

THEORETICAL REPRODUCTION IN SHADOWS OF DUAL COLONIALITY: DECOLONIAL THEORY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND NORTHERN EURASIA

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Abstract. *This article critically examines the interpretations of decolonial theory in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, highlighting how intellectuals in the region repurpose theories coming from external intellectual centers to challenge Russian imperial, Soviet colonial, contemporary Putinist neoimperialism, and nationalist hegemonies. It traces the historical adoption of external theories by intellectuals in the region, demonstrating how these theories often yield unintended outcomes rather than the anticipated emancipatory effects. The study highlights the complexities of embracing and reinterpreting decolonial frameworks in post-Soviet contexts, where efforts to dismantle epistemic injustice may inadvertently replicate the very structures they critique. Through case studies from Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, the article demonstrates the tensions between national majoritarian narratives and subaltern voices in contemporary decolonial praxis. Ultimately, it argues for a more context-sensitive and relational approach that resists authoritarian appropriations and fosters pluriversal solidarities.*

Keywords: *decolonial theory, epistemic justice, coloniality of power, border thinking, subaltern, Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, post-Soviet, USSR, Russian Empire, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Russia*

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Introduction

At this pivotal historical moment, Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia face profound social upheaval driven by military conflicts and cultural transformations. These developments challenge established hierarchies of power and knowledge while generating new frameworks of inequality among diverse social groups and their modes of self-representation. Such complex processes are connected to a longstanding regional tradition of adopting and critically examining “foreign” ideas—intellectual frameworks originating beyond the region's borders—which necessitate a fundamental reevaluation of cultural networks, social structures, and historical identities.

One particularly compelling example involves the adoption and adaptation of decolonial theory to address intra-national and international power dynamics across Eastern European and Northern Eurasian peoples. Given the relative scarcity of “indigenous” theoretical resources for addressing contemporary challenges, intellectual movements in the region frequently draw upon theories developed in external academic centers. This article examines how intellectuals of the region currently apply decolonial theory to challenge residual Russian imperial and Soviet epistemic hierarchies while simultaneously confronting emerging hegemonies, particularly those advanced by Putinist neoimperialism and post-Soviet nationalism. This case study illuminates an ongoing process whereby a theoretically sophisticated, epistemologically grounded, and ethically committed framework advocating epistemic justice for subaltern groups encounters application in complex and often contradictory contexts.

Societies throughout Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia have historically demonstrated a persistent pattern of embracing theoretical frameworks and developmental models originating in other regions' intellectual centers, typically motivated by aspirations to improve social conditions and establish more equitable governance structures. Notable examples spanning the past three centuries include the confessional-imperial ideology of the early eighteenth century, the enlightened absolutism characterizing the Russian Empire's transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, twentieth-century Marxism, and two distinct waves of nationalism—one during the first half of the twentieth century and another near its conclusion. These intellectual movements, primarily originating in Western Europe, found receptive and creative audiences throughout Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia due to their alignment with local political aspirations and ethical commitments to renewal and justice. Consequently, the region's societies developed a pattern of closely monitoring external intellectual developments while selectively integrating ideas that suggested pathways toward more effective governance or equitable social arrangements. This approach often led to the enthusiastic adoption of foreign theories for local purposes.

However, each instance of theoretical transfer to Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia has produced outcomes that diverged significantly—sometimes dramatically—from the original theorists' intentions and expectations. Confessional imperial interpretations, for example, demonstrated remarkable durability, with successive generations producing new adherents to these principles. The characteristic indivisibility of state power persisted throughout the region's political systems, surviving both Marxist

efforts to eliminate state structures and liberal constitutional attempts to establish separated powers. Rather than fulfilling promises of social emancipation, Marxism generated distinctive state formations that subordinated citizens, creating conditions of simultaneous partial liberation and partial subjugation. Similarly, nationalist movements that initially displaced imperial structures with promises of political freedom eventually evolved into nation-states whose control mechanisms proved equally effective at subjugating individuals and local communities. Invariably, social realities created through imported theories and models diverged substantially from both their original ethical and political intentions and the aspirations of their regional adherents.

The contemporary adoption and reinterpretation of decolonial theory by Eastern European and Northern Eurasian scholars and broader intellectual communities exemplify this historical pattern, presenting novel characteristics. Unlike previously mentioned theories that emerged from Western European intellectual centers, decolonial theory developed in explicit opposition to Western cultural hegemony in non-Western intellectual centers. Paradoxically, Western-educated intellectuals have served as primary agents for learning and adapting decolonial frameworks to regional national contexts. Through this process of transfer and reinterpretation, decolonial thinking has undergone significant modifications in both analytical focus and ethical foundations. Rather than consistently promoting equitable relationships among local, national, and foreign entities—or between indigenous and colonial influences, or peripheral and central knowledge systems—decolonial studies in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia appear to demonstrate selectivity in identifying targets for critiquing existing and emerging cultural and social inequalities.

1. Methodological Introduction and Problem Statement

Decolonial intellectual movements in regions formerly constituting the Russian Empire and Soviet Union confront a fundamental paradox: their critical interventions achieve only partial success in realizing decolonial theory's central objective of epistemic justice. When employing decolonial frameworks originally developed to critique colonial systems and oppressive knowledge hierarchies, these intellectual movements risk inadvertently reproducing the very power structures they seek to dismantle. This dynamic perpetuates the historical pattern of external theoretical influence over local conditions, thereby complicating efforts to develop genuinely indigenous approaches to justice and liberation. Such circumstances underscore the critical importance of implementing context-sensitive decolonial practices that remain vigilant against reproducing coloniality—or establishing new forms of it—within ostensibly anti-colonial movements.

This study examines the reception, interpretation, and implementation of decolonial theory within the intellectual and political landscapes of three Eastern European and Northern Eurasian countries: Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan. The research examines how scholars, intellectuals, and political actors utilize decolonial frameworks to critique, resist, or inadvertently reinstate existing power hierarchies. Additionally, this investigation aims to enhance our understanding of how global theoretical frameworks

evolve and adapt within specific local contexts, particularly across the nations of the region.

This study hypothesizes that the reception of decolonial theory in Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan simultaneously enables partial epistemic liberation while reproducing hierarchical structures of such injustice. While decolonial theory explicitly challenges existing colonial matrices of power, its local adaptations within these national contexts may inadvertently reinforce alternative hierarchies due to distinctive political, cultural, and historical factors specific to each setting.

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology incorporating discourse analysis and critical textual analysis of academic literature, conference proceedings, policy documents, and theoretical texts produced within the three target countries. The study integrates comparative analysis of foundational decolonial scholarship, particularly works by Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Madina Tlostanova, to contextualize local interpretations within broader theoretical frameworks. This methodological approach enables examination of both local epistemic transformations and the power dynamics embedded within decolonial theory's regional reception.

Several limitations constrain the scope and findings of this study. First, exclusive reliance on textual analysis prevents a full engagement with the lived experiences or practical implementations of decolonial frameworks by subaltern groups, limiting their impact to academic discourse. Second, the focus on intellectual and academic discourse may overlook grassroots, community-based interpretations and applications of decolonial theory. Third, as a multi-country comparative analysis, this study risks overgeneralizing national contexts while potentially neglecting the diversity of perspectives within each country. Finally, language barriers may limit access to certain regional texts and discussions, particularly those conducted in local languages rather than widely accessible academic lingua francas.

This article comprises two primary analytical sections, each addressing distinct aspects of the research framework. The first section examines the foundational objectives and core concepts of decolonial theory, emphasizing epistemic justice and the dismantling of colonial residues that persist within postcolonial societies. The second section presents a comparative analysis of decolonial theory's application across Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, highlighting how scholars within each national context deploy decolonial frameworks to critique historical and contemporary epistemic power imbalances. The article concludes by reflecting on the inherent ambiguities and tensions within decolonial studies, as manifested across the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian intellectual landscapes.

2. Frameworks of Decolonial Thought

Decolonial theory emerged as a non-Western critical intellectual and political response to the enduring legacies of coloniality across global and local contexts. As a distinctive analytical and ethical framework, it seeks to dismantle epistemic hierarchies and power

structures established through Western modernity and colonial expansion. By connecting global political objectives with local action, decolonial thinking empowers marginalized groups and communities to challenge oppression while reclaiming their epistemic agency. This approach emphasizes the relational dynamics between geopolitical structures and localized forms of resistance, constructing a pluriversal horizon that envisions more equitable and inclusive intra- and international orders.

Decolonial theory developed as a critical response to perceived limitations within postcolonial studies, offering more radical approaches to understanding global power relations. Unlike postcolonial theory, which decolonial thinkers argue remains embedded within Eurocentric epistemological frameworks, decolonial thought aims to dismantle the foundational premises of Western knowledge production itself. This fundamental distinction positions decolonial thinking not merely as a critique of colonialism but as a comprehensive project for epistemic liberation and transformation. Consequently, decolonial thinking integrates global political objectives with local political action, advancing the ethics and epistemology of liberation for marginalized groups. Its theoretical foundation rests on three core concepts: the coloniality of power, border thinking, and the ethics of liberation.

2.1. Coloniality of Power

Aníbal Quijano's concept of "coloniality of power" constitutes a foundational pillar in the development of decolonial theory, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the enduring legacies of colonialism within contemporary global structures. Quijano (2000) argues that colonialism imposed not only political and economic domination but also created persistent power structures that continue shaping social relations, knowledge production, and cultural hierarchies. According to Quijano (2000, 2007), the concept of "coloniality of power" describes power patterns that emerged from colonialism, persisting beyond formal colonial rule. These patterns classify global populations through racialized categories, organizing the distribution of labor, wealth, and knowledge.

As Quijano explains:

Coloniality of power, in its basic matrix, refers to the patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism but that have outlasted formal colonial rule; these patterns are based on the classification of the world population in terms of race, and they organize the distribution of work, wealth, and knowledge production. (Quijano 2000: 534)

His analysis challenges scholars to reconceptualize the "modern/colonial" world-system by emphasizing the inseparability of power, knowledge, and identity from colonial relations (Quijano 2007). This framework demonstrates how Eurocentric knowledge systems delegitimize indigenous and non-Western epistemologies, perpetuating inequality and marginalization while sustaining Western claims to universal rationality and progress.

2.2. Border Thinking and Delinking

Walter D. Mignolo's conceptual framework of “border thinking,” “delinking,” and the “geopolitics of thinking” expands this critique by illuminating how knowledge production operates within historically situated power structures. Mignolo (2000, 2011) defines “border thinking” as knowledge emerging from subaltern perspectives positioned at dominant epistemologies’ margins:

Border thinking is a knowledge from a subaltern perspective that arises from the colonial difference and that proposes an alternative to the totalizing logic of Western epistemology. (Mignolo 2000: 85)

Through foregrounding border thinking, Mignolo encourages scholars and activists to “learn to unlearn” dominant epistemologies, thereby creating space for pluriversality—a world accommodating multiple coexisting worldviews. Mignolo’s (2007) concept of “delinking” advocates for epistemic disobedience to challenge Western epistemic authority while fostering decolonial thinking:

Delinking is to opt for a critical consciousness that enables one to disobey the epistemic and political authority of the West and, instead, to engage in epistemic disobedience and decolonial thinking that opens up the possibility of thinking otherwise. (Mignolo 2007: 452)

This approach foregrounds the geopolitics of thinking, reminding scholars that knowledge is always produced within historically situated power relations. This argument insists that knowledge is always situated within a specific historical and spatial matrix of power (Mignolo 2002). By revealing the geopolitical inscriptions of knowledge production, Mignolo encourages scholars and activists to reflect on their own positionality and the ways in which their work might reinforce or resist coloniality. And new epistemic hierarchies. Together, these concepts advance a decolonial praxis that resists assimilation into Western frameworks, instead promoting relational, context-sensitive approaches to knowledge and emancipation.

2.3. Ethics of Liberation

Enrique Dussel’s “ethics of liberation” complements these epistemological critiques by insisting that ethical reflection must ground itself in the experiences of the oppressed. Dussel critiques Eurocentric ethics for failing to account for the subjugated, proposing instead an ethics rooted in solidarity with the victims of colonial and neocolonial structures. As Dussel explains:

The ethics of liberation is an ethics of the oppressed, in that it arises from the consciousness of oppression and seeks to transform the structures of oppression and domination by means of a process of liberation. (Dussel 1998: 1)

His emphasis on the system’s “exteriority” calls for an ethics inseparable from praxis: concrete action to transform unjust structures. Central to Dussel’s (1998) argument is the principle that ethics remains inseparable from praxis; ethical reflection must accompany concrete action aimed at transforming unjust colonial structures. His liberation ethics transcends abstract moral reasoning, instead demanding radical transformation of social, political, and economic systems that perpetuate colonial oppression. Dussel’s ethics of

liberation is dialogical and relational, highlighting the need for intersubjective communication and affirming the dignity of the oppressed, ultimately envisioning just and pluralistic futures (Dussel 1998).

Central to Dussel's (1998: 13ff) argument is the idea that ethics is inseparable from praxis; that is, ethical reflection must be accompanied by concrete action aimed at transforming unjust colonial structures. His ethics of liberation thus transcends abstract moral reasoning and instead insists on the radical transformation of social, political, and economic systems that perpetuate colonial oppression. This decolonial ethics is inherently dialogical and relational, emphasizing the need for intersubjective communication between the oppressed and the oppressors as a means of dismantling coloniality. Moreover, Dussel's framework highlights the "negation of negation" as a process of affirming the dignity of the oppressed and restoring their humanity.

This decolonial ethics operates as inherently dialogical and relational, emphasizing intersubjective communication between the oppressed and the oppressor as a means of dismantling coloniality. Furthermore, Dussel's framework highlights "negation of negation" as a process affirming the oppressed's dignity while restoring their humanity. This relational, praxis-oriented ethical approach both critiques existing power structures and offers visions of decolonial futures grounded in justice, solidarity, and respect for diverse epistemologies (Dussel 1998).

2.4. Modernity/Coloniality and Knowledges Otherwise

Arturo Escobar's contributions to the modernity/coloniality research program represent a significant advancement in decolonial theory, particularly regarding the epistemological dimensions of liberation. Escobar's (2007) modernity/coloniality framework challenges prevailing Western modernity narratives by exposing their inherent connections to colonial oppression. Escobar argues that modernity must be understood through its historical development, particularly via colonial expansion, which has significantly influenced global power structures, knowledge systems, and cultural dynamics. By elucidating the colonial foundations of modernity, Escobar (2007) calls for a reevaluation of knowledge creation that elevates the perspectives and resistance narratives of subaltern communities against coloniality.

Central to Escobar's decolonial praxis is his concept of "Knowledges Otherwise," which refers to alternative epistemologies that emerge from the experiences and worldviews of marginalized groups (Escobar 2008). This concept insists on the validity of knowledge systems that have historically been excluded or silenced by Western epistemology. Escobar (2008) argues that "Knowledges Otherwise" are not mere complements to Western knowledge but are critical sites of resistance and transformation, capable of challenging the coloniality of power at its epistemic core. By recognizing and legitimizing these knowledges, decolonial praxis disrupts the Eurocentric monopoly on knowledge production, thereby contributing to epistemic justice. For Escobar, "Knowledges Otherwise" exemplify an ethics of liberation because they are deeply embedded in the social struggles of the oppressed and are oriented towards the construction of more just and pluriversal futures.

His concept of “Knowledges Otherwise” affirms the legitimacy of knowledge systems historically silenced by Western epistemology:

The idea of knowledges otherwise is based on the assumption that other ways of knowing, thinking, and being in the world are possible and, indeed, necessary for constructing a world in which many worlds can fit. (Escobar 2007: 186)

By recognizing and legitimizing these knowledges, decolonial praxis disrupts Eurocentric monopolies on knowledge production, thereby contributing to epistemic justice. For Escobar, “Knowledges Otherwise” exemplifies an ethical commitment to solidarity, relationality, and the co-construction of knowledge, which underpins this vision, fostering pluriversal worlds and transformative justice.

2.5. Subaltern Groups and Epistemic Agency

Decolonial theory prescribes transformative roles for groups within colonial hierarchies, recognizing that coloniality has historically structured societies along racialized, gendered, and cultural lines, assigning differential value and privilege. Groups within colonial hierarchies function not merely as passive recipients of oppression but also as active sites of resistance, potential transformation, and alternative knowledge production. Decolonial thinkers argue that understanding these group roles remains essential for dismantling every form of the “colonial matrix of power” (Quijano 2000: 537), which systematically organizes and maintains global inequities. Groups that have been assigned inferior status under coloniality must not only be recognized as historically oppressed but also as epistemic agents capable of redefining society through their own knowledge systems, ethics, and political agency (Mignolo 2007: 450).

Subaltern, a term originally popularized by Gramsci and later developed by Spivak, is a core concept for decolonial scholars. It refers to groups and communities that have been marginalized and silenced within colonial and neocolonial structures of power. These groups include Indigenous peoples, racialized minorities, economically exploited classes, and gendered others who have historically been denied agency and voice in dominant knowledge systems (Gramsci 1971; Spivak 1988; Tiostanova & Mignolo 2012). Decolonial theory insists that subalterns should not remain mere subjects of study or objects of “development”; instead, they should become fully empowered epistemic and political actors in decolonized societies. As Mignolo (2011) and Dussel (1998) argue, subalterns must transform from passive recipients of imposed modernities into active co-creators of a pluriversal world—one in which their knowledge, ethical frameworks, and social aspirations shape the contours of a new, more just, and equitable order.

2.6. Distinguishing Decolonial Theory from Modernity and Postcolonial Studies

A fundamental disagreement between decolonial theorists and both modernity scholars and postcolonial researchers concerns the epistemological foundations of modernity’s conceptualization and critique. Modernity scholars often regard modernity as a universal project of rational progress (Giddens 1990; Habermas 1990), whereas decolonial theorists, such as Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2007), argue that modernity remains inseparable from coloniality and thus cannot be universalized. Similarly, postcolonial researchers often emphasize the cultural and discursive legacies of

colonialism while remaining entangled within Eurocentric analytical frameworks, particularly through their continued reliance on Western theories of modernity and subjectivity (Bhabra 2007).

Decolonial thinkers challenge both modernity and postcolonial methodologies by highlighting the structural and epistemic violence embedded in the concept of modernity itself. For Quijano (2000), modernity cannot be separated from coloniality, as the two are mutually constitutive; thus, any attempt to universalize modernity perpetuates the colonial logic of domination. Mignolo (2007) and Tlostanova (2012) further argue that postcolonial approaches, despite their valuable critiques of colonial discourse, often remain trapped within Western epistemological paradigms, failing to generate truly pluriversal perspectives that recognize the legitimacy of non-Western knowledges. Decolonial theorists insist on an epistemic delinking from Western modernity as the first step toward genuine liberation, advocating for the recovery of silenced epistemologies and the construction of knowledge systems that emerge from the lived experiences and resistances of subaltern communities.

Decolonial theory demands a praxis that connects geopolitical aims, local political action, and “glocal” ethical action through liberation epistemology, challenging the global order while empowering local communities. It provides means for constructing pluriversal worlds by affirming the validity of alternative epistemologies rooted in the histories and lifeworlds of the oppressed. This praxis operates both geopolitically—confronting global domination structures—and locally—enabling communities to reclaim agency through their own ways of knowing and being.

Ethically, decolonial praxis demands solidarity with those positioned on the underside of modernity, prioritizing their voices and experiences within liberation struggles. The decolonial vision of new, just worlds encompasses pluriverses that transcend modernity’s hegemonic universality, creating space for relationality, mutual recognition, and radical transformation. Given this transformative potential, the resonance of such a theory with the hearts and minds of intellectual activists across Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies becomes readily comprehensible.

3. Decolonial Theory in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia

The application of decolonial theory to post-Soviet contexts represents a relatively recent but rapidly expanding scholarly domain, primarily emerging from social sciences and humanities departments within Western universities. Decolonial researchers from Eastern European and Northern Eurasian academies confront the fundamental question of whether decolonial frameworks—developed principally to analyze Western global colonialism—adequately capture the complexities of post-Soviet and post-imperial formations. Scholars operating within this field have developed conceptual frameworks that bridge decolonial theory with the distinctive historical experiences of Soviet socialism and its aftermath. By situating these discussions within the broader decolonial framework, they underscore how local struggles intersect with global domination

systems, while also highlighting the interplay between geopolitical objectives and localized forms of resistance.

Central methodological challenges within this field involve accounting for the temporal and spatial specificities of “Soviet colonialism.” Unlike traditional colonial relationships characterized by oceanic distances separating the metropole from the periphery, Soviet colonialism frequently relied on contiguous territorial expansion and the establishment of what scholars term “internal colonialism.” These dynamics necessitate innovative theoretical approaches that can unpack the unique features of socialist modernity while maintaining analytical precision regarding power relations and cultural domination. Post-Soviet decolonial thinkers emphasize that epistemic liberation across Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia requires not only confronting Western imperial legacies but also dismantling the structures of Soviet modernity that continue to shape local knowledge systems and social hierarchies (Kendirbai 2012; Tlostanova 2012; Morozov 2015).

Among Eastern European and Northern Eurasian decolonial researchers, Madina Tlostanova stands as a leading figure in decolonial theorizing within post-Soviet and Russian post-imperial contexts. Significantly, she constitutes part of the core global community of decolonial thinkers. Her work on “secondary colonial difference” and “external imperial difference” provides nuanced perspectives on how the Soviet Union—conceptualized as a “subaltern empire”—operated simultaneously as a colonized periphery relative to Western Europe and as a colonizing power within its territorial boundaries (Tlostanova 2012).

Tlostanova employs the “subaltern empire” concept to describe Russia’s distinctive position within global colonial hierarchies—a state that has historically functioned both as a colonizer of its peripheries and, simultaneously, occupied semi-peripheral or subaltern positions relative to Western Europe. As Tlostanova explains:

Russia has always been a subaltern empire that at once colonized others and was itself colonized by the West through its intellectual dependency and Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge. (Tlostanova 2012: 134)

Her collaborative work with Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn* (2012), establishes essential links between Latin American decolonial theory and post-Soviet realities, showing how decolonial thinking can shed light on the complexities of Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies. In this influential text, Tlostanova and Mignolo argue that decolonial thought requires radical epistemic disobedience—a process of unlearning deeply ingrained thought patterns that favor Eurocentric knowledge systems. Drawing on experiences from Eurasia and the Americas, they maintain that the colonial matrix of power influences not only economic and political relations but also the core categories through which the world is understood.

The colonial difference in the Americas and in Eurasia has operated differently, yet with similar goals of domination and control: in the Americas, coloniality was marked by the direct imposition of Western categories on the indigenous population, while in Eurasia it involved the subalternization of local knowledge

through Russia's own imperial mediation of Western modernity. (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012: 26)

Through emphasizing border thinking, they invite scholars to inhabit interstices between imperial knowledge systems and subaltern epistemologies, thereby disrupting Western modernity's universalist claims. This approach operates not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a profoundly political and ethical intervention, challenging epistemic hierarchies that continue to marginalize non-Western ways of knowing.

3.1. Decolonial Theory and Praxis in Ukraine

Ukrainian decolonial scholarship has largely emerged in a context of Russian aggression since 2014. These frameworks are varied; they promote a political agenda of resistance while simultaneously differentiating themselves from the “too soft postcolonial approach” previously adopted by Ukrainians.

These tendencies are clearly demonstrated in the work of Svitlana Biedarieva, one of Ukraine's most prominent decolonial theorists. Biedarieva's research explores how Ukrainian artists and cultural professionals formulate strategies to decolonize cultural discourse in Ukraine. Her work illustrates how the ongoing conflict has accelerated Ukraine's decolonization process, propelling the nation from postcolonial dependencies toward what she terms “complete disentanglement” from Russian cultural and political dominance. Biedarieva's analysis highlights the distinctions between Ukrainian decolonization and conventional Ukrainian postcolonial studies, such as those conducted by Tamara Hundorova and Yaroslav Hrytsak (Biedarieva 2023: 5–8). Rather than merely reinterpreting colonial dynamics, Ukrainian decoloniality seeks total separation and promotes the development of independent cultural systems. She characterizes this shift as a transition from a postcolonial to a fully decolonial phase, wherein the former colonial power (Russia) forfeits all cultural and political influence within Ukrainian discourse (Biedarieva 2022, 2023, 2024). This transition necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of the post-Soviet context:

This happens not least because of the global effects of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the post-Soviet space as a space that for three decades was seen as a kind of utopian construct, a territory in which the underlying negative effects of former colonialism were invisible to the world's eye. This uncontrollable and unrecognized development of the postcolonial legacy led to the monstrous outcome of the long-suppressed impulse of Russia's reconquest of former colonies that we witness today. (Biedarieva 2023: 7–8)

However, Biedarieva finds existing decolonial theory insufficient for analyzing what she terms the “Russia–Ukraine colonial case.” She argues that other decolonial theorists “reproduce Russia-imposed misconceptions about the origins of the war” and that “Russia still appears to them as a blind spot on the colonial map because, since the 1970s, it has occupied an ascribed place as an ‘anti-imperialist’ entity in their world model” (Biedarieva 2023: 6). Consequently, she proposes her own theoretical model to address “an urgent necessity of explaining the following: (1) colonialism, which for decades remained omitted from public discussion; (2) colonialism, which currently experiences an anachronistic reenactment in an age when empires of the world have

fallen; (3) colonialism, which uses a variety of discursive methods to cover its oppressive intentions” (Biedarieva 2023: 7).

Ukrainian feminist philosopher Iryna Zhrebkina presents a distinct approach to addressing Russian cultural imperialism and Russian culture. In her essay *Does Ukraine Need Russian Culture to Win the War Against Russia?*, Zhrebkina challenges the wholesale rejection of Russian culture, suggesting that certain elements, particularly “minor literature,” can serve as tools for anti-fascist demobilization. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor literature”—works by marginalized authors who subvert dominant cultural narratives—she argues that engaging with these texts can help dismantle the imperialistic and fascist ideologies propagated by the Russian state:

I believe that an effective resource for anti-fascist demobilization is minor literature. The reader of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and even Tolstoy can easily be mobilized to participate in war—to take up arms and kill. It is much more difficult to mobilize, to send to kill civilians, the readers of Platonov, Kharms, Shalamov, and minor women’s literature. (Zhrebkina 2022)

Furthermore, Zhrebkina cautions against Ukraine’s aspiration to become a “Great Culture,” which she associates with imperial ambitions. Instead, she advocates for a decolonial strategy that embraces cultural plurality and resists the allure of cultural dominance:

In order to defeat fascism, Ukraine should not strive to become a Great Culture, the center of European culture, because Great Culture is an imperial project that always retains the germs of fascism. The truly emancipatory strategy is the decolonial strategy of becoming minor, eluding the fantasy of colonial greatness. (Zhrebkina 2022)

Zhrebkina’s approach emphasizes the importance of critically engaging with cultural narratives and demonstrates how marginalized voices can contribute to a more inclusive and decolonized Ukrainian identity.

Grassroots movements, such as the Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary project led by Anastasiia Omelianiuk and Yuliia Elyas, exemplify the creation of local theoretical tools rooted in everyday resistance and cultural praxis. Various activists and intellectuals utilize this platform for their scholarly work. For example, Ukrainian researcher and cultural practitioner Yuliia Kishchuk focuses on “decolonial aesthesis”—a concept that challenges dominant aesthetic paradigms imposed by colonial and imperial powers. In her contribution to the Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary, Kishchuk emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing indigenous and marginalized aesthetic practices as forms of resistance and assertion of identity during wartime.

Kishchuk’s examination of “decolonial aesthesis” is clear in her analysis of the embroidery traditions of Ukraine and Palestine. In her article “Cross-stitches that bind us together,” she discusses the political and cultural importance of these crafts:

Ukrainian embroidery was a vernacular way to exercise peasant, mainly women’s, agency through the accessible form of artistic practice. (Kishchuk 2022)

This perspective highlights how traditional crafts can serve as mediums for expressing resistance and preserving cultural identity in the face of colonial suppression.

Like Zhrebkina, Kishchuk advocates for a decolonial approach that embraces cultural plurality and resists the allure of cultural dominance. She similarly cautions against striving for a “Great Culture,” which she associates with imperial ambitions, and instead promotes a strategy of “becoming minor,” thereby eluding the fantasy of colonial greatness. This approach aligns with the broader goals of decolonial aestheSis, which seeks to dismantle hierarchical aesthetic norms and promote diverse, localized expressions of art and culture.

The decolonial theoretical approach is now widely applied across various disciplines in Ukraine. For example, Oleksandr Mikhno (Mіхно 2024) develops concepts such as “decolonial pedagogy” and “epistemological decolonization” as analytical tools. He argues that a decolonial approach requires treating “context” not as a fixed backdrop but as a dynamic interplay of time, space, and identity, involving multiple “lines of inquiry” rather than a single object of study. In this view, knowledge is inherently pluralistic and processual: no single truth can capture a subject’s biography; only multiple narratives can be articulated. Olena Bondareva (Бондарева 2023) makes a parallel point in literary criticism, demonstrating that Ukrainians must create their own war narratives embedded in a “broader history of the colonizer’s struggle against Ukrainian identity,” thereby opening “conscious decolonial perspectives” on memory and trauma. Together, these theoretical works underscore that Ukrainian reception of decolonial theory centers on contextualized, dialogical approaches to history and identity (Mіхно 2024; Бондарева 2023b).

At the cultural policy level, many Ukrainian scholars identify “real-world dilemmas” in applying decolonial frameworks. For example, Oleksandr Kravchenko (Кравченко 2024) explicitly addresses the “dilemmas of decolonial strategy” in Ukraine’s cultural policy. This reflects a broader debate over how to reconceptualize Ukraine’s post-Soviet position: whether it constitutes a colony of Russia and how policy should respond accordingly. Ukrainian analysts emphasize the need to assume narrative control of the war. Bondareva (2023b) warns that Ukrainians “must not allow the aggressor’s narratives to dominate” and instead must document Russia’s crimes within global anti-colonial history. Similarly, she argues that the invasion has underscored shared concerns in ecocriticism, identity theory, and decolonial practice, making it imperative for Ukraine to “irreversibly overcome the colonial ‘victim’ position” imposed by Russian imperial and Putinist neo-imperial narratives. These arguments suggest that cultural policy must balance fostering Ukrainian sovereignty with navigating the ambiguous legacy of Russian colonialism—a tension that Kravchenko, Bondareva, and others identify as a central strategic challenge.

Ukrainian critics also employ decolonial analysis in their examination of Ukrainian cultural works. Bondareva (2023a) analyzes Neda Nezhdana’s play “Closed Sky” through decolonial and trauma-study lenses, demonstrating how its dramatization of personal testimony becomes a form of collective healing and resistance. She emphasizes that the play generates “resilient decolonial identity” by transforming women’s trauma into

empowering artistic narratives. In another example, she examines contemporary “cat story” dramas and finds that even these fantastical fables function as potent counter-discourses: by placing Ukraine’s plight within a mythical animal context, they assert the shared popular nature of Ukrainian victory. In both cases, scholars demonstrate how Ukrainian artists are recasting symbols and stories through a decolonial lens—dismantling colonial tropes while valorizing indigenous perspectives (Бондарева 2023а).

Ukrainian scholars also describe how decolonial ideas are being integrated into educational and institutional practices. Mikhno (2024) proposes “contextualization” in pedagogical biography: treating teachers not as isolated figures but as situated within socio-political currents. By applying this to the life of the Soviet Ukrainian dissident educator Nadia Svitlychna, he illustrates how context reveals her anti-russification and human-rights activities, thus exposing the “many-sided” aspects of life under colonial dependence and dismantling imposed narratives.

In short, this shows how a decolonial lens can recover agency in Ukraine’s intellectual history. Similarly, media and cultural institutions are beginning to foreground these concerns (e.g., Протас 2024). In summary, the Ukrainian reception of decolonial theory combines serious theoretical grounding with attention to national cultural policy and practice: scholars adapt decolonial concepts to Ukraine’s unique history, incorporate them into literary and pedagogical analysis, and debate how institutions should implement decolonial strategies (Міхно 2024; Бондарева 2023). However, many current subaltern groups in Ukraine remain outside the scope of this study.

Collectively, these efforts exemplify how decolonial thinking in Ukraine effectively integrates global political aims—namely, resistance to imperial structures—with a national political agenda that prioritizes marginalized Ukrainian voices and previously subaltern knowledge systems. In the Ukrainian context, decolonial scholars primarily focus on nation-state policies, “culture front” resistance, and the current cultural center, while placing less emphasis on peripheral localities, such as economically marginalized, ethnic, or confessional groups. Furthermore, the ongoing war constitutes a defining context for Ukrainian decolonial studies, shaping both its theoretical frameworks and its ethical imperatives.

Following Russia’s aggression, Ukrainian decolonial theory has evolved into a vibrant and contested field that integrates global concepts of epistemic liberation with Ukraine’s unique historical and cultural contexts. Researchers such as Svitlana Biedarieva, Iryna Zherebkina, and Oleksandr Mikhno highlight various aspects of this evolution: from an agenda of “complete disentanglement” from Russian cultural and political influence to critical engagement with Russia’s minor literature as a means of anti-fascist mobilization, and the reevaluation of educational narratives through a decolonial perspective. While these initiatives foster robust conversations about indigenous cultural sovereignty, they also reveal the complexities and tensions inherent in Ukrainian decolonial practice—balancing advocacy for pluralism and resistance to cultural hegemony while focusing on national identity development. Simultaneously, these frameworks often overlook numerous subaltern groups that exist and/or emerge in

Ukraine, underscoring the necessity for more inclusive decolonial approaches that adequately address intersectional identities and the impacts of internal hierarchies.

3.2. Russian Decolonial Theory and Praxis

Russian decolonial theory has developed as a unique intellectual movement in the region, critically examining the legacies of Soviet and Russian imperialism alongside global coloniality. It also defines itself distinctly from Western postcolonial theories. This development is shaped by resistance to the rising Putinist neo-imperialism in Russia, leading many decolonial scholars to operate from outside the country. The situation is further complicated by some supporters of Putin who also consider Russia a challenger to Western hegemony, thereby positioning themselves as decolonial actors.

Unlike postcolonial studies that concentrate on European overseas colonialism, Russian academics focus on the distinctive notion of “internal coloniality” present in Soviet modernity, where Russification policies and ethnic hierarchies perpetuated colonial power structures under the guise of socialist rhetoric (Etkind 2013; Tlostanova 2010, 2017, 2018, 2019). This body of work fosters dialogue that interrogates Russia’s dual identity as a “subaltern empire” (Morozov 2015)—a state that has been marginalized by Eurocentric modernity while simultaneously imposing oppression on its peripheries. These scholars tend to reject general postcolonial models, placing greater emphasis on the specific epistemic contexts of post-Soviet societies and their intertwined narratives of socialist modernization alongside imperial dominance. This perspective translates into a nuanced understanding of coloniality, subalternity, epistemic justice, and the post-Soviet condition as a whole.

Coloniality in the Russian context is conceptualized through Madina Tlostanova’s influential notion of “secondary colonial difference,” which describes how Russia internalized Eurocentric hierarchies while imposing its own colonial logic on non-Russian territories (Tlostanova 2019). Soviet modernity, ostensibly framed as anti-imperial, paradoxically perpetuated coloniality through forced sedentarization, linguistic Russification, and the erasure of indigenous cosmologies. Tlostanova argues that Soviet policies created a “hybrid coloniality” where socialist progress narratives masked the ontological marginalization of minority groups, rendering their knowledge systems “backward” or “non-modern” (Tlostanova 2019).

This analysis reconceptualizes Soviet industrialization and collectivization as forms of epistemic violence, resonating with Artemy Magun’s critique of Russia’s coloniality, which persists through “epistemic extractivism.” In this context, local knowledge is commodified for Western academic purposes while being undervalued domestically (Maryn 2013; Magun 2022). Magun elaborates on the dynamics of epistemic relationships, highlighting a shift from epistemic distrust to epistemic exploitation. He identifies this transition as a change from skepticism regarding local knowledge sources to the commodification and extraction of knowledge from marginalized communities. This process mirrors broader trends of epistemic injustice, where knowledge from specific communities is appropriated without fair recognition or benefit.

Tlostanova and Magun emphasize the complexities of epistemic interactions within modern societies, stressing the need to critically examine the production, distribution, and utilization of knowledge. Their research advances ongoing dialogues about decolonizing knowledge systems and addressing the power imbalances inherent in epistemic practices.

Subalternity is redefined through Viacheslav Morozov's characterization of Russia as a "subaltern empire," which captures its paradoxical position as both a periphery to Europe and a colonizer of its own internal Others (Morozov 2015). Morozov contends that Russia's mimicry of Western modernity—evident in its adoption of capitalist frameworks post-1991—coexists with the suppression of non-Russian identities, creating a "double bind" of dependency and domination. This duality is exemplified in Soviet nation-building policies, which framed Russification as liberation from "feudal backwardness," thereby erasing indigenous agency. For Morozov, decolonization requires dismantling Russia's "imperial unconscious," which normalizes centralized control over ethnic republics and denies their right to epistemic sovereignty (Morozov 2015). Furthermore, internal colonization rendered Russia simultaneously semi-subaltern and semi-hegemonic:

Russia has successfully colonized itself on behalf of Europe, but has been unable to assimilate. (Morozov 2015: 11)

This observation highlights the complex dynamic wherein Russia, while exerting imperial control over its own peripheries, simultaneously remains dependent on Western norms and structures. Morozov's analysis highlights the challenges Russia faces in establishing an autonomous identity independent of Western hegemonic influence.

The concept of epistemic justice has been revisited under the strong influence of what Tlostanova terms "border thinking from shared colonial wounds"—a delinking from both Eurocentric and Soviet epistemes to center marginalized voices (Tlostanova 2019). This approach advocates for pluriversal knowledge production that validates non-Russian cosmologies, such as Siberian shamanism or Caucasian oral histories, as equally legitimate as Russian or Western rationality. In this context, Russian scholars emphasize "epistemic disobedience" against Russia's "monopoly on truth," urging researchers to reject Moscow-centric historiography and engage with grassroots movements in Tatarstan, Chechnya, and Sakha (Maryn 2013; Magun 2022; Durdiyeva 2023). These efforts align with projects such as the Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary, which Tlostanova cites as a model for creating "counter-archives" that challenge imperial narratives through vernacular languages and embodied memory.

Furthermore, as Saida Durdiyeva (2023) observes, achieving epistemic justice entails acknowledging and valuing the diverse epistemologies and experiences of subaltern peoples, rather than imposing dominant frameworks that marginalize or erase their voices. In her analysis, Durdiyeva critiques Putinist Russia's self-portrayal as a geopolitical "decolonial force," suggesting that its anti-Western rhetoric often conceals persistent neo-imperial practices and epistemic exploitation. She argues that Russia's concept of "civilizational communism" has historically appropriated and suppressed knowledge systems from its own margins, thereby denying these groups epistemic justice. Therefore, in the Russian context, achieving epistemic justice necessitates dismantling

these imperial hierarchies and fostering an environment where subaltern groups can articulate their own narratives and knowledge authentically (Durddiyeva 2023).

A compelling case of coloniality is analyzed in Artemy Kalinovsky's study of the Tajik intelligentsia educated during the 1960s and 1970s. His research highlights the dual role these individuals played, first embracing Soviet anti-colonial rhetoric and later critiquing Soviet policies as inherently colonial. Initially, these intellectuals played a crucial role in promoting Soviet ideals, viewing their participation as a means to advance their nation's development within the Soviet framework. However, during the perestroika period, many began to reassess their positions, recognizing the limitations and contradictions of Soviet policies, particularly regarding national autonomy and cultural expression. Kalinovsky suggests that postcolonial theory provides valuable analytical tools for understanding this shift, particularly in examining how these intellectuals navigated the complexities of national identity within an imperial framework (Калиновский 2020).

These policies are often viewed as a Russian variant of Orientalism. Eleonora Shafranskaya examines how Russian colonial narratives are reimagined in contemporary literature, highlighting the reinterpretation of Orientalist themes and the concept of the "Russian world" by modern authors. She observes that while classical literature often depicted Central Asia from a colonial perspective, newer works by writers such as Vladimir Medvedev and Sukhbat Aflatuni provide more nuanced and critical perspectives. Shafranskaya emphasizes that despite these developments, postcolonial and decolonial discussions remain underrepresented in Russian literary studies, revealing the necessity for greater engagement with decolonial perspectives to fully comprehend the complexities of Russia's imperial past (Шафранская 2020).

Russian decolonial thought perceives the post-Soviet landscape as a realm of shared borders, where the intertwining of imperial and Soviet legacies with neoliberal and nationalist policies demands transnational solidarity. Theorists in Russian decolonial studies emphasize how Central Asian migrant workers in Moscow and Chechen refugees in Europe represent the "coloniality of displacement," navigating between Soviet-era marginalization and contemporary xenophobia (Tlostanova 2019). Initiatives such as the *Unrest* collective advocate for a "decolonial federation" that replaces centralized governmental systems with horizontal partnerships among ethnic republics, drawing inspiration from Indigenous land-back movements worldwide (e.g., see *ABN* 2024). This perspective rejects both Putin's neo-imperialism and Western liberal multiculturalism, instead envisioning a future where "decoloniality is not a metaphor but a praxis of re-existence" (Tlostanova 2019).

It is crucial to highlight that attempts have been made to instrumentalize decolonial theory to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy and Putin's neo-imperial war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes an imperialist war that denies Ukraine's sovereignty, while Ukraine's defense is increasingly viewed through decolonial frameworks (Mälksoo 2023; Foley & Unkovski-Korica 2024). Many pro-Kremlin ideologues invert this narrative. As Durddiyeva observes, the Kremlin "misappropriates the language of decolonization for its own colonial ends" (Durddiyeva, 2023). In practice,

Russian nationalist and neo-imperialist intellectuals acknowledge the conflict's imperial character but insist that Russia itself is the victim of Western "colonial" influence. Thus, they cast the West (and even post-Soviet elites) as neo-colonial oppressors while presenting Russian actions as liberatory.

The most prominent example of this Russian alternative to decolonial thought can be found in the recent works of Alexander Dugin, a leading Eurasianist philosopher, who explicitly frames Western influence as a form of colonialism that must be overturned. He coins a new discipline called "Westerology," defining it as the study of Western science "as a local regional phenomenon," and declares that this constitutes "a way of decolonizing consciousness," which is "extremely useful..., simply necessary" for him and like-minded thinkers (Dugin 2024: 12). Dugin further argues that Russia requires "a full and deep epistemological decolonization of Russian consciousness," freeing it from "the centuries-old influence of toxic assumptions that have enthralled Russian thought" (Dugin 2024: 15).

These statements recast Russia as a society still under colonial influence, whether from Western ideas or domestic "colonizers," and implicitly justify the war as Russia's effort to overthrow imperialist domination. This demonstrates how some Russian thinkers instrumentalize decolonial concepts to support Putin's neo-imperialist policies. Durdiyeva (2023) emphasizes that co-opting decolonial language in this manner constitutes a "move to innocence"—a rhetorical strategy to excuse Russia's own colonial-style violence. The scholar insists that decolonization cannot be equated with conquest:

Decolonization is not rooted in the logic of 'war, conquest, and genocide,' which, on the contrary, characterize coloniality. (Durdiyeva 2023)

In other words, Russia's brutal invasion, based on denying Ukrainian self-determination, runs directly counter to genuine decolonial principles. As Mälksoo (2023) argues, true decolonial struggle empowers subjugated peoples to assert sovereignty; the Kremlin's narrative merely "repackages" an imperial project in populist terms (Mälksoo 2023: 474). In sum, while pro-Putin thinkers cloak aggression in anti-colonial rhetoric, critical observers contend that this is a distortion. The war in Ukraine is an act of domination, not liberation, and invoking decolonization in its justification is widely viewed as illegitimate and misleading (Durdiyeva 2023; Mälksoo 2023).

Decolonial theory in Russia has developed into a distinct intellectual movement that investigates Soviet and Russian imperial legacies, as well as contemporary Putinist neo-imperial and post-Soviet neoliberal policies, while resisting the uncritical adoption of Western postcolonial frameworks. Scholars such as Madina Tlostanova and Artemy Magun explore the "internal coloniality" of Soviet modernity, illuminating how Russification and epistemic hierarchies continually marginalize indigenous cosmologies and local knowledge systems. This scholarship underscores the complexities of Russia's dual position as both a subaltern entity in relation to Europe and an imperial center concerning its own peripheries, creating a "double bind" of dependency and domination. Key concepts such as Tlostanova's "secondary colonial difference" and Morozov's "imperial unconscious" demonstrate how Soviet and contemporary Russian policies replicate colonial dynamics under the guise of socialism and nationalism. Russian

decolonial theorists also emphasize the significance of “epistemic justice” and advocate for the reclamation of marginalized voices from Russia’s subaltern communities, promoting a shift toward pluriversal knowledge that challenges Moscow-centric historiography and Putinist neo-imperial narratives. However, the instrumentalization of decolonial concepts to justify Russian imperial aggression represents a significant distortion of decolonial principles, underscoring the importance of maintaining critical vigilance regarding the authentic application of decolonial theory.

3.3. Decolonial Theory and Praxis in Kazakhstan

In recent years, Kazakhstan has emerged as a significant site for developing decolonial theory and praxis, particularly in response to domestic and geopolitical upheavals such as the January 2022 protests and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This context has energized a scholarly and activist movement dedicated to examining Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet identity, subalternity, epistemic justice, and the enduring legacies of colonial rule. While Kazakhstani thinkers often draw on global decolonial frameworks, they adapt these concepts to the unique historical and cultural realities of Kazakhstan’s nation-building and its complex relationship with Russia.

One of the most influential strands of this scholarship focuses on the effects of Soviet sedentarization policies and their impact on indigenous knowledge systems in the country. Ainash Mustoyapova’s (2023) research reveals how these policies systematically undermined nomadic epistemologies, highlighting the urgency of reviving and valorizing local knowledge to challenge the persistence of economic colonialism in the post-Soviet era. Similarly, Togzhan Kassenova’s *Atomic Steppe* (2022) masterfully combines archival research with personal narrative, illustrating the devastating human cost of imperial policies such as nuclear testing in Kazakhstan. Kassenova’s work underscores the importance of recovering marginalized histories as a fundamental ethical imperative of decolonization, linking the national struggle to broader global discourses of justice and historical memory.

Kazakhstani decolonial theory also critically engages with issues of gender and digital subalternity. Jasmin Dall’Agnola (2024) investigates the interplay between digital media and gender roles, revealing how online platforms can simultaneously challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms. She observes that:

... digital communication technologies’ effect on societal attitudes towards gender roles and norms in Kazakhstan is conditional on Internet and social media penetration rates, state-led digital censorship, and the ways in which local activists and conservative bloggers use their online presence. (Dall’Agnola 2024: 2)

This perspective highlights the complexities of subaltern experiences in a hybrid cultural landscape where modernity and tradition coexist in dynamic tension. Dall’Agnola’s insights align with broader efforts by Kazakhstani scholars to unpack the layers of coloniality that shape everyday life and societal structures.

Epistemic justice has emerged as a central concern for decolonial scholars in Kazakhstan. Kamila Smagulova (2023) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and

promoting indigenous knowledge systems that were marginalized during the Soviet era. She argues:

Coloniality still persists and does directly affect social and economic disparities, continuing to produce hierarchies which require breaking those frames. (Smagulova 2023: 1)

This perspective calls for a reevaluation of knowledge production and dissemination, advocating for the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in shaping national narratives and policies.

This approach resonates across various cultural and academic initiatives that aim to pluralize Kazakhstan's knowledge production and policy frameworks. Artistic practices provide an important arena for these decolonial interventions. Diana T. Kudaibergenova (2020), for example, demonstrates how contemporary Central Asian artists repurpose Soviet symbols and incorporate indigenous motifs to critique colonial legacies and assert alternative cultural identities. This artistic movement not only reclaims cultural expressions but also fosters a more inclusive national narrative grounded in local histories and perspectives.

Nari Shelekpayev (2020) examines the concept of "uyat" (shame) and its effects on women's agency in Kazakhstan. He argues that the revival of patriarchal norms represents not merely a return to pre-Soviet practices but is also closely connected to post-Soviet transformations, highlighting how colonial histories persist in influencing gendered power relations. In parallel, Kulshat Medeuova (2020) examines the transformation of collective memory through the lens of Soviet and post-Soviet memorial sites, observing a transition from Soviet-focused commemorations to the inclusion of indigenous stories and sacred landscapes. Medeuova's research demonstrates that memory politics play a crucial role in decolonizing public spaces and fostering a postcolonial national identity.

However, these analyses also reveal a significant limitation in current Kazakhstani decolonial scholarship: a predominant focus on the ethnic Kazakhstani majority as subalterns under Soviet rule, often rendering contemporary subaltern groups—such as socioeconomically marginalized, ethnic, and confessional minorities—less visible in academic and activist discourses. Smagulova (2023) acknowledges this issue in her methodological reflections, noting that "ethnicization and racialization are the processes we have to reimagine as a part of our decolonial rethinking of identity" (Smagulova 2023: 4). She cautions against reproducing Soviet-era nation-building frameworks that reduced ethnic minorities to stereotypical representations rather than recognizing their complex identities and lived experiences. This observation is crucial, as it calls for expanding decolonial analyses to fully engage with the multiplicity of subaltern experiences within Kazakhstan's borders.

The post-Soviet condition in Kazakhstan is characterized by a productive tension between embracing modernity and reclaiming indigenous identities. As Dall'Agnola observes, Kazakhstan's society exists as "neither fully traditional nor entirely modern" (Dall'Agnola 2024: 12). This hybridity presents both challenges and opportunities for decolonial scholarship and practice, demanding careful navigation of historical legacies

and contemporary realities. Kazakhstani scholars and activists, by integrating global decolonial concepts with local histories, aim to foster a more inclusive and equitable society that honors its diverse heritage while addressing historical injustices.

Kazakhstani decolonial studies have made significant strides in theorizing the legacy of Soviet and Russian coloniality while proposing concrete strategies for epistemic justice, memory politics, and cultural reclamation. These scholars creatively adapt global decolonial frameworks to Kazakhstan's unique historical context, centering indigenous knowledge and post-Soviet hybridity as key analytical concepts. However, the field's current focus often privileges the experiences of the ethnic Kazakhstani majority, leaving questions regarding contemporary socioeconomically marginalized and confessional subaltern groups relatively underexplored. Addressing this gap remains a critical challenge for future decolonial research in Kazakhstan, ensuring that the field continues to evolve toward greater inclusivity and comprehensive engagement with all forms of subalternity. The ongoing development of Kazakhstani decolonial theory thus represents both a significant intellectual achievement and an invitation for more expansive and intersectional approaches to understanding post-Soviet coloniality and resistance.

Conclusions

The above analysis demonstrates that encounters of the intellectuals of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, at least in the cases of Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, with decolonial theory unfold as a fundamentally double-edged process: while challenging certain Russian imperial and Soviet colonial legacies, they simultaneously risk reinforcing other hierarchical structures. Through examining intellectual and activist discourses in the three countries, this study reveals how Eastern European and Northern Eurasian decolonial claims often invoke anti-colonial critique while inadvertently reproducing new forms of dominance and hegemony. These findings confirm the central hypothesis that adopters of decolonial thought tend to subvert particular colonial narratives even as they sometimes instantiate new status differentials within their own scholarly and political orders.

In Ukraine, decolonial thought has become deeply intertwined with cultural resistance and the forging of a new national identity. The Donbas War and subsequent Russian full-scale invasion have catalyzed a horizontal reorientation in Ukrainian art, historiography, and intellectual activism, emphasizing local complexity and polyphony. This process has linked emergent decolonial narratives to profound identity shifts, as communities engage in Ukrainian anti-colonial resistance by consciously erasing colonialist elements from cultural representation and treating atrocity documentation as epistemological delinking from imperial frameworks. These struggles have fundamentally reshaped public memory and civic self-understanding, with Ukrainian intellectuals and artists re-evaluating history, language, and memory through decolonial lenses. The Ukrainian situation exemplifies decolonial discourse centered on nation-centered anti-colonial solidarity, epistemic liberation, and rebuilding national identity in the face of external threats. However, during this process, the voices of many marginalized groups often go unheard.

The Russian context presents a more contested and fractious decolonial turn. While some scholars diagnose internal coloniality within Russian thought and advocate for epistemic justice through decentering Western knowledge hierarchies—even describing Russia as a “subaltern empire”—other segments of Russian academic and ideological discourse have co-opted decolonial language to serve Putinist neo-imperialism. Russian decolonial discourse, therefore, oscillates between genuine critique of Soviet/Russian imperial legacies and the appropriation of decolonial rhetoric to justify contemporary authoritarianism. This tension reflects Russia's liminal position in global hierarchies, where some activists genuinely seek to unmask post-Soviet coloniality while others reinforce Kremlin-inspired civilizational narratives.

Kazakhstan presents yet another variation, blending indigenous epistemologies with state-driven identity politics. Following the January 2022 unrest and Russia's war in Ukraine, long-suppressed debates about “tangible colonialism” have surfaced, prompting more open shifts in national narratives. While official discourse has largely downplayed Tsarist and Soviet domination in favor of celebrating a mythic pre-colonial past, grassroots decolonial voices increasingly question this silence. Filmmakers and activists critically reinterpret Kazakh mythology and history to expose how colonial legacies have shaped gendered social roles. Kazakhstan's decolonial reception is thus marked by productive tension: seeking to recover indigenous traditions and rectify Soviet-era erasures while risking collapse into nationalist discourse that treats the nation-state as the sole arbiter of truth. Kazakh decolonial discourse engages memory politics and local epistemologies but struggles to represent emerging subaltern groups—particularly ethnic minorities and women—without reproducing state-centric histories.

These three cases reveal both common threads and significant divergences across Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. Regional actors draw upon shared decolonial vocabularies—particularly epistemic “delinking” or disobedience to Western-centered knowledge—to affirm local agency and pluriversal histories. Both Ukrainian and Kazakh communities, for instance, utilize wartime crises to break from colonial narratives by documenting violence and establishing alternative epistemologies outside imperial historiographies.

Many thinkers refer to a broadly defined “ethics of liberation” that connects with decolonial feminism and theories from the Global South, despite the fact that decolonial theory has spread to Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia mainly through Western universities. Nevertheless, national contexts heavily shape how these ideas are expressed. In Ukraine, the decolonial shift has largely been driven by civic activists and artists opposing foreign influence and Russian aggression. In Kazakhstan, decolonial language often supports top-down nation-building and language revival efforts. Russia presents an intermediate case: ideas about a subaltern empire and critiques of Western epistemic dominance circulate among intellectuals but coexist awkwardly with an aggressive neo-imperialist ideology.

The analysis uncovers various reorientation strategies emerging regionally—from solidarity actions to transcolonial approaches. Each strategy must address the unique legacies of socialism, empire, neoliberalism, and nation-building within its specific

national context. While similar frameworks circulate across borders, these discourses reveal distinct new hegemonies that shape the position of different communities within the new hierarchies of each post-Soviet nation.

This study opens several avenues for further research. A key priority involves theorizing intra-national inequalities and hierarchies that existing decolonial literature often overlooks. This may require reevaluating the concept of “subaltern” within Eastern European and Northern Eurasian contexts by exploring how gender, race, and class intersect with post-socialist colonial legacies and current neoliberal state-building, as well as exclusivist nation-building projects.

Another key priority involves building authentic transnational solidarity frameworks that can foster transcultural alliances linking Eastern European and Northern Eurasian struggles while connecting these movements to broader global anti-colonial initiatives. Such frameworks must remain vigilant against appropriation, instrumentalization, and the reproduction of new hegemonies, ensuring that decolonial practice serves genuine liberation rather than merely reconfiguring existing power structures.

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