

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN BELARUS AND UKRAINE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61095/815-0047-2024-2-5-17>

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This issue is based on the presentations and discussions at the international conference *Decolonization of Education and Research in Belarus and Ukraine: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Tasks* that took place in September 2023 in Vilnius. It was co-organized by three academic institutions: European Humanities University (Vilnius), Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv), and Charles University (Prague)¹. The event was remarkable for its wide geographical scope, bringing together scholars from Belarus, Germany, Lithuania, Canada, Poland, the USA, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. Moreover, the majority

1 Find detailed reports and reflections on the conference here (Korablyova 2023; Latysh 2023).



of participants were of Belarusian and Ukrainian origin. This fact highlights the uniqueness of the conference: it emerged not out of “pure theoretical curiosity”; but, first of all, out of personal engagement, of being morally and existentially implicated by the catastrophe of war, which encourages and obliges us to theorize from the situation in which we find ourselves today.

The full-scale war launched by Russia against Ukraine in 2022 and supported by the Lukashenka regime has arguably buried forever and consigned to the archives the well-known myth of “Slavic brotherhood” as well as the used-to-be-consensual notion of “the post-Soviet region”. Claiming to be a universal signifier for the countries that were formerly parts of the USSR, this term continued to insidiously keep them in the shadow of the Soviet empire. It has been acting “insidiously” because, as it later became clear, the popular prefix “post-” did not actually mean that the empire expired in 1991. For most of the former socialist republics, Russia’s claim to political dominance and control over the region meant rather a reformatting of the imperial project.

Belarus and Ukraine stood out in the post-Soviet geopolitical context, as for these countries, Russia’s neo-imperial (“integration”) ambitions were packaged in the ideological discourses of “triunity,” “brotherhood,” “common heroic past,” and the like. These discourses and corresponding historical narratives had numerous adherents in all the three countries, especially among the older generation. Russia’s political and cultural dominance in the region for several decades relied on the inertia of the Soviet cultural identity, shaped within the imperial dichotomy of center-and-periphery. People who, to one degree or another, inherited and shared Soviet identity, regardless of their citizenship and nationality, remained affectively attached to and gravitated toward “Moscow” as an authoritative center of knowledge production, “high culture” and, of course, to the “great and mighty” Russian language as its bearer.

It took the shock of a big war for the attraction of the imperial center and, in general, the neocolonial configuration of the region to become the object of radical critical reflection. This is how a new demand for the term “decolonization” emerged: it was based on acute awareness of the need to resist permanent aspirations of Russian authorities for the political and cultural subordination of Ukraine and Belarus. By placing this term in the title of the conference and this issue, we did not follow some sort of academic “fashion” (as Western observers might think), but responded to the demand of our current geocultural and socio-political situation, which, among other things, urges to address the politics of knowledge production *in* and *about* our countries.

The above does not exclude either the need for scientific exploration of the relevance of the concept of decolonization, or clarification of the limitations of its applicability in the current regional context. We are well aware that within the global academic community, there are diverse and often polarizing points of view regarding the applicability of the postcolonial framework and the term “decolonization” in relation to our countries (Moore 2001; Spivak et al. 2006; Akudovich 2007; Oushakin 2011; Riabczuk 2013). This special issue also addresses the polemic nature of the concept. Its significance lies precisely in the fact that, after the conference, it has become a platform for interdisciplinary discussions regarding conditions and semantic features of applying the term “decolonization” to Belarusian and Ukrainian societies.

The issue is dedicated to decolonization in the domains of education and social and humanitarian research. We assume that in our societies, knowledge production, to a certain degree, remains under the influence of Soviet and/or Russian ideological narratives and approaches. Importantly, not just local, but also Western scholars can act as agents of this influence. Both Belarus and Ukraine are stifled by the “double colonial loop”: Russian imperial claims to control our countries have long been reinforced by the dominance of Russia as a thematic focus in Western centers of post-Soviet, Slavic, and East European studies, and the dominance of the Russia-centered approach to our countries in Western academic and expert environments. Thus, our task of revising the politics of knowledge production in education and science has a direct link to the critical rethinking of the understanding of Eastern Europe itself in Western academia.²

Releasing the “double colonial loop” implies at least three things: a) different positioning of our countries in the cultural imaginary of European and other societies; b) filling in the gaps in the knowledge about our countries and working out productive approaches to their study in the global academia; c) overcoming the inferiority complex of our scholars, who might treat their intellectual work as secondary to Western – but also often to Russian – scientific discourses. We – Belarusian and Ukrainian scholars – need to rethink and redefine ourselves as independent epistemic subjects (knowledge producers) and, on this foundation, reconsider the principles and content of national pedagogy in our countries.

The conference and this collection of articles make a feasible contribution to the development of theoretical and methodological

2 The degree of radicalism of such rethinking varies today from pointing out the necessity to recenter Eastern Europe to abandoning this very notion as irrelevant.

foundations of decolonization today and after the end of the war. As Mignolo and Tlostanova (Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012) rightly mention, colonization is reproduced through everyday thinking habits. It can be resisted by developing conscious practices of “learning to unlearn”. Hence, education and culture (especially media) are becoming the main venues for decolonization. And academia has to provide new content and new meaningful perspectives, so that the unlearning stage could be followed by new learning (“learning to unlearn in order to relearn”).

Theoretical justification of the decolonization policy in the domain of knowledge production today must account for two different intellectual schools — postcolonial and decolonial studies. While postcolonial studies developed a theoretical toolkit that may be useful in analyzing our post-Soviet experience, modern decolonial thought makes a very inspiring theory and practice for us, since it suggests a general philosophical strategy of decolonization of knowledge production. The relationship between the terms decolonization and decoloniality³ can be compared to the relationship between the ontic and the ontological. Decolonization means concrete measures to eliminate various forms, symbols, practices and narratives of colonial (imperial) domination. Decoloniality is a kind of metanoia, radical liberation of thinking from its attachment to the imperial center of hegemony; or delinking, in Mignolo’s terms (Mignolo 2007). In order to successfully decolonize the sphere of knowledge production and, ultimately, our very lifeworlds, we need a “change of mind,” which can kindle the creative work of relearning and rethinking toward a new cultural imaginary of our countries, our region and Europe in general.

We are different and set apart from the thinkers of the decolonial turn by a significantly divergent geocultural location and geopolitical agenda. Therefore, the comparison of our perspectives inevitably gives rise to a number of conceptual problems and questions, a comprehensive analysis of which is beyond the scope of this issue. Yet, we share the basic methodological foundations of this approach: namely, the situated and embodied thinking and knowledge production geared toward ethical and political emancipation. “I am where I think” — this existential-epistemic formula of Mignolo is executed in no other way but performatively. In this regard, this collection of articles shows that the semantic horizons of self-emancipation of Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars overlap to a significant extent. At the same time, there are cultural-historical and political differences between our countries, which should also be reflected in educational and scientific policies.

3 They thus presuppose another pair of terms — colonization and coloniality — as a background.

Delinking from the Russian/Soviet lasting hegemony has unfolded in stages, being often provoked by political developments inside and toward our respective societies. Decolonial scholars remind us that the political act of declaring independence is just the beginning of cultural and mental decolonization. Being far from linear, this trajectory is marked with twists, backslides, disruptions, and fluctuations. Partaking both in the Soviet imperial project and in its demise, symbolically signed in the Belovezhskaya pushcha in December 1991, Belarus and Ukraine embarked on the post-Soviet transition track with large swaths of Soviet nomenklatura in charge. Unlike some Central European and Baltic states, these societies opted for the smooth transition that augmented their imperial/subaltern hybridity and postponed the hard task of processing their complex pasts and entangled histories. This societal choice was equally mirrored in the academic domain, where the inertial reproduction of the Marxist-Leninist framework – even if stripped of overt ideological markers – paradoxically co-existed with or was even imbricated in catching-up receptions of Western epistemologies (poststructuralism, phenomenology, etc.) (Shchyttsova 2023). Despite the regained pluralism of methodologies in the humanities, educational and research institutions largely retained the old bureaucratic structure and academic habitus.

Short periods of national revival and increased interest in the national culture, history, and language in the early 1990s were curtailed by a deep economic crisis escalating into a political one. Ways out of those crises differed significantly in Belarus and Ukraine, which explains the de-synchronization in political and cultural developments in those two cases. While the main points of convergence were the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the political socialization of the citizenry through mass protests unfolded at a different pace and scope. Still, some structural parallels and common pending tasks could be traced. An important structural prerequisite for political changes was the emergence of new social groups and generations socialized in a broader European context and integrated into transnational networks: educational entities, business projects, cultural and civic initiatives. While those processes are increasingly framed as decolonization, they have always been intertwined with national re-imagining and grassroots democratization.

Claiming more political agency for the citizenry vis-à-vis the captured states went hand in hand with re-discovering deep historical roots and alternative legacies of their polities and attempts to re-position them into regional and global contexts. Conversely, reactive re-colonization from the Kremlin went beyond the ethnocultural dimension, though efficiently instrumentalizing it rhetorically and

politically. *Russkiy Mir*, transmitted and imposed through the Russian language and culture, rested on specific political and social patterns that supported kleptocratic elites, autocratic governance, and de-politicization of the populace. From this standpoint, two parallel tracks of decolonization could be analytically distinguished: the activist and the academic one. The activist track, aimed at re-claiming political agency, historical legacy, and cultural peculiarity, only recently appropriated the decolonial vocabulary, often as a shorthand for “emancipation”. It was especially after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that decolonial activism mushroomed in Ukraine and Belarus, but also in Central Asia and faraway regions of the Russian so-called Federation. While Western academia debated the applicability of the postcolonial lens to the post-Soviet region, civic activists across the region launched educational initiatives – podcasts, public lectures, exhibitions – exposing Russian encroachment on their cultural legacies, rediscovering the hidden past, and learning their mother tongues, estranged from them in previous generations. This activism engages with academic writing and academic speakers, and incentivizes the latter to enrich and refine knowledge production to be disseminated forward and outward.

Despite the seemingly consensual labelling of the Russian war of aggression as a neoimperial conquest and the need to incorporate subaltern perspectives in the shared body of knowledge, several contentious issues are still worth mentioning. First, our images of each other are still derived from the Russian and Western imperial gazes. Thus, the desired solidarity of subalterns is endangered by mutual othering and misconceptions that perpetuate the image of Ukraine’s Maidan as political chaos, Belarusians as silent enablers of aggression, and Asians and Muslims as inferior barbarians. Second, knowledge production and dissemination in the region are largely mediated by imperial languages. Even if the conference preceding this publication was primarily bilingual, and Ukrainians and Belarusians understood each other without translation, a broader outreach in national languages cannot be guaranteed. Finally, shedding off imperial legacies is the necessary first step that must eventually bring us to the need to look into our own nesting orientalisms, persistent cultural hierarchies, and external structures resisting the inclusion of local contexts on an equal footing.

In Ukraine, fruitful attempts of application and further development of the postcolonial lens started as early as the 1990s, and since the early 2000s have proliferated potently in literary studies with broader political implications. A constellation of influential literary scholars, including Marko Pavlyshyn (1993), Myroslav Shkandrij (2001),

Vitaly Chernetsky (2003), and others — claimed for revisions of the existing literary canon via bringing in the limelight the forbidden and forgotten masterpieces of Ukrainian authors and exposing racial stereotypes othering Ukrainians as uncivilized peasants in need of political guidance, which are plentiful in the cornerstone works of Russian classical literature. Mykola Riabchuk (2003) reframed the perception of Ukraine as a “cleft country” allegedly divided by regional historical legacies into a societal division within and across the regions, defined by the level of interiorization of the Russian imperial viewpoint: that is, analytically dissecting Ukrainians into “creoles” accepting the “little Russian” identity reserved for them by the hegemonic centre in Moscow; and “genuine Ukrainians” appropriating and developing Ukrainian identity as a Central European one.

In Belarus, the postcolonial perspective has been shaping in close connection with the national Revival of the late 1980s — early 1990s, for which liberation from the pressure of the Russocentric Soviet ideology was an indispensable condition for the revival of national culture and the strengthening of national identity (Dubaviec 2003). This approach gave impetus to productive creation of new historical narratives, but was usually limited by the conceptual framework of an ethno-national state. In the 1990s and early 2000s, various thinkers proposed more innovative options for applying the postcolonial approach, which took into account the historical and socio-cultural heteronomy of the Belarusians’ lifeworld. Thus, Valyantsin Akudovich (Akudovich 2007) pointed out the non-linear, intermittent nature of the genesis of modern Belarus, as well as the important role of the experience of Soviet modernization for the positive self-understanding of Belarusians. Vladimir Abushenko (Abushenko 2004) and Igor Bobkov (Bobkov 2005) sought to understand the Belarusian socio-cultural space as a different type of modernity: the former, through the concept of Creole; the latter, through the concept of a borderland, the distinctive feature of which is transculturality. In parallel with these and other conceptual explorations, Belarusian postcolonialism developed in poetry, literature, cinema and music, creatively combining postcolonial and post-modern approaches (Lewis 2017).

An intellectual response from the imperial side presented the Russian society as the first and major victim of Russian imperialism, which was enveloped in the notion of “internal colonization” (Etkind 2011); while the Russian state was positioned as a European subaltern incorporated in the capitalist world-system as a semi-periphery, which was explicated through interpreting Russia as a “subaltern empire” (Morozov 2015). Those innovations inscribed the Russian perspective into broader postcolonial and decolonial studies, sharing the common

anti-Western angle, more willingly and efficiently than the perspectives of former western peripheries of the Russian empire.

It took an all-out war to carry these debates out of the niche communities to the broader audiences. A new wave of important reflections and refinements concerned questioning Russian “imperial innocence” (Kassymbekova & Marat 2022), exposing Western academia as enablers of aggression (Zayarnuk 2022; Malksoo 2023; Hendl & all 2023), challenging Russian catching-up resentful imperialism, allegedly legitimized by its mistreatment in the West (Čanji & Kazharski 2022), and explicating Ukrainian resistance as an efficient subversive strategy of a “double subaltern” (Korablyova 2022; Bossuyt, Amoris, & Riabchuk 2024). What is important, new institutions pursuing the agenda to rectify the power asymmetries in knowledge production on the region started emerging⁴. The current issue adds another brick to pave this path forward.

Structure and Contents of the Issue

The collection includes four sections. The first one contains articles on the postcolonial perspective and various aspects of decolonization in national, regional and global contexts. A number of texts focus on specific disciplines (international relations, history, theatre studies), but most of the articles touch upon a wide range of social and humanitarian knowledge, addressing various cross-cutting issues: memory, language policy, methodological difficulties in applying the postcolonial approach to our countries, the meaning of the term decolonization, issues of epistemic (in)equality, etc.

This special issue opens with *Olena Khylyko and Maksym Khylyko*'s text aiming to prove the efficiency of the postcolonial approach in the toolkit of international relations studies. The latter, long defined by the intellectual rivalry between realism and (neo)liberalism with their respective overfocus on great powers and international structures, conflate in their neglect towards minor agencies and societal peculiarities. Social constructivism, enriched with the post- and decolonial perspectives, is capable of overcoming the limitations exposed by the failure of the dominant IR paradigms to explain Russian aggression and Ukrainian resistance to it. The authors present a panoramic overview

4 The RUTA Association for Central, South-Eastern, Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asian Studies is a good example of connecting scholars and practitioners from a broader region, defined in an inclusive and non-hierarchical way, with its annual meetings symbolically held in Ukraine.

of the main venues of Russian/Soviet colonialism towards Ukraine in its “classical” imperial forms, encompassing multifaceted eradication, exploitation, and co-optation, but also post-imperial, or “neocolonial” forms, operating through “penetration and infiltration into financial, economic, political, and security structures”.

Andrei Gornyxh analyzes the dialectic of “internal colonization” in the Soviet/Russian empire. He emphasizes that decolonization as a new theoretical and practical approach must take into account the complex problems of modernity, which complicates the dialogue between postcolonialism and postcommunism. Gornyxh’s article portrays our region as a complex cultural palimpsest, consisting of three specific divisions, each of them implying a colonial perspective: the division of the city and the countryside, ethnolinguistic divisions (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian) and the division of imperial and democratic forces.

Yurii Latysh’s paper discusses the changes in the politics of memory in wartime Ukraine and ponders Putin’s anti-Ukrainian retrotopia as an attempt of mnemonic revenge re-playing the Cold war. He argues that mnemonic decolonization in Ukraine was a reaction of self-defense aiming to regain mental and territorial control over the country, where decommunization in the first phase of the war was followed by decolonization after the Russian full-scale invasion. Providing the list of relevant laws and informative statistics on changed toponyms, the author concludes with a debatable statement that the call for total decolonization was not culturally rooted in Ukrainian society and it must give way to more nuanced policies after the end of the war.

Maksim Karalyow aims to analyze the options of decolonization in Belarusian academic humanities research. Given the determinism of the Belarusian education and science system by the trends laid down in the Soviet era, he points to a lack of consensus in the Belarusian academic environment in understanding what to consider manifestations of colonialism and how to get rid of it. In this regard, he identifies a number of factors on which the success of decolonization will depend, and suggests several definite steps in this direction.

Taras Tkachuk focuses on the dynamics of language conversion, language tolerance and prestige in a bilingual postcolonial setting. The presented case study of high-school students in the Vinnytsia region compares the results from 2011, 2016, and 2024. While sharing the mainstream claim of increasing prestige and daily use of Ukrainian, the author draws attention to the language pendulum effect (i.e., partial reversal of language conversion) and to the emergence of an antagonized Russophone minority.

Tanya Artsimovich problematizes the existing models of the history of Belarusian theatre, setting the task of going beyond the geopolitical “center-periphery” binary. Defending the right to imagine a different version (versions) of the history of Belarusian theatre, she emphasizes her refusal to focus on a certain universal (dominant) narrative of the world history of theatre in order to give voice to the stories that subalterns can tell. Practicing thus a decolonial approach, she ultimately revises the concepts of “tradition” and “experiment” in her version of the history of Belarusian theatre.

Alyaksey Kazharski discusses the validity of using the term “West-splaining” when assessing current discussions of Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, of the Russian-Ukrainian war and of the events in Belarus. Labelling the belief of some Western analysts in the universal relevance of Western optics as intellectual provincialism, he simultaneously draws attention to the Russian-centricity of the Western perception of our region.

The second section presents a report on the discussion that took place within the framework of the Vilnius conference. The roundtable discussion on the objectives and impediments in the development of culture studies in Ukraine, in light of the decolonization task, brought together key representatives of regional academic schools and influential cultural institutions. Interventions by *Olha Mukha*, *Oksana Darmoriz*, *Oleksandr Kravchenko*, *Zoriana Rybchynska*, *Oksana Dovgoplova*, and *Dmytro Shevchuk* expose “a complex landscape of evolving educational paradigms and societal expectations, defining the unique experience of the ‘culturology project’ in Ukraine.” Problematizing controversial expectations stemming from diverse traditions of the studies of culture (theory-driven vs practice-oriented), on the one hand, and from the growing market demands for cultural managers and entrepreneurs, on the other, the authors agree that culture studies in Ukraine must delink from the Russian hegemonic influence in the field and better align with the needs of Ukrainian society and the agenda of Ukrainian cultural production. They conclude that “culturology” is still a project rather than an academic discipline in Ukraine, where (self-)decolonisation is a pending task.

In the third section, *Andrei Vazyana* and *Andrzej Tymowski* share their experiences and practical recommendations regarding the language issue in teaching for an international audience.

Andrei Vazyana discusses the feasibility of developing functional multilingualism in students’ groups where Belarusians constitute a majority. Drawing on international experience in implementing the

principles of multilingualism in the educational process, he examines the specifics and methods of applying multilingual teaching in the Belarusian education system both within and outside of the country. A special focus is made on motivating learning languages, including Belarusian, as well as the capacity of the Belarusian language to serve for intercultural communication.

Andrzej Tymowski critically reconsiders the place of such a discipline as Academic Writing in English in the global and regional (Eastern European) academic contexts. Focusing on the problem of cultural hegemony, he notes that Belarus and Ukraine have found themselves “caught in a sort of decolonizing scissors”, and that this situation makes the choice of a language for academic work a political decision. In this regard, Tymowski believes that the so-called “lingua franca cultures” must themselves learn to refrain from the position of normative dominance for the sake of a new decentralized pluriversality of pedagogy and research.

The final section contains *Syeda Masood's* book review of Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă's *Creolizing the Modern*. It expands the scope of the Eastern European region revealed in the issue and allows comparisons between the situation in Belarus and Ukraine with socio-cultural processes in such a multilingual and multicultural place as Transylvania. Closing the special issue with this review is symbolically important, as it connects the postcolonial thought in the region with global decolonial studies where creolization of theory is one of the most recent and fruitful trends.

In the times of war, we are more than ever aware of the connection between the social sciences and humanities with the socio-cultural reality, between knowledge production and politics. Decolonization as a practical task unites Ukrainians and democratically minded Belarusians in their aspirations for national independence and cultural development free from Russian neo-imperial domination. We hope that this collection will serve as a new impetus for making a difference both in the regional and global production of knowledge about Belarus and Ukraine. This requires not only our joint efforts but also a new quality of cooperation open to transcultural imaginaries. Moreover, the awareness of the existing “double colonial loop” and “decolonizing scissors” can only be truly transformative if it is rooted in a *decolonial mirror*: we must first and foremost look into ourselves, with a caring yet critical attitude, to disentangle from the past and the habitus it casts on us. Then, new epistemologies of the region might emerge.

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