences and responses to the Russian war of aggression. Political scientists Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz (2022) mention key foreign policy figures who have been treating Russia's invasion of Ukraine like a game of Risk. They confess that for them as East-European scholars, it has been galling to watch the unending stream of Western scholars and pundits condescend to explain the situation in Ukraine and Europe's East, in ways that commonly disregard voices from the region and claim to perfectly understand Russian logic and motives. They later conceptualized this phenomenon as epistemic superimposition, or "the methodological error of overlaying abstract theories onto unique historical and political contexts, which can lead to poor engagement with empirical evidence or to ignoring empirical evidence altogether" (Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023, p. 619). Similar critiques have been made and resonated among many scholars from those parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Central Asia and Syria, which have been directly affected by Russian imperialism (Al-Shami, 2018; al-Haj Saleh, 2022; Ayoub & Atik, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Kassymbekova, 2023a). What is characteristic for such kind of "Westspaining" is the treatment of Europe's East and its people as objects rather than subjects of history (Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023; Kazharski, 2022; Kurylo, 2023; Sonevtsky, 2022).

Such Westspaining and the significantly imperialist approach toward Europe's East that underlines it, is also manifested in the wide disbelief at Ukrainian resistance. Under the logic of realist IR models, Ukraine should not even begin to resist as it presumably stands no chance (Khromeychuk, 2023; Kuzio, 2022; Zabuzhko, 2022a). In response to such manifestations of western epistemic imperialism, a scholar of Critical Security Studies and political anthropologist Maria Mälksoo (2022) has observed: "Along with the Russian leadership, the strength and scope of the Ukrainian resistance has taken the world by surprise" (pp. 1–2). She notes that this surprise points to an overall lack of understanding of resistance within IR and that

these oversights remarkably replicate old hierarchies of power and domination in the world. Indeed, historian Olesya Khromeychuk notes that:

Ukrainians' historical fight for their right to sovereignty might have been accepted as sufficient evidence that they would put up resistance in this new colonial war, had it been recognised. Yet traditionally Ukraine's own narratives of its past have been dismissed in favour of the distorted version presented by a neighbouring dictator who denied the country's existence. It was that version that was then mansplained – or Westsplained – back to us by talking heads in the Western media who, despite possessing little relevant expertise, were recognised as authoritative. (Khromeychuk, 2022b, n.p.)

In this regard, what can be observed in realist and fellow dominant IR debates, is an inter-imperialist dynamic. In these debates, Ukraine is framed as a clueless Western pawn without subjectivity or agency and seen through a Russo-centric lens, denying a right to self-determination and national liberation (Yurchenko, as cited in Smith, 2022), as illustrated in debates describing the Ukrainian liberation struggle against the Russian invasion as a Western “proxy war” by scholars such as Noam Chomsky, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt or Richard Sakwa (see the critiques by CEE scholars Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023; Kukharsky et al., 2022).

In these theories, Ukraine is always constructed in relation to Russia, Putin is imagined as someone who might be cornered by a war of his own initiative, and Ukrainians are typically voiceless and spoken over. Such epistemically imperialist and colonial discourse has also been employed in public debates, for example by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who has theorized about Ukraine while centering Russian colonial talking points and not engaging with Ukrainian voices and perspectives (read the poignant critique by Snyder, 2022). The disregard for Ukrainian agency was also replicated by scholars from the global South, including Walter Mignolo (see a critique by Durdiyeva, 2023), Ramón Grosfoguel, or Tithi Bhattacharya, Verónica Gago and Luci Cavallero (see Hendl, 2022, for an analysis of their positions; Tripathi, 2022). Bhattacharya, Gago and Cavallero have supported a feminist “anti-war” manifesto, which has shifted parts of responsibility for a military invasion from perpetrating Russia toward the West and NATO, while Grosfoguel and Mignolo have painted Russia as “defending” itself in a world dominated by Western imperialism and, thereby, normalized Russian violence against Ukraine.

Next, we take a closer look at the characteristics of these debates, namely the shifting of responsibility for Russia's war of aggression toward the West, the whitewashing of Russia's war crimes and colonial violence, and the systematic casting of Russia as a cornered innocent victim with seemingly legitimate territorial claims over sovereign societies.

### ***The shifting of responsibility: “It’s all the West’s fault”***

In much of Western IR debates, and realism in particular, we can observe a systematic effort at the shifting of responsibility for the Russian military invasion of Ukraine toward the West. The most symptomatic example is the Western debate which criticizes NATO “expansion” for causing a security threat to Russia. In particular, there has been much recycling of John Mearsheimer’s “The Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault,” voiced in 2014 and again in 2022, a text that involves claims that have long been refuted (Dunnet, 2014; Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023; Kostelka, 2022). The “Bend sinister” narrative of Western politicians and think tanks on the “Ukraine crisis,” which treats Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas as justified/qualified aggression and calls for dialogue, concessions and compromise, is one example of such recycling (Koval et al., 2022, pp. 7–8). Political scientist Filip Kostelka (2022) argues that Mearsheimer’s late work is “deeply problematic on factual, scientific, and moral grounds,” “is intellectually unsatisfactory” and “rests on shaky empirical foundations.” Moreover, “by publicly defending his scientifically unsound thesis, Mearsheimer legitimizes Russia’s propaganda and violates the fundamental values of social responsibility that all academics should respect.” Kostelka and other scholars (Driedger, 2023; Driedger & Polianskii, 2023; Kukharskyy et al., 2022; Smoleński & Dutkiewicz, 2022) have emphasized that Mearsheimer’s and fellow (imper)realist accounts have immensely limited explanatory power and little scientific value. More so, as Makarychev and Nizhnikau (2023) argue, these and other academic discourses implicitly, if not explicitly, normalize and rationalize Russia’s conduct.

Indeed, many critics of inter-imperial realism have argued that Russia’s latest conquest was never actually about NATO. For example, political scientists specialized in post-socialist countries Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel have argued:

Putin’s rhetoric and actions over almost two decades reveal that his goals extend beyond imposing neutrality on Ukraine or even staving off further NATO expansion. The larger objective is to re-establish Russian political and cultural dominance over a nation that Putin sees as one with Russia, and then follow up by undoing the European rules-based order and security architecture established in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>3</sup> (Popova & Shevel, 2022, n.p.)

They have also clarified that Ukraine’s “neutrality” is “a woefully insufficient concession for Putin” (Popova & Shevel, 2022, n.p.). The argument that “Russia felt threatened by NATO expansion” is a projection of coloniality, as it deprives of agency not only Ukrainians, but also many fellow populations from Europe’s East who wish to increase their security due to their direct and destructive experience with Russian imperialism. Concerningly,

this projection also paints Russians themselves as people void of agency, civic responsibility and accountability (more on this below).

The epistemically imperialist character of debates on Europe's East has been countered by many CEE scholars who have called out the denial of agency and right to self-determination in scholarship that fails to account for the fact that NATO enlargement has been based on the active demands of newly independent and de-occupied CEE states who needed to ensure their military security against yet another Russian aggression and in the wake of genocidal wars in Yugoslavia and later Chechnya (Bělíček, 2022; Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023; Lambert-Deslandes, 2022). While we believe that the offensive imperialist dimension of NATO, as manifested in the military invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq, warrants critique (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Ahmad, 2014), NATO's defensive dimension has functioned as the most effective deterrent of Russia's invasions into countries in CEE and the Baltics, where NATO membership has overwhelming public support (Kostadinova, 2000; Lanoszka, 2023; Lanoszka & Hunzeker, 2023; Statista, 2022). To this end, Zosia Brom has addressed the Western Left critique of NATO's CEE enlargement as follows:

Further, you talk about how you desire to stop "NATO expansion" but you don't really mention what, exactly, would be a viable alternative to it. This is not acceptable at all, it just shows your privilege of growing up in a country where your life story was not littered with, how exciting, tantrums and aggressions of various scales of this great, unpredictable force that assumes it can throw its way anywhere where there is no NATO. (Brom, 2022, n.p.)

We, too, believe that a critique of NATO, void of serious propositions on how to ensure more effectively the safety of CEE from Russian imperialism and genocidal violence, is irresponsible, harmful, inconsiderate and colonial in that it enables Russian imperialism. In this regard, it is important to note that critical IR scholarship, and specifically the Western Left, fails to understand "agency that does not fit into the fixed conceptions of 'acceptable' agency in Critical IR" (Kurylo, 2023) and is yet to acknowledge and constructively engage with Ukraine's and fellow countries' specific and complex socio-historical experiences with post-socialist transformations (Hendl, 2022; Oksamytna, 2023b). For many scholars in Western and global South academia, their critique of Western capitalism and imperialism has relied on the casting of the Soviet "Union" as an egalitarian project, at the exclusion of the experiences and knowledge production of societies who have been occupied and colonised by it (Hendl, 2022; Kassymbekova, 2017, 2022; Kassymbekova & Chokobaeva, 2023). These patterns of focus and disengagement manifest the ways through which the West has been centered as the core of the world, with Russia conceptualized as another metropole, as we will discuss below.

## ***The whitewashing of Russia's war crimes and imperial accountability***

The shifting of responsibility from Russia, apparent in dominant IR debates, goes hand in hand with the whitewashing of Russia's war crimes and imperial accountability. Many critical scholars have shown that much of Western and global South scholarship has painted Russia as interested in negotiations while the country has been escalating a genocidal military invasion, with scholars even advocating for the yielding to Russian colonialism as the way to escape the country's nuclear blackmail (Kukharskyy et al., 2022; Matviyenko, 2022a, 2022b; Smoleński & Dutkiewicz, 2022; Snyder, 2022). In such accounts, we observe a remarkably inconsistent and ambivalent construction of Russia: it is simultaneously portrayed as a powerful and frightening nuclear superpower and a cornered victim in need of face-saving and off-ramps. The trope of Russia's innocence is particularly concerning as it not only contradicts empirical evidence regarding the long and ongoing legacy of Russian imperial violence (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022; Tlostanova, 2010), but perpetuates victim-blaming by implying that the military aggression toward Ukraine was "provoked," as if Russia could not help itself and had to invade a sovereign state and perpetrate a genocide. In what comes across as "imper-realist" victim-blaming, we trace a denial of Russian agency, which aids toward the relieving of the empire and its peoples from responsibility for their actions.

In particular, in this line of reasoning, Russia is not considered capable of acting but merely of *re-acting* to the West. Such a line of argumentation downplays the perpetrator's responsibility, as well as sides with the perpetrator and denies their rationality and accountability by suggesting Russia was just triggered. Yet, as sociologist and social anthropologist Volodymyr Artyukh (2022, n.p.) has argued, "Russia is not reacting, adapting, making concessions anymore, it has re-gained agency and it is able to shape the world around it." On his account, Russia's toolkit relies on brute force, and brute force is a powerful tool.

In this socio-historical context, continuous calls for Ukrainians to negotiate with their invaders and serial mass murderers come across as not only alarmingly out of touch with the reality and intentionality of genocidal violence but also as remarkably violent and epistemically unjust toward Ukrainians. Likewise, leading Western universities and organizations that promote inclusive peace continue to draft peace negotiations and settlements for Ukraine without Ukrainians (see Cambridge Initiative on Peace Settlements, 2023; Paffenholz et al., 2023). These calls and the politics of appeasement they reinforce are also failing to grasp the basic rights that Ukrainians are entitled to by international and human rights law, including provisions of public international law on the act of aggression, genocide, state sovereignty

and territorial integrity, transnational and international criminal law, international human rights law, international humanitarian law, bilateral and multilateral agreements and memorandums and, indeed, Russia's own legislation (Burlyuk, 2021). Similarly, these calls are blind to the colonial violence and persecution against Ukraine by Russia that any subjugation would entail, as evidenced in great depths in the occupied parts of Ukraine since 2014 and specifically since February 24, 2022 and in other countries and territories occupied within the past and present of Russian imperialism (Kryvulyak, 2022; Shapovalova & Burlyuk, 2016; UN OHCHR regular Ukraine Country Reports from April, 2014, onwards).

Western (and global South) politics of appeasement is thus effectively aiding the exempting of Russia from accountability for its war crimes and genocidal colonialism in Ukraine and elsewhere. In turn, Ukrainian scholars have appealed to realists: "If you truly value Ukrainian lives as you claim to, we would like to kindly ask you to refrain from adding further fuel to the Russian war machine by spreading views very much akin to Russian propaganda" (Kukharskyy et al., 2022; on the ethics of (not) speaking, see also Axyonova & Lozka, 2023; Brattvoll, 2023; Graef, 2023; Howlett & Lazarenko, 2023; Kurylo, 2023; Tsybalyuk, 2023).

### ***The epistemically unjust myth of Russian imperial innocence***

The exceptionalism that fuels the politics of Russia's appeasement is embedded within a broader framework of Russia's presumed imperial innocence. The common, yet unsubstantiated, framing of Russia as an innocent victim is particularly striking, given the robust empirical evidence regarding the long and ongoing legacy of Russian imperial and colonial violence in Europe's East and the Baltics, large parts of Asia, as well as on the territory of the Russian "Federation" (Kassymbekova & Chokobaeva, 2021; Sakha Pacifist Association, 2022; Tlostanova, 2010, 2021). Throughout its history of conquests and racialized violence, Russia has strived to whitewash both its imperial crimes and its population. The "Federation" has managed to maintain an image of a country with an almost exclusively white population, while Indigenous nations and residents and migrants from Russia's (former) colonies have been systematically marginalized, oppressed and erased into invisibility, including via genocides (Arystanbek, 2022; Cameron, 2018; Morrison, 2016; Ochir, 2023; Sakha Pacifist Association, 2022; Tlostanova, 2010, 2021). Historian Botakoz Kassymbekova and political scientist Erica Marat have recently called for the abandonment of the myth of Russian imperial innocence and argued that the imperial view that "Russian rule over non-Russian populations is not colonialism but a gift of modernity" ought to be scrapped and the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary fascist Russia—accounted for (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

As part of this article, it is important to recognize that the absence of Russia in global debates of coloniality is reinforced by the othering of Russia itself. The history of the Soviet “Union” and its self-positioning as an antithesis to the West and its subsequent othering during the Cold War made the Soviet Union—and the Russian Federation as its successor—into one of the West’s ultimate Others. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) describes how construction of the other, in his case the Orient vis-à-vis the Occident, is accomplished through oversimplification and binary thinking. The complexities and nuances of the Orient are unnecessary as long as its differences and shortcomings against the Occident are easily displayed. The Western newfound fascination and repel of Russian imperialism is partly based on the fact that Russia is attacking its own former colonial periphery, the one that lies in between Western Europe and Russia, challenging the myopic view of the Soviet Union as a homogeneous Other and causing the international community to recognize the complexity of geopolitical relations in the post-Soviet region and the colonial heritage that haunts them (see Bunde, 2022; Pomerantsev, 2022).

After the fall of the Tsarist empire, the Soviet “Union” positioned itself as an anti-capitalist state that prioritized communities, even if they were “included” through force (Morrison, 2016) and by forced unveiling of Muslim women and burning of mosques (Northrop, 2004). Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva (2021) argue that these Soviet efforts were successful in obscuring the colonial nature of the regime through an imperial discourse, framing Soviet colonialism as a “gift of modernity,” particularly when it came to Central Asia. Language was a powerful tool wielded by the Soviet Union to assert proclamations of “friendship” over colonization and extraction and “to persuade the colonized people that they were liberated, while in fact they were recolonised” (Tlostanova in Luciani & Luntumbue, 2021, p. 275; Tlostanova, 2018).

Russia’s “postcolonial” identity has been “critically” studied from an imperial position, perceiving it as a subaltern empire and thus indirectly justifying what happens in Russia and with Russia (Morozov, 2015). It has also been studied from a colonized position, conceptualizing Russia as a “Janus-faced” empire with two faces looking both to the West and to the East (Tlostanova, 2003). Russia’s colonization of the region is not overseas colonization, as with other empires, but “it is very similar in its basic dehumanizing forms” (Tlostanova in Luciani & Luntumbue, 2021, p. 273). As such, it is “an empire with an inferiority complex in the presence of the West,” an empire which “desperately wants to be in the first league but never succeeds”—and which therefore “acts in the most cruel and savage colonialist ways” in its own colonies (Tlostanova, 2021; as cited in Luciani & Luntumbue, 2021, p. 279). Unlike other empires, the Russian empire retained most of its territory and is holding together, “masquerading as a nation-state” (Saveliev, 2021, p. 140).

The systematic oppression of Indigenous and ethnically/racially minoritized populations has most recently been manifested through the disproportionate recruitment of these population groups into the Russian military to fight in the invasion of Ukraine. The recruits include not only Indigenous and fellow minoritized populations, such as Central Asian labour migrants, Siberian Asian residents and communities of the Caucasus region on the territory of the Russian “Federation”; they also include Ukrainians and Indigenous populations in occupied Ukraine, such as Crimean Tatars (Kavkaz.Realii, 2022; Kurbangaleyeva, 2022; Latypova, 2022; Mediazone, 2022; Vyushkova & Sherkhonov, 2023). These recruitment practices have furthered concerns of genocide in Ukraine and additional ethnic cleansing within Russia.

While some of the members of Indigenous and ethnically minoritized populations have been drafted coercively, others have been joining the military owing to their impoverished socio-economic conditions in Russia. In particular, their position within a racially oppressive white supremacist Russian society and given promises of remuneration and provision of a legal citizenship status (Latypova, 2022; Putz, 2022; Wood & Khashimov, 2022). The financial and legal incentives have disproportionately targeted the structurally vulnerable and often young and inexperienced members of large labour migrant communities, whose livelihood in Russia has further been impacted by the unstable economic situation in Central Asia, aggravated by sanctions against Russia (Kurbangaleyeva, 2022; Wood & Khashimov, 2022).

The disproportionate recruitment of members of minoritized communities from Central Asia as well as the normalization of their subjugated status has a long history. Shin (2015) reports that the USSR specifically produced military propaganda targeting non-Slavic populations to recruit them into the Red Army. Soviet authorities have also utilized Central Asian soldiers in the military operations in Afghanistan, in the hope for favorable results for Soviet imperialism; yet, Central Asian Soviet soldiers ended up fraternizing with Afghan troops (Wimbush & Alexiev, 1981). In light of this, it is becoming clear that Russia’s regime is currently building upon decades of military exploitation of Central Asian and fellow non-Slavic and Indigenous communities. In this biopolitics that weaponizes negatively racialized bodies in military conquests, the regime is relying on a well-established power dynamic involved in colonial social structures dominated by ethnic Russians, through the surveillance, racial profiling and policing to control racially othered and oppressed bodies within its borders (Kurbangaleyeva, 2022; Kuznetsova & Round, 2019; Light, 2010; Vyushkova & Sherkhonov, 2023).

Yet, the struggles, voices, perspectives and resistance of these population groups and communities have long been disregarded by academics and journalists. Kassymbekova (2023a) has explored how Western academics have

ignored Russian imperialism. In her perspective, one of the reasons Soviet coloniality was disregarded is because knowledge about the Soviet Union in the West was Russo-centric, and Western academics knew little about non-Russian people within the “Union.” Further, Kassymbekova argues that:

The Soviet Union also became a space of projections for those who looked for ways to criticise capitalism and Western imperialism. Those who blamed capitalism for oppression believed that eliminating capitalism would end all forms of oppression. For them, the Soviet Union was an internationalist project that brought equality and freedom to formerly subjugated peoples. (Kassymbekova, 2023a)

She elaborates that “[v]iolence against various nations and ethnic groups was either ignored or treated as a necessary evil of the transition to communism” (2023a). In Kassymbekova’s view, given that Western research focused on Russian metropolises Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, Western scholars did not understand the liberation struggles and resistance of colonized states, and this problem continues to this day.

### **The replication of epistemic injustice and imperialism in feminist debates**

Concerningly, similar power dynamics and tropes can be traced through feminist debates, from Western feminist IR to much of global South feminist scholarship, which have positioned themselves as fields critical of sexist oppression. In this section, we demonstrate that albeit feminist IR is more critical than conventional IR, Western and global South feminist debates on Ukraine have often displayed similar patterns of epistemic marginalization, power hierarchies and colonial projections as manifested in mainstream IR.

### ***The Western-dominated genealogy of feminist IR***

Some of the gaps and inequalities replicated in feminist IR can be better understood through the contextualization of the broader conditions of the discipline, i.e., that the field of feminist IR has originated and evolved, similarly as mainstream IR, as a domain of geopolitically privileged academics situated in the global North. Western feminists have made notable and impactful interventions in IR by bringing attention to the gendered and racialized systems that underpin war, conflict, peace and security, while centering perspectives, agencies and everyday experiences of women and marginalized voices (e.g., Cohn, 2013; Gentry et al., 2019; Väyrynen et al., 2021). Feminist IR work has engaged in sustained critique of militarism and militarization (e.g., Cohn, 2013), but has also pragmatically recognized the potential of militaries to provide security, arguing that in situations of such dire insecurity that local men and women actively ask for and

support an international military presence, they deserve our attention and critical encouragement (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018).

In their more recent reflexive knowledge-building efforts to produce more emancipatory and decolonized research, Western/global North feminists have placed particular emphasis on the inclusion of global South. Yet, in the dominant geographical and epistemic boundaries of the post-Cold War world, the CEE is neither part of the global North nor of the global South, but located somewhere “in-between” (Blagojević, 2004). In this sense, the West-centric feminist knowledge production has transmuted the positionality of Europe’s East from the Second World to the second Other of Europe (Kulawik, 2020). Such epistemic divide is apparent also in Feminist IR research, which has remained strikingly uninformed by CEE knowledge production (Bluhm et al., 2021; Krulišová & O’Sullivan, 2022; Kulawik & Kravchenko, 2020; O’Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023).

The Western-centric character of feminist IR has manifested itself in the responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the first month of the full-scale invasion, Western feminist debates on Ukraine were almost absent. Discussion started emerging slowly when it became clear that dominant international war narratives were gender-oblivious. Within the new, highly gendered security situation raised by a war of aggression, international actors have delegated feminist perspectives on/from Ukraine to the margins, including by silencing feminist foreign policies (FFP) and the otherwise widely embraced Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (O’Sullivan, 2022). The failure of the Western-centric WPS agenda to respond to Ukraine has revealed the long epistemic erasure of CEE, the unfeminist and epistemically imperialist practice of Westsplaining and speaking over Ukrainian and CEE feminist experts and thus an urgent need for a new post-Western WPS trajectory (O’Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023).

Among the first to respond to what was perceived as a masculinized militarization were Western-based international feminist networks calling for de-escalation and an immediate ceasefire (GNWP, 2022; WILPF, 2022). As we further show, this approach, based on geopolitically privileged pacifism of Western and global South feminists whose lives are not affected by Russian imperial violence, has preoccupied IR debates and has come into direct collision with Ukrainian feminists’ demands to the West for arming Ukraine (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Tsymbalyuk & Zamuruieva, 2022).

As the humanitarian crisis and the gendered effects of the Russian military aggression continued escalating, first feminist responses started appearing in Western media, including by diaspora feminists from former Yugoslavia (Hojić & Restrepo Sanín, 2022; Moros, 2022; Davies & True, 2022; Wibben, 2022). However, many Western feminists have perpetuated the same epistemic imperialism dominating mainstream IR debates, furthering the marginalization of Ukraine and fellow (post)occupied societies,

communities and regions. In particular, they have often responded to the war of aggression and militarism without knowing, regarding and respecting the local contexts, specific histories, voices and agencies of those directly affected by the Russian invasion (as can be seen in *Feminist Resistance against War*, 2022; WILPF Canada, 2022; see also the critiques by Hendl, 2022; and Shymanchuk, 2023). Excluding local and direct feminist CEE knowledge has resulted in superficial accounts with feminist authors reproducing practices of institutions and malestream IR they seek to criticize (see O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023).

Symptomatically, leading Western IR feminists have often used vague language, such as the “Ukraine crisis,” “Ukraine war,” “Russian intervention in Ukraine” (see O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023). This terminology not only downplays the unlawful act of invasion and fails to attribute responsibility to Russia as the violent and imperial aggressor, but also conceals the very power dynamic of colonialism at the core of the violence, which many Western and global South feminists have come short of accounting for in Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Tsybalyuk & Zamuruieva, 2022).

### ***Whose feminism? The gap between disembodied theory and lived reality***

Similar to mainstream IR, many Western and global South feminists have trivialized Russia's imperialism. This trivializing is most explicit in the minimizing of Russia's responsibility for a military invasion of a sovereign neighboring society and misleading attributions of responsibility to NATO. Such feminist debates involve common narratives of “NATO expansionism,” “NATO revival,” “US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine” or the evoking of Russia's security anxieties as if they were an excuse for perpetrating violence (see Acheson, 2022; Mogaveni & Nagarajan, 2022; Salvage Editorial Collective, 2022; and the critiques of such discourse by Dutchak, 2022; Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022). Yet, as sociologist Oksana Dutchak (2022) has explained from her lived experience, “when the bombs start falling from the sky—only Russia can be blamed for bombing.” In a later contribution, Dutchak added that any critiques against NATO and similar blocs also need to take into account the interests of small states, for whom defensive alliances are existentially critical as they are the major mode of protection against imperialist invasions and wars of aggression (Dutchak, 2022; as cited in Gheorghiev, 2022, p. 180).

The stark contrast between Ukrainian embodied material realities and foreign theories was made particularly visible in the *Feminist Resistance against War* (2022) manifesto, written in early 2022 and signed by many Western and global South feminists. In the manifesto, feminists proclaim:

We reject the positions issued in recent days that deepen the warmongering spiral. We reject the decisions that involve adding more weapons to the conflict and increasing war budgets. We reject security narratives that reinforce authoritarian logic and militarization. Not in our name. (Feminist Resistance against War, 2022)

The authors who attribute co-responsibility for the “situation” to NATO then proclaim: “we are with the people of Ukraine who want to restore peace in their lives and demand a ceasefire.” (Feminist Resistance against War, 2022, n.p.). Yet, it is not at all clear which Ukrainian voices the manifesto is grounded upon.

The collective “we” of the manifesto has raised specific critique for who has dared to assume authority and pose demands in the midst of the Ukrainian existential struggle and what kind of power dynamic has been evoked through this (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Zlobina, 2022). In particular, the manifesto has been called out for committing silencing by exclusion, given that Ukrainian feminists are entirely absent among the signatories and, as philosopher Tamara Zlobina (2022) has clarified, were not even approached for consultation in the drafting of the “feminist” manifesto. This raises concerns about the abuse of power through the exclusion and speaking over Ukrainian feminists whose lives are at stake and the appropriation and instrumentalization of the Ukrainian liberation struggle.

In return, Ukrainian and fellow CEE feminists have critiqued the Feminist Resistance against War manifesto (and several other foreign feminist “anti-war” manifestos that have since emerged) for dismissing and erasing their voices. Indeed, foreign feminists behind anti-war manifestos have asserted demands that are in stark opposition to what Ukrainian feminists have repeatedly articulated and requested (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Tsymbalyuk & Zamuruieva, 2022; Zlobina, 2022). Failing to use their privilege of not living under a Russian invasion in ways that would support the self-defense of those endangered by such military violence, Western and global South feminists have employed experientially and epistemically uninformed and disembodied pacifist scenarios.

Feminist scholar Tamara Martsenyuk (2022) explored this dynamic in a way that suggests that pacifism is a rather fortunate position, which is very easy to uphold under peaceful conditions: “When you are under bombardment and Russian soldiers want to destroy your country, you cannot be pacifist.” Similarly, feminist and peacebuilding scholar and activist Oksana Potapova (2023) wrote a poem to Western pacifist feminists, dissenting that her theory has become “Waking up every day and checking if Kyiv was bombed...” In light of this, feminist manifestos, which do not account for Russian imperialism as the ongoing threat to Ukrainian lives and deny them the right to resistance are not only textbook examples of arm-chair theory out of touch with reality but also effectively endanger the

survival and wellbeing of those whose lives are at stake (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022). Given the historical and material circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that CEE debates on “militarism” differ greatly from those in the Western countries, which have perpetrated, rather than having been subjected to imperialism and colonialism (Hendl, 2022). It is telling that the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which still has the dismantling of NATO among its objectives, is not at all present in those NATO member states that have been subject to imperial invasion by Russia.

### ***The oppressive pacifism that can be deadly***

In disregarding the material reality of Ukrainians and their demands under a Russian military invasion and projecting their own conceptual frameworks and agendas into debates on Ukraine as if they knew better than Ukrainian women, Western and global South feminists have perpetuated grave epistemic injustice and imperialism (Hendl, 2022). In asking for “peace” instead of decolonial justice, foreign feminists have not only failed to grasp the very colonial nature of Russian aggression against Ukraine, but contributed to the normalization and enabling of colonial conquest, all the while speaking over feminists with relevant inter-generational and lived experiences as well as direct context-specific expertise (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Sonevytsky, 2022; Tsymbalyuk & Zamuruieva, 2022). In doing so, these feminists and their accounts not only failed to stand with the oppressed but reinforced the (epistemic) oppression of a population victimized by gendered and colonial violence (Hendl, 2022; Tsymbalyuk & Zamuruieva, 2022; Zlobina, 2022). As Anna Dovgopol (2022) had to clarify, “there is absolutely no way to stop Russia except the weapons ... I’m sorry to disappoint Western feminists.”

Furthermore, by replicating Western- and Russo-centric discourses on NATO, which are selectively critical of Western imperialism while reinforcing the myth of Russia’s imperial innocence and evoking the discourse of “both-sideism” by demanding mutual de-escalation, these feminists have shifted the responsibility away from the aggressor and came short of attributing accountability for patriarchal imperial violence to the serial perpetrator. There have been a few instances of feminist accounts significantly more sensitive toward local context, coming mostly from scholars who have specialized or lived closer to the region or have war experience (Mathers, 2020, 2023a, 2023b; Moros, 2022; Wibben, 2022; Williams & True, 2022). These debates have critiqued relying “on a brutal idea of “peace”” (Kirby, as cited in Broussy, 2023) and emphasized distant feminists’ need for respecting occupied women’s agency and resistance as well as the necessity to listen to local voices and the plurality of demands that war places on those fighting for survival.

Much of pacifist debates have been troubling in that they have disregarded the intentionality of Russian imperialism and its gendered impact on Ukrainian women and fellow people oppressed on gender grounds, and erased the active role of women<sup>4</sup> in the liberation movement and defense forces (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Zabuzhko, 2022b). Even before the full-scale invasion in 2022, women constituted almost 22% of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and over 12% of its military personnel, including snipers, tankers, drone operators, artillery women, company commanders and platoon members; women also constitute 8%–25% of the National Guard of Ukraine, the National Police, the State Emergency Service of Ukraine and various Territorial Defense units, all part of Ukrainian defense (Levkova, 2022). Women's participation in the armed forces builds on a long history dating back to World War I, has played a vital role since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and constitutes a prominent force in women's agency and resistance since the full-out invasion of 2022 (Koh, 2022; Martsenyuk & Grytsenko, 2017; Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023).

In this regard, Zlobina (2022) observes that Western and global South feminists employ a remarkably gender-essentialist outlook, constructing war-affected women as peaceful motherly caretakers and erasing their partaking in wars of liberation. This erasure is especially unsettling in the wake of sexualized and genocidal violence committed by Russian and allied troops (Finkel, 2022; Havryshko, 2022, 2023; Hendl, 2022; UN OHCHR, 2022). It is symptomatic of a broader lack of knowledge of women's resistance against the ongoing legacy of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by the Russian army in Crimea and Donbas (OHCHR, 2017) and the history of sexualized violence perpetrated by USSR armies in countries they have occupied and colonized (Havryshko, 2022, 2023; Hendl, 2022). The lack of accounting for such violence amidst a war of aggression calls into question the intersectionality, if not the very feminist character, of the debates that commit such shortcomings (Hendl, 2022; O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023; Zlobina, 2022).

In light of this, it is becoming clear that oppressively pacifist feminist debates have perpetuated harm under the veneer of transnational feminist solidarity. It is difficult to grasp the full consequences of epistemically unjust and oppressive pacifism, channelled toward situationally vulnerable populations under a military invasion. Yet, the severity of such impact can perhaps be imagined, given that Ukrainian mediators and facilitators have made an inside and bottom-up appeal to international actors, emphasizing that pressure toward dialogue addressed to Ukrainians who are in an asymmetrical war of aggression, can be perceived as a form of psychological violence (Kyselova, 2022). In their appeal to feminists, asking them to use their privilege to lobby their governments to provide Ukraine with weapons necessary for self-defense, Tsymbalyuk and Zamuruieva (2022) explained

that under a war of aggression, pacifism kills. In this regard, we find it particularly disheartening that amidst a military invasion, involving sexualized violence, mass killings and fighting for survival, Ukrainian feminists also had to exert energy and labor to defend themselves against international feminist communities, their misconceptions and lack of solidarity and support toward their liberation struggle against gendered imperial oppression.

### **Toward decolonizing IR: Can the speaking of the (post)occupied finally be heard?**

Following on from our discussion, it is becoming rather obvious that although the Western-centric IR discipline has failed in its approach to Russia, it continues to perpetuate the same epistemic imperialism that has proven wrong and harmful. Major changes are urgently warranted in knowledge production on Ukraine and all fellow societies and Indigenous nations affected by Russian colonial and imperial violence. The current epistemic gaps and the structural inequalities that have produced them are no longer viable and have never been justifiable to begin with. The silencing and disregard of Ukrainian voices, which we observe in mainstream IR and, sadly, also in feminist debates and the voices from the global South, is a concerning manifestation of coloniality of knowledge production, whereby knowledge on Ukraine is being produced through Western- and Russo-centric frameworks. In such a power dynamic, Ukraine/Ukrainian experts are commonly excluded, disregarded and silenced or denigrated to the role of emotional non-experts.

We notice that Ukrainian voices are often missing in debates and, when included, they are usually cast in the roles of tearful witnesses rather than subjects with agency and experts in their own history, whose various lived experiences in dealing with Russia had equipped them—and fellow colleagues from (post)occupied societies, we might add—with a detector to see Russia's acts for what they are (Brik, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022; Sonevytsky, 2022; Tlostanova, 2003, 2010, 2021). Yet, when positioned as mere eye-witnesses, Ukrainian experts are inevitably treated as a biased party to the conflict, and so their data, ideas and narratives are readily dismissed and disregarded. Darya Tsymbalyuk articulates this dynamic of erasure:

As I have been interviewed, mentioned, or invited for events, my identity as a researcher of war and displacement has often been erased. With the escalation, in the eyes of others I often become the “local” voice, an activist whose parents are on the ground, a girl from Ukraine who can speak for all Ukrainians of course. Even the university that issued me my PhD just four months ago suddenly forgot that I am a doctor. (Tsymbalyuk, 2022a)

Similarly, one of the co-authors of this article has been routinely presented as “Ms. XX, Ukrainian political scientist” (with emphasis on “Ukrainian,” not “political scientist”) and is consistently asked as the first—and last—question how her family in Ukraine is coping. Such absence of Ukrainian expertise in debates on Ukraine means that there is a striking lack of knowledge of local context and relevant issues, which points to an underlying wilful ignorance and epistemic distrust by many Western scholars and institutions (Khromeychuk, 2022b; Sonevytsky, 2022). In response, the Kyiv School of Economics made an appeal to Western academia to avoid “Russplaning” and “Westspaining,” making practical suggestions on how to respect Ukrainian agency and intellectual sovereignty (KSE, 2022).

### ***“Nothing about us without us”***

The recognition that nothing about Ukraine shall be done without Ukrainians should be the bare minimum and norm, as Ukrainians are the most qualified experts on their own country; “Ukraine Peace Appeal” initiated by the Ukrainian Community of Mediators and Dialogue Facilitators and the Ukrainian Feminist Network for Freedom and Democracy and supported by Ukrainian civil society reasserts this point (2023). However, this threshold is still insufficient to address the full scale of the problem. There is considerable evidence showing that, when in fact invited and treated as experts, Ukrainian scholars are often confined to narrow areas of expertise about the specific domestic context, and so are not considered legitimate contributors to the broader debates on international relations, security or international politics.

We observe that this treatment fits the broader dynamic of marginalization of expertise from so-called “post-Soviet” countries, symptomatic of what Madina Tlostanova called the failure to treat the “post-Soviet” as a rational subject. This dynamic has reinforced colonial hierarchies and power dynamics, in which Ukrainians and fellow societies in Russia’s “sphere of influence” have been treated as peripheral and as objects rather than subjects in debates on their own existential concerns. As we have shown through our discussion, the epistemic marginalization has often meant that the concerns of Ukrainian sovereignty and existence are not centered or even present, as illustrated in the continuing calls for Ukrainians to engage in negotiations with an Empire which is perpetrating a military invasion and genocide against them.

These calls and pressure to surrender to a colonial oppressor designate Ukrainians to the peripheralized “buffer zone” that Ukraine has been imagined as by so many Western scholars. In this buffer periphery, Ukrainians should be presumably grateful when they are noticed and given bread crumbs. The Western surprise at the active resistance taken up among lay

and academic Ukrainians against Russian colonialism and Western “Orientalism”—and the dismay that Ukrainians insist on speaking from their actually epistemically privileged standpoints—is telling (Khromeychuk, 2023). The inter-imperial power dynamic involved in the silencing of Ukrainians and the simultaneous appeasement of imperial Russia only further reveals starkly unequal power relations. Concerningly and semi-paradoxically, global South perspectives minimize the ongoing legacy of Russian imperialism and colonialism and thus contribute to this colonial power matrix. The fact that similar patterns can be traced in feminist IR then shows the striking inconsistencies in theories related to justice and their application in foreign contexts.

### ***The de-imperialization of knowledge and material transformations***

In this regard, it is becoming apparent that efforts at the decolonizing of scholarly knowledge production need to enter yet another dimension and critically assess and address the treatment of a whole region that has so far been mostly neither seen, nor understood as a domain affected by colonialism and inter-imperiality. Khromeychuk (2022a) has argued that what is warranted is “a permanent alteration – de-colonization, de-imperialization – of our knowledge” (n.p.) And many scholars have argued that this requires, first and foremost, to stop erasing Europe’s East as a site of knowledge production (Blagojević, 2004; Hendl, 2022; Kulawik, 2020; Mälksoo, 2021; Sonevytsky, 2022).

Such decolonial shift shall also be integrated with the reassessment of knowledge production on diverse parts of Asia. Similar to CEE, fellow regions impacted by Soviet and Russian imperialism, such as Central Asia, have also been constructed by Western scholars in a limbo of post-Sovietness, while being unrecognized by the global South and feminist movements and literature (Tlostanova, 2010, 2015; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2012). The socio-historical experiences of Central Asian societies have been detrimentally impacted by Russian colonialism, permeated by racial and Islamophobic power dynamics. The “Otherness” of Central Asian identity from the epistemological norms of whiteness and Christianity continues to legitimize the Soviet colonial era and the state of coloniality in which the region exists today (Aripova, 2022; Kandiyoti, 2008). Contrasting CEE to Asian experiences would help to acknowledge the levels of Russian imperialism and note the existing power hierarchies between CEE and Central Asia that are still perpetuated today, including by members of CEE communities themselves.<sup>5</sup> Their identity and unique positionality had to be reinforced by Central Asian feminists and scholars who are slowly carving out their epistemic space within the field of subaltern studies (Kudaibergenova, 2019). Compared with CEE, post-Soviet Asian regions remain in a more obscured

position due to the perceived whiteness of the post-Soviet identity and the erasure of Central and North Asian agencies against the geopolitical domination of Russia and China.

Non-native scholars who are writing on societies that have been affected by Russian imperialism need to ask themselves what ways of relating they practice toward these societies, their scholars and knowledges: do their ways of relating replicate any power hierarchies, inequalities and stereotypical forms of re-presentation? How does these scholars' work interact with native knowledges and what can be said about these interactions if examined through the lens of power? More specifically, whose voices, agency, standpoints, theories and conceptual frameworks are centered in this research? Does the work contribute to the minimizing and normalizing of imperialism and inter-imperiality? Does the work of these scholars, and the broader academic structures they uphold, maintain and reinforce coloniality of knowledge production about the societies and regions? And if yes, what are these scholars doing about it? Finally, would it be more ethical and responsible to exercise silence or refusal (see Burlyuk & Musliu, 2023)?

The shifts that are warranted will require structural transformations in whole disciplines: not only major changes in the university curriculum are needed but also the critical interrogation and decolonization of whole fields and study programs. Some efforts to this end are emerging slowly; for example, the special issue on the future of Russian Studies in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, guest edited by Tomila Lankina (2023), which argues for “a successful response to exogenous shock through creative destruction” (p. 7). However, more—and more radical—efforts are needed for a new way of looking at CEE and Asia: one that will center local experts and their scholarship and will account for the imperial nature of the Russian Federation as a colonial project, i.e., a conglomerate of settler states with a long legacy of imperial violence (Kassymbekova, 2017, 2023a, 2023b; Kassymbekova & Chokobaeva, 2021; Sakha Pacifist Association, 2022; Tlostanova, 2003, 2010, 2012, 2021).

### ***To a better understanding of Russia through the employment of (post)occupied expertise***

As Andrii Portnov (2022) has argued, if we want to have a better understanding of Russia, we need more Ukrainian studies. In other words: to better understand Russia, its ongoing historical legacy needs to be studied and investigated from the perspectives of scholars from societies and Indigenous nations who have been occupied and colonized by it. The recognition and exploration of the Russian Federation as a colonial project and an empire shall prompt an in-depth reflection and critical assessment of Russia's long imperial history as well as the coloniality of knowledge production about it, including the power dynamic and structures of Westspaining and

inter-imperiality. In other words, the West and particularly Western Europe also need to be studied, investigated and interrogated from the peripheralized East. Such inquiry is crucial for the interrogation of West-Eurocentrism and the European East–West power relations, especially their role in the marginalization of Ukraine and fellow Russia-colonized and occupied societies and their framing through a Russia-centric lens, including in Western scholarship. This scholarship has not only perpetuated the Wests-plaining of non-Western contexts, but also extractivist, exploitative, instrumentalizing, epistemically imperialist and condescending forms of research that have silenced qualified experts from Europe’s East and Asia and contributed to their marginalization.

The extractivist practices of Western academic profiteering from wars have a long “tradition.” The treatment of military invasions and genocides as an academic opportunity in Europe’s East have previously been interrogated by scholars and thinkers from post-war contexts of South-East Europe, such as the Balkans, who have expressed particular solidarity with Ukraine. In her essay “They Descend Upon Us,” Selma Asotić, a writer and feminist theorist, critically reflected on Western academics’ “tourism” to former Yugoslavia and spoke of a “Nick from Connecticut” as a metaphor for the collective dispassionate and disengaged, racializing and condescending Western researcher:

Nick from Connecticut is here to inspect. A peace studies graduate, whenever there’s war Nick from Connecticut is deployed to spread common sense, ask the right questions – why, instead of why not. The more we war the more we need Nick from Connecticut, a few more genocides and he’ll join the tenure track. (2022; as cited in Musliu, 2022, n.p.)

Aida Hozić, a feminist IR scholar, has appealed:

To my academic and critical IR friends, please: 1) do not use Ukraine to score points 2) do not reproduce hierarchies of wars and victimhood 3) if you have never experienced war, do not talk about it as a game 4) build life-lines, be considerate of those who are losing them. (Hozić, 2022, n.p.)

Similarly, Maria Mälksoo, a scholar of Critical Security Studies from Estonia, has observed:

As any war, Ukraine’s struggle against Russia’s aggression also reminds us that war is not an abstract board game – as it has, alas, traditionally been conceived as through much of the classical IR theorizing. (...) The least the onlookers can do is to learn to empathize better with the perspective of the murdered, and not of the murderers – politically, analytically and disciplinarily. (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 11)

This will require to interrogate and outgrow the idea of Russian victimhood, treasured by imperial Russians and uncritically replicated by many Western scholars (Kassymbekova, 2023a). Furthermore, it will also require some former empires, such as Germany, to overcome the tendency to construct

tales of the Russian society as a largely unknowing innocent population manipulated by a “crazy” leader. One of the authors is currently based in German academia and observed a disturbing number of German professors making proclamations of this kind at local conferences related to Ukraine. While the replication of the myth of Russian imperial innocence in Germany might be a symptom of German struggles with the history and societal responsibility for German Nazism (Kassymbekova, 2023a, 2023b; Lenz, 2023), such tropes are dangerous as they contribute to the minimization of Russian fascism and its genocidal violence, and the concealing of the wide support and responsibility for the military invasion of Ukraine amid the Russian population (see Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022).

In light of this, major changes are warranted, especially with regard to how academia and its encounters with Europe’s East and large parts of Asia ought to move toward decoloniality. Building on the arguments of Indigenous scholars from North America, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012), who have emphasized that decolonization is not a metaphor but a process that requires material and structural changes, we recognize that major systematic changes and transformations are warranted to eliminate the deeply entrenched inequalities and coloniality within academia, that has marginalized and erased East-European and “post-Soviet” scholarship from the “canon” and treated their bearers as not-rational and “biased” unreliable subjects (Hendl, 2022; Kassymbekova, 2022; Stavrevska et al., 2023; Tlostanova, 2010, 2012, 2021). Reparative change will require shifts in power, institutional structures and funding across academic institutions, departments and funding schemes, as well as a revision of “that which we know” about Ukraine, Europe’s East, Asia and Russia through critical, decolonial perspectives.

Importantly, research and permanent positions will need to be created in Slavic and European Studies and related disciplines for scholars from Ukraine and fellow societies and Indigenous nations occupied and colonized by the Russian Federation. This will urgently require a substantial and dedicated investment into Ukrainian expertise. As to our knowledge, there are currently few to none full time positions in Ukrainian studies across the academy in Western Europe and North America and most positions in East European studies are held by Western or Russian scholars.<sup>6</sup> This disparity not only shapes and limits the angles applied, questions asked, concerns expressed and issues prioritized or even seen, but also maintains a power asymmetry through the interpreting of Europe’s East by relying on socio-historically imperial Western and Russian standpoints.

### ***The employment conditions of Ukrainian scholars***

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the current employment situation does not provide the conditions for adequate support of Ukrainian scholarship, as

particularly Ukrainian scholars at risk need to serially apply for short-term fellowships to stay in academia, while being affected by the Russian invasion, forced migration and heightened economic instability and precarity. Ukrainian scholars outside of Ukraine need to have access to more stable employment, while further distant-fellowship schemes supporting Ukrainian scholars in Ukraine are warranted to support local expertise. The epistemic shift in Slavic and East European Studies will also require Russian and Western scholars to stop dominating the debates and engage in a critical and decolonial transformation of these disciplines, including their own role and research conducted within them. Moreover, Ukrainian scholars are currently being killed by Russian shelling and while defending their society on the frontlines. In this context, the least Russian and Western scholars can do is take a step back and create space for Ukrainian voices amid and after genocide. In debates on Russian imperialism, the scholarship and perspectives of experts from Ukraine and fellow societies directly affected by Russia's imperial oppression and violence ought to be centered, built on, valued and adequately funded for a lasting future.

The shift in power within academic structures and knowledge production as well as in the value attributed to thus far peripheralized knowledges, scholars and their academic labor is crucial for the fostering of more just and anti-oppressive academic institutions and debates. It is also a matter of safety, survival and wellbeing. As Khromeychuk emphasized: "Knowledge is not only about power; it is also a matter of security ... If Ukraine does not exist on mental maps, its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk" (2022a, n.p.). And this risk extends far beyond Ukraine. The addressing and mitigating of persistent gaps, inequalities and debts within knowledge production are thus fundamental for the survival and thriving of a large part of the world that has so far been largely neglected in debates on epistemic and material reparations. The centering of embodied knowledge held by those directly affected by imperial violence (Tsybalyuk, 2022b) is paramount to anti-coloniality, and in particular, a genuine commitment to the prevention of further imperial violence so that "never again" will become more than a performative proclamation.

## Conclusion

We have attempted to explore the complex and concerning legacy of IR and the persistent structural inequalities that have dominated the discipline and shaped its outputs on Europe's East and Central Asia. We have argued that both dominant and feminist IR is Western-dominated and shaped by a dynamic of inter-imperiality, which leads to the theorizing of Ukraine and fellow societies that have been occupied by Russia through Western-centric standpoints and in relation to Russia. This approach epistemically

marginalizes embodied and direct knowledges of Russian imperialism and the agency of affected societies, and as such, fails to understand the subject and carries low predictive value. Moreover, such epistemically imperialist scholarship is troubling as it shifts responsibility from Russia as the serial perpetrator of imperial war crimes and genocides. We contend that much of global South scholarship also contributes to the offsetting of Russian responsibility through a predominant focus on Western imperialism and lack of engagement with the knowledges of societies directly affected by the legacy of Russian colonial violence. All together, these imbalances and distortions in scholarship have severe implications as they contribute to a climate in which the expertise of societies endangered by centuries of Russian aggression continues to be devalued while Russian violence is downplayed and enabled.

The path toward effective change thus requires significant epistemic and material changes. We have argued that a decolonial shift in knowledge production is warranted, which will centre embodied and direct knowledges of Russian imperialism and colonialism, held by affected societies and their diasporas. Yet, these changes not only require significant shifts in power but also material transformation in academic institutions and departments. As we have argued, the only way to a better understanding of Russia leads through the valuing of expertise of scholars from Ukraine as well as (post)-occupied Europe's East, the Baltics and Central Asia. This then requires creating space for their expertise and their employment within academic fields and departments. But more than anything, it will require a major change in attitude. Through our time in academia, all of us authors have faced marginalizing and Western chauvinism and prejudice directed at who we are, where we come from, the topics we work on and the frameworks and sources we build on. During the work on this article, an excellent MA student of one of us reported that a few dozen PhD applications of hers to universities across the UK and USA with a project on Ukraine had been rejected and that she had been kindly advised to "add Russia or at least one of the Baltic states to the mix" to make her research fundable. And yet, this under-represented and silenced expertise is necessary in order to increase the nearly flat learning curve within scholarly and public debates, in particular because the lives and safety of many societies are at stake.

## Notes

1. In our discussion we build on the notion of agency as "the ability to make meaning and act in ways one cares about in the world," as conceptualised by philosopher Serene Khader (2019).
2. In the context of debates on imperialism and genocidal violence that have affected Ukraine, it should be remembered that Nazi Germany attempted to

swallow Ukraine and utilize it for Germany's "Lebensraum" through territorial imperial expansion, extraction of agriculture and resources and a genocide of the Ukrainian population, of which several millions were killed by Nazis (Beyrau & Keck-Szajbel, 2012; Lower, 2005; Plokhly, 2015).

3. The authors have elaborated this argument in public talks over 2022–2023 and developed it in a book format in Popova and Shevel (2023).
4. The manifesto (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022) uses "women\*" to acknowledge that gender oppression affects populations beyond cisgender women, such as LGBTIQ+ people.
5. Debates on the racialization and discrimination against Central Asians have intensified since the full scale invasion of Ukraine, which has raised questions over how welcomed people from Central Asia would be in Europe should their countries be re-occupied by Russia (Arystanbek, 2023). The severe limits of solidarity with racialized and predominantly Muslim populations harmed by Russian imperialism have already been shown in the hostility towards Syrians and need to be more systematically critically interrogated.
6. In summer 2023, the University of Manchester appointed Olga Onuch as "Professor in Comparative and Ukrainian Politics," making her the first-ever holder of a Full Professorship in Ukrainian Politics in the English-speaking world and making the University of Manchester the first English language university to host such a Professorship (from <https://olgaonuch.com/>).

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