

**POST-SOVIET OR POSTCOLONIAL?  
ON (DE-)DECOLONIZATION IN WARTIME UKRAINE:  
THE CASE OF ODESA<sup>1</sup>**

**Vera Skvirskaja**

University of Copenhagen  
ORCID: 0000-0001-5637-5192

DOI: 10.36169/2227-6068.2025.02.00005

**Abstract.** *This article explores the debates over decolonization in Ukraine during the ongoing Russian war (2014–), with a particular focus on present-day Odesa, a port city on the Black Sea. It argues that the post-Soviet framework remains essential for understanding the practices and tensions on the ground, even as postcolonial perspectives gain traction and Ukrainian society seeks to leave the post-Soviet epoch behind. The study shows that decisions about which symbols, monuments, and cultural legacies to remove or reinterpret have sparked polarized interpretations: some Odesans see decolonization as an opportunity to reimagine the city beyond its Russian-centered representations of the past and the old Odesa myth, while others perceive these efforts as coercive, Soviet-style attempts to erase Odesa’s heritage. In the city, the debates over decolonization reflect a confrontation between two patriotic orientations: one opposing the Russian invasion, and another linking that struggle to a broader and deeper project of decolonial transformation. The article highlights how post-Soviet dynamics are manifest among both supporters and opponents of decolonization.*

**Keywords:** *Russo-Ukrainian war, heritage, Soviet legacy, memory wars, culture wars, cultural front, Odesa myth*

The article **received:** October 11, 2025; **approved:** December 18, 2025.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers and Dr. Elmira Muratova for their helpful and critical comments on an earlier version of the article. The research on which this article is based has partially been supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (DFF), ID: 10.46540/5240-00093B, Case No: 5240-00093B.

## Introduction

This article focuses on the controversies of decolonization in war-affected Ukraine, particularly since the beginning of the Russian military invasion in 2022. It suggests that the concept of the post-Soviet is crucial for understanding the impact and afterlives of the Soviet Union and for grasping the dynamics of ongoing tensions in nation-state building on the ground. In tandem with the growing scholarly interest in postcoloniality as both a research theme and a methodology in studies of wartime Ukraine and Russia, the article adopts an anthropological understanding whereby the Russian war against Ukraine (since 2014) has underscored the enduring ideological (cf. Bogdanova et al. 2023: 95) and analytical power of the concept of the post-Soviet.

The war has pitted different anti-imperialisms or anti-colonialisms against one another, bringing to the fore conflicting perspectives from the Western Left, Eastern Europe led by Ukrainians, and Russia (e.g., Dzenovska 2024: 485). The plural discourses of decolonization are by no means new in (post-)Soviet Ukraine, historically encompassing diverse and contradictory currents, whose legacies remain evident today. One was promoted by the Soviet mainstream anti-imperialist rhetoric that built on the Bolsheviks' ideological discourse: the Russian Empire was “a prison of peoples,” and the task of the Soviets was to bring liberation to the socially oppressed and nationally repressed imperial subjects, among them the Ukrainians.

This rhetoric was part of Soviet authoritative discourse—the standardized and routinely reproduced language of Soviet propaganda—which was also aimed externally at the many nations and liberation movements in the Third World. The Slavist Nancy Condee (in Spivak et al. 2006: 829) has captured this strategy when she described the Soviet Union as “an anti-imperialist empire.” In the context of Soviet Ukraine, this Soviet discourse formally recognized the role of Ukrainian culture and arts in Ukrainians' fight for cultural distinctiveness (*samobytnost*) and for the unification of their lands historically. Moreover, while it acknowledged the historical disunity (*razobshchennost*) and diversity of Ukrainian lands,<sup>1</sup> it also emphasized that, in spite of diverse cultural influences and histories, from around the seventeenth century, Ukrainian art (e.g., wooden architecture, pictorial and decorative art, ecclesiastical mural painting) manifested a common aesthetic approach. As elsewhere in nineteenth-century Europe, the national awakening in Ukrainian regions was stimulated by a growing interest in peasant folk culture. A key role in the development of Ukrainian culture was played by the son of a Ukrainian serf, the poet, writer, and artist Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), who was trained at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and was connected to the Russian democratic revolutionary circles (cf. Баранов и др. 1978: 509–510; 528; 538). Many post-World War II Soviet, Russified Ukrainians grew up with this understanding of their decolonized present and of the self, whether or not they subscribed to the propagandistic trope of the Soviet man as “national in form, socialist in content.”

---

<sup>1</sup> The regional diversity of Ukraine reflects histories of belonging to the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

A different current of decolonization was represented by a circle or a group of the Sixtiers who appeared during the relative liberalization of political-social life under Khrushchev's reign (1953-1964) in the sixties. The Sixtiers were an assemblage of opposition-minded intellectuals and intelligentsia—writers, poets, and artists—espousing national rights and expressing anticolonial attitudes, and, in the late Soviet period, also promoting a broader conception of human rights in political, religious, economic, and cultural spheres (cf. Bilocerkowycz 2019). Like the official Soviet authoritative discourse, the Sixtiers venerated Taras Shevchenko and, in their works, expressed solidarity with the oppressed cultures and nations elsewhere in the world. Some became engaged in political opposition more than others; while the Sixtiers and their followers were interested in Ukrainian culture, insisted on using the Ukrainian language, and shared identification as members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, Russian culture was not considered as something foreign (Mokryk 2022: 94–107). Collaboration with Russian dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s was not widespread, but neither was it uncommon.<sup>1</sup> The works of Russian-language *samizdat*, including those on tragic events in Ukrainian history such as the Holodomor, were in wide circulation among the multi-ethnic urban intelligentsia in Ukraine and were perhaps better known than Ukrainian-language *samvydav*. The case in point is that just as with Russian dissidents and “dissident-like” people discussed by Yurchak (Yurchak 2006: 102–108), where open criticism of, or confrontation with, the Soviet system was involved, leading to dismissal, exile, or imprisonment, Ukrainian dissidents often felt outside the category of “normal people”. Their anticolonial stance (the term “colonialism” was used) and their attempts at decolonization of the mind in “a hybrid cultural space between the Ukrainian national culture and the official Soviet one” (Mokryk 2022: 121) were considered largely irrelevant by mainstream Soviet Ukrainian society, outside the circles of the oppositional intelligentsia.

These two contrasting currents of decolonization—Soviet official and Ukrainian dissident—were challenged by the top-down perestroika reforms and the subsequent People's Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika, *Rukh* (“The Movement”), in the late 1980s. *Rukh* (est. 1989) united diverse groups—clergy, reform-minded communists, representatives of ethnic minorities, intellectuals, environmentalists, and former political prisoners—around a common platform that emphasized economic and ecological concerns and the development of Ukrainian culture. The Movement and its delegates in the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine endorsed complete independence from the USSR and contributed to the establishment of a sovereign Ukrainian state in 1991.

In independent Ukraine, the Soviet-era attitudes and rhetoric of decolonization have morphed into rhizomatic manifestations and new, post-Soviet forms of both vernacular and authoritative discourse, including political rituals and visual language. Russia's reactions to Ukraine's political leanings toward the EU and the United States

---

<sup>1</sup> Halyna Mohylnytska, 2008, Odesa, personal communication. In Soviet times, the poet and educator Halyna Mohylnytska (1937–2021) was active in the Ukrainian human rights movement in Odesa and was one of the initiators of the campaign to establish the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. In 2024, the Halyna Mohylnytska Award was established as a “building block” of a new narrative about Ukrainian Odesa (Челяк 2024).

have involved attempts to interfere in Ukraine's domestic affairs, which in turn have resulted in intensified national identity-building efforts in the country (Torbakov 2022: 404). The Orange revolution (2004), with its emphasis on democracy, EU integration and Ukrainian national traditions, was also brought about, as Chernetsky (Chernetsky 2007: 211) has argued, by the spirit of carnivalesque cultural production of Ukrainian intellectuals and writers rethinking Ukraine's cultural history.

A decade later, the Euromaidan (the Revolution of Dignity, 2013-2014), the annexation of Crimea by Russia (2014), and the Russo-Ukrainian war have not only brought the language of decolonization to the forefront of Ukrainian politics, media, and research agendas, but have also exacerbated tensions between official and various grassroots initiatives. An ongoing issue at stake has been the challenge of overcoming "the amorphous post-Soviet identity" (Torbakov 2022: 408). In this article, I discuss some of these tensions, arguing that the concept of the post-Soviet, despite being often dismissed by scholars and their Ukrainian subjects alike as no longer applicable or desirable, continues to offer insight into wartime decolonization efforts aimed at Russian imperial and Soviet heritage. Decolonization practices and people's varied responses to them illuminate the ways in which continuities with the Soviet period, both imaginary and material, are manifested and negotiated. In what follows, I turn first to anthropological and other scholarly debates on post-Soviet and post-colonial "situations", highlighting the dominance of a Russia-centric approach to colonialism in wartime Ukraine. I then zoom in on the port city of Odesa.

## 1. Theoretical Frames and Political Realities: Post-Soviet vs. Post-Colonial

Speaking on behalf of the intellectuals on the left, Buck-Morss (Buck-Morss 2008) has argued that the fall of the USSR (1991) marked a new ontology of time rather than an ontology of the collective, a state of affairs she termed "the post-Soviet condition". This shared, universal historical condition ("we are all post-Soviet" (Buck-Morss 2008: 30)) has marked the end of capitalism as conceived in the West and has opened the way for an unlimited range of responses and genuinely democratic exchange. The new community to come still lacked a proper name, but there was an expectation that it was on its way (Buck-Morss 2008: 31).

For many ordinary post-Soviet subjects, the temporal dimension ("a halfway time", 2008: 30) was also of great importance but from a different, nostalgic perspective. Shortly after the end of state socialism and the partial removal of Soviet imagery from public spaces, Soviet symbols, iconic images, and cultural products acquired new popularity and visibility. The recovered Soviet reference materialized in a wide range of commodities, artworks, and public sites driven by new entrepreneurs across the vast post-Soviet realm.<sup>1</sup> In Ukraine, the Communist Party of Ukraine (est. 1993) remained a major political player

---

<sup>1</sup> One can recall, for instance, in the 2000s the popular "Propaganda" club in central Moscow, which paid homage to early Soviet aesthetics, or the open-air, barbed-wire "Gulag" restaurant in the Hydropark in Kyiv.

until it was banned in 2015.<sup>1</sup> These diverse engagements with, and evocations of, Soviet legacies are widely known as post-Soviet nostalgia, part and parcel of the Eastern European “nostalgia industry”. Comparative research on this topic has produced a strong argument against the tendency to read politics into nostalgia and to read nostalgia into politics: even though nostalgia could, of course, be appropriated for political purposes, it has mainly indicated that something is irrevocably lost and has thus created a sense of dislocation from the socialist past (cf. Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2014: 64-66). Differently put, post-Soviet nostalgia was not a simple fit with the individual or regional-collective dispositions and attitudes (positive or negative) to historical memory and the Soviet past (see e.g., Shevel 2016 on memory wars). At the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea, as Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2014: 90) pointed out, post-Soviet nostalgia had acquired an additional meaning—as nostalgia for the early promises of postsocialism itself. Younger generations of Ukrainian artists, for instance, have tended to regard the Soviet past as “a clear antiquity,” while reserving nostalgic representations for the first post-Soviet decades (cf. Osadcha 2024 on contemporary Ukrainian photography).

Since the early 1990s, in tandem with this omnipresent but also fading post-Soviet nostalgia, anthropologists have been debating whether the concept of post-Soviet was useful for designating culturally different societies with a communist legacy—not only the former Soviet bloc countries, but also the former republics of the USSR, including Russia. While it was recognized early on that young people and new generations tended to reject the label as offensive or inappropriate (cf. Humphrey 2002: 13), for many scholars this concept became obsolete for studying the “family resemblance” of post-socialist countries (e.g., Galina Lindquist 1999, personal communication; cf. Bogdanova et al. 2023).

An alternative conceptual approach favored seeing the post-Soviet space and time from the vantage of comparative studies of imperialism and colonialism. On the one hand, it followed the methodologies of postcolonial studies, with their focus on the practices of domination, production of knowledge, and representations. The key emphasis at the time (the first post-Soviet decades), however, was not on the colony and the metropole but on the (post-)communist self and the capitalist other. On the other hand, postcolonial perspectives allowed for a broader comparative framework centered on the globalization of capitalism: the transfer of Western institutions (e.g., markets, democracy) to non-Western settings. The task of anthropologists was to give full voice to the natives (native intellectuals—many of whom were based in the West—as well as ordinary people) as analysts of their own condition (Verdery 2002: 19).

In the narrower field of Ukrainian Studies, postcoloniality was first introduced by the Australian scholar of Ukrainian descent, Marko Pavlyshyn, through works published in 1992. Pavlyshyn is also credited with introducing Ukrainian readers to mainstream

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1999, the leader of the Ukrainian Communists, Petro Symonenko, made it to the second round of the presidential elections, with a slogan “For people and the Orthodox Church” (Шлихта 2014). In 2016, a sociological survey recorded that 35 percent of respondents expressed regret over the dissolution of the USSR, while 50 percent did not (Огородник 2016). In 2022, Symonenko welcomed the Russian forces in Ukraine and then fled to Russia (Shcherbak 2024).

Western postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha; however, he has been criticized for portraying postcolonialism as a liberated, optimistic and forward-looking condition (Chernetsky 2007: 49–53). This approach, Pavlyshyn's critics argue, has not accounted for the contestation of colonial domination that in the Ukrainian case has been manifest in the ongoing memory wars and competing "memory regimes" (Shevel 2016). At the same time, postcolonial scholars were largely silent on the subject of the former Soviet realm (Moore 2001: 116; see also Spivak et al 2006: 829–831) until the Russian military invasion in 2022, when Ukraine has been framed as a post-Soviet place to "teach us about colonisation" (e.g., Redbirth and Homaniuk 2024; Shevel 2024), to engage with decolonial writers of the Global South (e.g., Yurchuk 2024), and to enrich the postcolonial vocabulary writ large (e.g., Biedarieva 2024).

Renewed attention to the post-Soviet has emerged in response to the Russian war against Ukraine. Especially the younger generations of Ukrainians, including academics, and their counterparts in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, have publicly distanced themselves from the idea of belonging to a "post-Soviet society"; the "Soviet" has to be eliminated from cultural heritage and, to some extent, public memory (as I discuss in the following sections). The argument is that a range of culturally diverse societies were an unwilling part of the Soviet Empire. Historically, they belonged to different cultural worlds and were identified with different political (imperial) spaces, and hence, at present, do not want to be defined or identified by their shared Soviet past. In line with this empirical reality, Tlostanova (Tlostanova 2024) has suggested the term "no longer post-Soviet spaces," while Dzenovska (in Bogdanova et al. 2023) has pointed out that the post-Soviet is all too often deployed as an ideological marker on the ground, with so-called "Soviet mentality" being blamed as an impediment to a new start (Bogdanova et al. 2023: 98). It has also been noted that the post-Soviet has been co-opted in Russia's cultural diplomacy, reinforcing the ideological foundation for the imagined ties between Russia and the post-Soviet states (Osadcha 2024: 64).

Since the Soviet system was adjusted differently in diverse cultural settings, scholars have been aware that the post-Soviet is a complex construct that does not refer only to shared conceptions and, moreover, is used differently by different disciplines and different generations of researchers (Bogdanova et al. 2023: 95). If we treat the post-Soviet as a temporal rather than a geographic phenomenon, concerns about diversity and spatiality give way to the scholarly argument that the Russian invasion in 2022 constitutes a "critical event" (Das 1995) that has compelled individuals and communities to reconfigure their identities, values, and relationships, thereby marking the end of the post-Soviet period. For instance, writing in late 2022, historian Torbakov (Torbakov 2022: 408) suggested that the amorphous post-Soviet identity, which had been widespread in Ukraine since independence, was unlikely to survive the war. The post-Soviet era has been declared over, the post-communist transition (including democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization) has ended or failed, and a new, as-yet-unnamed era is said to have begun (Minakov 2024: 15–17; cf. also Morozov in Охримовская 2025; Kasianov 2024). This change in "periodisation" has likewise emerged in the discourse of leading English-language media worldwide: with the onset of the military invasion, Ukraine's image as a "post-Soviet state with structural problems" at the

periphery of the European order has been recast as that of a fighter for democracy, a defender of Europe, and a key player in the global food market (Kuczabski et al 2025).<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is precisely against media representations of, and theoretical emphases on, the end of the post-Soviet time—or, to borrow Buck-Morss's (Buck-Morss 2008) terms, the post-Soviet ontology of time—that it seems worthwhile to revisit older anthropological understandings of the post-Soviet, as well as recent implicit or explicit usages of the post-Soviet in the analyses of Ukrainian nation-building.

The early anthropological voices (e.g., Humphrey 2002) in defense of the post-Soviet focused on the distinctive features of these societies while also emphasizing that such a focus should not come at the expense of traits these societies shared with other parts of the world, including the West. There were continuities in the everyday moralities of socialism that were undermined but not totally replaced by new nationalisms or new religiosity. Moreover, Sovietism persisted as a covert ideological contestation in a variety of diverse practices. It made sense to think, for example, about Sovietism as a style of government: an authoritarian style of government, a patronage style of government, or informal political-economic arrangements as an accepted social norm. In this way, the category of the post-Soviet also allowed for a broader range of comparisons of political habits, languages, and attitudes.

More recently, writing about ethical evaluations in the study of nationalism, Shevel (Shevel 2024: 342) has argued that what she calls “the post-Soviet situation,” different as it is from Western democracies, is an important factor explaining the shape, and indeed the necessity, of ethnic nationalism in Ukraine. The post-Soviet dimension is what allows us to comprehend why, in contrast to the mainstream political theorization of ethnic nationalism as a “bad”/pejorative variant contrasted with the civic one, Ukrainian ethnic nationalism is ethically defensible and justifiable. The post-Soviet situation here refers to both the “detailed local knowledge” and the ethical lens that enables us to move away from the habitual understanding of ethnic nationalism as representing the democratically and civilizationally inferior East.

In the post-Soviet environment, Ukrainian (or Estonian, or Latvian) ethnic nationalism is a form of affirmative action against Russian (neo)imperialism, where the latter is disguised as ethically sound civic nationalism or internationalism. While Russia wants its post-Soviet neighbors to pursue civic nation-building policies, including dual citizenship and official bilingualism (i.e., including Russian alongside the state language), the neighbors treat official monolingualism as a strategy to undo the colonial and Soviet legacies of Russification (Shevel 2024: 341). Shevel argues that in the post-Soviet states, the problematics of ethnic nationalism are not simply about minorities and migrants' rights (i.e., the status of a Russian minority and Russian-speaking communities) and individual rights but about the durability and prospects of new statehood itself. Official bilingualism and multiple citizenship are not objectionable analytically, but the post-Soviet situation renders them so in practice. For Shevel, this approach exemplifies

---

<sup>1</sup> When editing this article (November 2025), a major corruption scheme in the energy sector, in the state nuclear power company Energoatom, involving President Zelensky's longtime associates, was uncovered, dealing a blow to these public representations.

“theorizing from the bottom up.”<sup>1</sup> Taking into account the post-Soviet situation, as opposed to “abstract reasoning,” helps in analyzing ethnic and linguistic reidentifications in Ukraine without attributing assimilationist intent to the state’s Ukrainization policies; the dynamics of minority–majority relations take place in the post-Soviet context where cultural and ethnic boundaries are already blurred and identities can be rediscovered or chosen (Shevel 2024: 348–349). Implicit in this argument is the postulated durability of the hybrid Soviet man construct.

Addressing the analytical significance of the post-Soviet situation, Shevel, like many other recent analysts of Ukrainian postcoloniality (e.g., Biedarieva 2024), frames her discussion around Russia and Russian cultural heritage and legacies, which are evaluated negatively. Through these post-Soviet lenses, other types of “colonial” cultural heritage (Austro-Hungarian, Polish, Ottoman) appear largely insignificant or less subversive, even when they are highly visible in Ukrainian public space. Suffice to mention the monument to Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph (1830-1916), erected in Chernivtsi in 2009 at the request of private individuals and sponsors (Purici and Sabol 2021), and still standing at the time of writing. Whereas I agree with Shevel that blurred cultural and ethnic boundaries in post-Soviet Ukraine may undermine or challenge the discourse of ethically objectionable assimilation of minorities resulting from the top-down Ukrainization policies, I would also suggest that the ethnic minority-majority binary limits our understanding of the tensions of decolonization on the ground. I shall use the case study of Odesa—a city where I have worked ethnographically studying migration, coexistence, markets, and transnationalism since 2005 (e.g., Сквирская, Хэмфри 2007; Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009; Skvirskaja 2010, 2014)—to explore the post-Soviet situation at the grassroots. Before I turn to wartime Odesa, a brief overview of Ukraine’s decommunization and decolonization practices and recent legislation is in order.

## **2. Breaking with (pre-)Soviet continuities: Decommunization, Decolonization, and The *Kultnastup* Manifesto**

At the time of Ukraine gaining its independence, Ukrainian activists were formulating their aspirations as a common wish to break, one way or another, with Soviet continuities (ideological, economic, and political) through new political projects. Increased emphasis on the use of the Ukrainian language and the popularization of Ukrainian culture was the order of the day, but decolonization (from Russia or the USSR) was not yet a common or widespread conceptualization of these processes. The initial rupture with the Soviet past was marked by decommunization, and the first waves of decommunization took place as early as the late 1980s and 1990s, when many, but not all, monuments to Lenin and other prominent communist figures and KGB members were removed. A more pervasive and organized campaign for the removal of symbols of the communist regime was approved

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent (wartime) class-focused scholarship articulates an alternative bottom-up approach, emphasizing the enduring significance of the Soviet legacy in shaping the proletarian subjectivity and national identifications of the Ukrainian working class—particularly in relation to political attitudes and (cynical) attitudes toward political action and institutionalized political structures (e.g., Gorbach 2024; Ishchenko 2024).

by the Verkhovna Rada in 2015 and is regulated by a package of laws “On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of the Propaganda of Their Symbols.” The decommunization laws also prohibit the public expression of certain views on the historical past, and some of their provisions have been criticized by human rights groups (Shevel 2016: 24; Kasianov 2024).

After the full-scale invasion, ongoing decommunization was followed by intensified de-Russification at the grass-roots—a spontaneous process of abandoning symbols and names associated with Russia and Russian legacies. Many Russophone Ukrainians also spontaneously shifted to Ukrainian, although some later partially reverted to Russian as the war continued and became “normalised” (cf. Besters-Dilger 2023: 4; Івановська 2025).<sup>1</sup> This process of de-Russification was not regulated by law. Local communities (*hromada*) and civil society actors could appeal to local authorities, demanding that a particular street be renamed or that a monument be removed. The final decision was up to the city or village council. Eventually, the practices of decommunization and de-Russification were addressed together in the new legislation “On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine, and the Decolonization of Place Names” (Закон 2023), known in Ukraine simply as the Decolonization Law, which came into force in July 2023. The law aims at critically rethinking the history and heritage of the Russian Empire and its cultural influence. It prohibits toponyms that “glorify, commemorate, propagate, or symbolize the occupying state, or its prominent, memorial, historical, and cultural sites, cities, dates, events, or its figures who carried out military aggression against Ukraine and other sovereign states.” In the explanatory note, the authors of the draft law highlighted the necessity of fully restoring Ukrainian toponymy that was distorted beyond recognition and erased from maps by the former totalitarian regime (see YCI 2023). In contrast to spontaneous de-Russification, the Decolonization Law is intended to accelerate the process of removing Russian imperial and cultural symbols; city and local authorities are now obliged to respond to the community’s proposals. As with the decommunization processes initiated a decade earlier, the state-driven decolonization discourse and practices have been unevenly received by the public and have actively engaged Ukrainian academia, educational institutions, cultural producers, media, and NGOs.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the implementation of the Decolonization Law, other high-profile initiatives and campaigns promoting Ukrainian content have emerged. From the outset of the Russian invasion, culture has become an important strategic resource, giving rise to the idea of Ukraine’s “cultural front” (*kul’turnyi front*), indicating that culture is a guide to values and a crucial weapon (*zbroia*) (Skvirskaja 2024). The Ukrainian Institute of

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the documentary by the Oscar-winning Ukrainian director Mstyslav Chernov, “2000 Meters to Andriivka” (2025), that records conversations among soldiers from the Kharkiv area about their efforts to master Ukrainian.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the activities of the NGO “Decolonize. Ukraine” that identifies Soviet and Russian imperial heritage across Ukraine, reports it to local authorities, and campaigns for its removal. As Skolkina (Skolkina 2024) has noted, the tendency to mark Soviet monuments as “Russian” has introduced additional tensions in local communities.

National Remembrance (est. 2006), mockingly called by some “The Institute of National Amnesia” (*natsionalnyi skleroz*) for its part in decommunization, has played an important role in the weaponization and securitization of the Ukrainian language and culture. The cultural front has extended the idea that the Ukrainian language is a bearer of patriotism and a weapon to be used against the enemy (KHY 2014). In October 2024, a new cultural doctrine, “The Cultural Offensive” (*Kultnastup*), with its “Manifesto of Offensive Cultural Policy” was adopted at a forum of cultural producers, politicians, and cultural managers gathered in Kyiv (Маніфест 2024). The initiative is meant to coordinate the efforts of the government, civil society, and cultural industries around a new cultural policy that is aimed not only at the protection and defense of Ukrainian culture but also at its active development and vigorous promotion, as well as increased financial investment in Ukraine’s cultural and linguistic sphere (Isar Ednannia 2024). As Serhiy Zhadan (2024), a prominent Ukrainian writer, public figure, serviceman, and signatory of the Manifesto, put it during the Kultnastup forum:

Yesterday [2022] we were monolithic and consolidated, but not so today; there is war fatigue and disorientation—we need ‘concrete’ to bind us together... Now Ukrainian culture can properly move beyond its ‘ethnic ghetto’ to become the culture of Ukrainian society as a whole...The cultural front is important (Жадан 2024).

The Kultnastup initiative has promoted the slogan “By getting rid of the old, the alien, we will find ourselves.” Moving Ukrainian culture out of its “ethnic ghetto” implies the permanent removal of Russian cultural products from Ukraine. “Ukrainian-language national and locally produced [sic] Western content should completely displace Russian-language content” (Маніфест 2024). Another signatory of the Kultnastup Manifesto, Vladlen Maraev (Бондарук 2024), a historian and author of the popular YouTube channel “History Without Myths”, maintains that Ukraine had remained post-Soviet as long as there was a monument to Lenin in the center of Kyiv, dismantled in 2013. He emphasizes that, following the Revolution of Dignity (2013-14), it is only in the context of the war with Russia that a new Ukraine is emerging; for Ukraine, the military conflict constitutes a war for independence, described as an anti-imperial, anti-colonial, national liberation struggle (Бондарук 2024).<sup>1</sup>

Kultnastup has elicited a range of responses, including critical reactions from some Ukrainian public intellectuals and engaged citizens. On the one hand, the Kultnastup initiative feeds into long-standing concerns about the dangers of regulating the past through politically charged legislation and whether such legislation complies with the provisions of the Ukrainian constitution. On the other hand, there is cynicism regarding the timing and underlying intent of such patriotic initiatives directed at cultural heritage. Years before the war, especially during the tenure of President Yushchenko (2005–2010), which marked the most democratic period and the most nationalistic government in Ukraine (Shevel 2024: 337), ordinary people were well aware that the

---

<sup>1</sup> YouTube channel “History Without Myths” (est. 2020) is “dedicated to debunking unscientific myths, fake narratives, and stereotypes about Ukraine and Ukrainians, presenting the past without falsification, and featuring contributions from professional historians and academics” (Description 2020).

status of Russian and the memory wars were used opportunistically by competing political elites to gain voter support (e.g., Skvirskaja 2009). At present, there is apprehension that “aggressive patriotism” or “ethically omnivorous patriotism” is often a performative display (sometimes reminiscent of the old Soviet *pokazhukha*—a performative conformity to the Party line).<sup>1</sup> As Ukrainian philosopher and public intellectual Serhii Datsiuk (in Yuriy Romanenko 2024) asserts, there is no doubt that Ukrainian culture and content must be supported and promoted, but not as an “offensive.”<sup>2</sup>

To sum up, the Decolonization Law and the concomitant discourses and practices on the ground have resulted in new visibility and new tensions surrounding decolonization processes targeting Russian imperial heritage, and Russian and Ukrainian heritage of the Soviet period. While some removals and renaming of heritage deemed ideologically objectionable pass unnoticed or take place quietly, others provoke outpourings of emotion and discontent (mainly on social media and in private conversations), as well as accusations against those in power (*vlada*) of iconoclasm detrimental to the strategic interests of Ukraine. In the next section, I discuss how decolonization has been addressed in Odesa, leading to a “de-decolonization” campaign spearheaded by a small faction of Odesa’s activists and their allies, both within Ukraine and abroad. While I acknowledge that there is a wide spectrum of attitudes toward, and pragmatic interests in, decolonization, including stances of total indifference or radical ethno-nationalism, I will discuss only the aggregated mainstream voices of the proponents and opponents of decolonization.

### 3. Decolonization in Odesa: The Myths and Monuments

A recurring theme in the extensive body of scholarship on decolonization is that it involves not only the replacement of colonial symbols, affiliations, and attachments, or a confrontation with colonial knowledge, but, more fundamentally, the creation of one’s own models, freed from colonial knowledge. This generative process is an act of “unlearning imperialism” (Azoulay 2019), which entails a commitment to revising history and rejecting imperial taxonomies; it entails “decompressing, decoding, reversing, rewinding, unlearning, and undoing” in order to recover “potential history.” Now, “potential history” is an evocative concept, distinct from the notions of “alternative” or “forgotten” histories, which are often reflections of the different nationalist regimes of knowledge or ideologies replacing the colonial order of things. The case of wartime Odesa exemplifies the struggle of “alternative histories” with the old or (post-)Soviet

---

<sup>1</sup>As one online commentator, Ivan Kulchytskyy, Lviv, formulated it in a comment thread about the removal of a commemorative plaque to the renown Soviet filmmaker Larisa Shepitko: “For many, being a nationalist, patriot, or intellectual, etc., is simply a matter of performative display [*gra v pokazhukhu*]” (Ivan Kulchytskyy (2025)).

<sup>2</sup>Yuriy Romanenko (2024). In the interview, Datsiuk argues against the “ethically omnivorous patriotism” and “the war for identity” promoted by the *Kultnastup* agenda. In a similar vein, the activist of Euromaidan and journalist Mikhail Golubev questions *ltnastup*’s characterization of the Russian war as “a war for identity,” pointing out that this is a war of the Ukrainian political identity against the current Russian neo-imperial identity (Голубев 2024).

urban myth and the impossibility (cf. Tlostanova 2024) of formulating a decolonized “potential history.”

In independent Ukraine, prior to the Russian war, Odesa had been negotiating its positionality simultaneously as a predominantly Russophone Ukrainian city and as a major international commercial hub –a type of “translocality” (Appadurai 2003) that is removed from the national context. Besides being a leading exporter of grain, Odesa has also been known for the largest open-air wholesale and retail market in Ukraine—the 7th km Market, located just outside the city—which is one reason the city has become an important center for transit commodity trade and transnational migration routes (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009). Odesa’s translocality has been supported by “the Odesa myth,” which has shaped the city’s brand since at least the late 1980s (the period of perestroika and the mass emigration of ethnic minorities, particularly Jews, Germans, and Greeks). It has been popularized by Odesa’s global diaspora, encompassing both Soviet and post-Soviet emigrants in the West and Israel (see, e.g., Сквирская, Хэмфри 2007; Herlihy 2018). An assemblage of representations—summed up as the Odesa myth in both popular and academic literature—includes freedom (the city was a symbol of Westernisation in the Russian Empire), apolitical spirit and trade (it was a porto franco in 1817-1859), humor, Odesan language (an urban koine based on Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Polish and other languages), colorful gangsters, diversity (the city was built by Europeans and hosted ethno-religious minorities), and urban cosmopolitanism (despite the history of pogroms). As the city’s old minority groups emigrated in great numbers, the streets in the post-Soviet Odesa acquired new names such as Greek Street, Jewish Street, Polish Street, and so on.

In the first post-Soviet decades, a “side effect” of this myth, with its cosmopolitan orientation, was the city’s ambivalent attitude toward the Ukrainian state and its “disdain” for Ukrainophone newcomers who were claimed to reduce native Odesans to a “diaspora at home” (Skvirskaja 2010). Ukrainian nationalists had, in turn, tended to see it as a site of Russian neocolonialism because of the city’s persistent attempts to erect a monument to Empress Catherine the Great/Catherine the Second (1729-1796) considered the founder of Odesa. The original monument was removed by the Soviets in 1920, and a replica, now called the Monument to the Founders of Odesa, was erected in 2007 on its original spot—an event condemned in non-Odesan Ukrainian media as a catalyst of the colonization of consciousness (Сквирская, Хэмфри 2007). By then, an alternative reading of Odesa’s history had already claimed that the city was only renamed by Catherine the Great, but its actual “date of birth” went back to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom. Without dwelling much on the Ottoman history of the region, the city was declared 600 years old by a local historian (Болдирев 1994), and Catherine the Great became an element of the Odesa myth to be discarded. The Monument to the Founders of Odesa was taken down and stored in the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum in December 2022 (Dartford 2022).

Today, Odesa is at the center of the Russian-Ukrainian struggle over the borderland where, some scholars argue (e.g., Kravchenko and Zychowicz 2022), the future landscape of Europe is being determined. Efforts to unlearn the Odesa myth have been

part of Ukraine's broader pursuit of epistemic justice. For instance, for the Kultnastup's activist Maraev, undoing the Odesa myth is akin to dismantling Russian propaganda about the city (Історія Без Міфів 2023). There have been no shortages of various creative endeavors in Odesa to consciously formulate new Odesa myths rather than simply dismantle the old (post-)Soviet ones. To demonstrate the range, I use examples of the Odesa Business Club (est. 2017) with its project "Odesa Decolonization" (2023-2024), and the Odesa Literary Festival PORT that organized a discussion titled "The Coast of Freedom and the Literary Colonial Myth" in August 2025 (Стягайло 2025).

The Odesa Business Club (OBC) has declared the task of reconfiguring the Odesa myth as its contribution to enhancing Ukraine's resilience and security. The "Odesa Decolonization" project, supported by USAID in 2024, focused on the history of entrepreneurship in Odesa as a key defining trait of the city-port. It proposed envisioning the city as one of entrepreneurs, in contrast to the popular (post-)Soviet images of Odesa's early twentieth-century gangsters, bandits, and smuggling networks, and of the black-market operators of the Soviet underworld. To this end, the OBC has organized research programs and workshops and has promoted publications on Odesan entrepreneurs of the past from diverse ethnic backgrounds. It has also maintained a dedicated Facebook page and a website, *Odesa Decolonization*.

The Odesa Literary Festival PORT considered Odesa's Ukrainian facet, which was disregarded by the old Odesa myth, and explored different ways of restoring it in the city's history. The main question raised concerned how to produce new cultural maps, conduct cultural diplomacy, and communicate new visions of the city to the world. In the new visions, Odesa's diversity is valued in the national context, but urban multiculturalism must be divorced from the Russian colonial myth that the Russian language has united everyone. Habitual understandings of regional identity may also require a radical shift in both geographical visions and the values attached to the landscape. Whereas the old myth operates through an image of a blank space where the Russian Empire established civilization, it is pertinent to acknowledge the steppe as a "Ukrainian cradle" and a crossroads of important historical connections. The PORT participants discussed the possibility of looking at the region not only as the South—which often refers to the south of the Russian Empire and the USSR—but also as the North: the north of the Mediterranean or the north of the Black Sea. Advocates of these approaches recognized that it was a monumental task to overcome the old stereotypes of Odesa, popularized by the post-Soviet Odesa diaspora, by a substantial body of Russian-language popular literature and memoirs of the city (known as the genre of *Odesika*), and by Western audiences familiar with the Odesa myth through the works of Odesan writers in translation (e.g., the Soviet Jewish writer Isaac Babel).

There are, as mentioned earlier, regional variations in the reception and implementation of the Decolonization Law in Ukraine. The examples from Odesa illustrate a broader tendency to concentrate decolonization efforts on Russian cultural and imperial heritage, largely overlooking the heritage of other empires that ruled over the territory of present-day Ukraine, and valuing the country's ethno-cultural diversity. In November 2022, President Zelenski presented Ukraine's bid to host the EXPO 2030 World

Exhibition in Odesa, citing the city's renowned multicultural and multinational character and global connectivity: "In Odesa, you will feel the potential of all humanity" (Зеленський 2022).<sup>1</sup> The 2024 edition of the Statute of the Territorial Community of the City of Odesa states that, when applying the Law on Decolonization, "the renaming of toponymic objects should be carried out with due regard for names that reflect the city's multicultural character" (Голубев 2024). Local media outlets have launched cultural-educational projects to explore Odesa's regional identity through the toponyms of its minority communities (German, Jewish, Gagauz, and others) (see: Земля О'Деса 2025). The practices of topographic renaming reflect this strategy: Isaak Babel's name has been removed from Odesa's map due to the author's alleged links to the NKVD (the Soviet secret police), but another street was then named after Mendele Moykher-Sforim (1836-1917), the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature, who lived and worked in Odesa.

The diverse projects and attempts to envision a decolonized Ukrainian Odesa, freed from the image of "a state within a state" (partially due to its historical *porto franco* status) and Russian cultural domination, have been challenged by the opponents of decolonization. The latter were particularly provoked by the Decolonization Law, resulting, among other things, in a list of some 100 street names liable to renaming in Odesa, which was issued by the Odesa Regional State Administration. Besides the aforementioned writer Babel, the list included Russian classics such as Pushkin and Bunin, cult Odesan writers such as Paustovsky and Il'f and Petrov, and the popular (post-)Soviet stand-up comedian and writer Mikhail Zhvanetski (1934–2020), who also served as president of the World Club of Odesans. The list was produced by the Odesa toponymy committee and has created a stir among many native Odesans and Odesa's diaspora.<sup>2</sup> On the ground, however, it is primarily civil-society actors and decolonization enthusiasts rather than the city administration who have initiated campaigns and practical measures to remove monuments and rename streets; the Odesa ex-Mayor, Gennadi Trukhanov, who was ousted in October 2025 after more than ten years in power, had not been an active supporter of the decolonization of Odesa's historical center.

The de-decolonization activists wrote a letter to UNESCO's Cultural Sector to voice their concerns, signing as patriots of Ukraine, united by their care for the country's future and for Odesa's cultural heritage, which they described as the foundation of the city's fragile social peace. They also expressed concerns that the top-down style of decision-making regarding the country's world heritage could undermine democracy in Ukraine. The letter was signed by 112 representatives of the creative intelligentsia and academia from Odesa (including Westerners settled in Odesa and diasporic Odesans), other regions of Ukraine, and a small number of Western scholars. The UNESCO letter was followed by an open letter to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance and by several publications in high-profile Western outlets, including *The Economist*, *Il Foglio*, and *Prospect*. Although de-decolonization is promoted in the name of the European and cosmopolitan Odesa of lore, it is the Russian language and heritage that have become

---

<sup>1</sup> On the support for multiculturalism among the proponents of decolonization, see also (Любка 2024).

<sup>2</sup> While the street protests, both for and against decolonization, were very modest, explosive debates occurred on social media. On pickets against decolonization in Odesa, see: YCI (2024).

the center of contention. For example, one of the signatories, Thomas de Waal, a British journalist who has worked on Russia and the Caucasus, wrote a piece about Ukrainian government trying to cancel “rich Russian-language cultural heritage” titled “Odesa’s cosmopolitan history under threat” (Waal 2024). The international publicity generated by the UNESCO letter and the follow-up publications has thus attempted to confer new legitimacy on the old Odesa myth.

In tandem with these publications and open letters, the activists have organized a “cultural and intellectual collective” called Ukrainian Cosmopolis (Ukrainian Cosmopolis n.d.) whose strategies include rejecting and discrediting decolonization as a non-transparent, non-democratic, and anti-Constitutional set of procedures. The activities range from challenging the ideas of cultural front and Kultnastup in dedicated workshops to giving public lectures to the Western research community, access to which is facilitated by the fact that the founder of Cosmopolis, Anastasiia Piliavsky, is a UK-based academic of Odesan descent. Although the activists go to great lengths to defend a “cultured and cosmopolitan” Odesa,<sup>1</sup> their cosmopolitan discourse also appears somewhat exclusionary, reproducing (post-)Soviet hierarchical distinctions between “the real Odesans” and the “others”—the local mob, the uncultured villagers (*selo*), and the (new) Ukrainophone Odesans. Local Ukrainian cultural figures are often regarded as less well-known or of lesser quality than their acclaimed Russian or Russophone counterparts in the urban landscape. In her public lecture at the Einstein Forum, Germany, “Decolonization as Ukraine’s Suicidal Culture War” (2025), Piliavsky argued that decolonization projects financed by Euro-American donors had (unwittingly) supported ethno-nationalist agendas wholesale, all the while the Ukrainian language had become associated with unfreedom, forcing people into “internal emigration” in a manner closely reminiscent of Soviet practices.<sup>2</sup> This take on wartime (self-)censorship, which occurs as a matter of fact (cf. Skvirskaja 2024), has appeared highly exaggerated to Cosmopolis’ opponents and has problematized the dynamics of majority–minority relations in decolonization debates—not in terms of ethnic minorities versus the Ukrainian ethnic majority, or Russophone versus Ukrainophone, but in terms of who speaks on behalf of the urban majority.

Many Odesans have been disappointed or offended by Cosmopolis’ activities and claims. Not only are de-decolonisers often seen as an outdated or imposing voice of a local “minority” and (post-)Soviet emigres, but they are also viewed as insensitive to the diverse dispositions of the city’s residents. Commenting on The Economist’s article “Cancel culture in Ukraine” about decolonization in Odesa (Cancel culture 2024), Vladislav Burda (2024), a participant in the Decolonization project run by the Odesa Business Club, lamented that the article undermined to the Club’s efforts on the project and reverted to the idea of Odesa as an “apolitical city” (here, a city where Russian cultural heritage is considered independently of political concerns)—a centerpiece of the old Odesa myth

---

<sup>1</sup> In November 2026, Ukrainian Cosmopolis announced that they were developing a program to invite writers and journalists from Ukraine and other countries to Odesa, cover their stay, and introduce them to the city’s culture. See Dimerli 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture at the workshop “BRICS Postcolonialism”, Einstein Forum, Brandenburg, Germany, February 21, 2025. See the full lecture: Einstein Forum 2025.

(Burda 2024).<sup>1</sup> Many Odesans share the sentiment expressed in the Odesan journalist Olena Balaba's (2023) rhetorical question: "How much more Russian weaponry must fall on our heads before we renounce the Soviet and imperial idols?" At the same time, Balaba and like-minded opponents of the de-decolonizers, including esteemed local scholars, highlight the shared Soviet roots of both radical decolonisers—who are said to reproduce the communist drive to eradicate all supposed dissent "with napalm"—and the sensibilities of older generations and the Russophone Odesan diaspora in the West and Israel, attached to Pushkin, the Silver Age poets, and so on (Балаба 2023).<sup>2</sup> Contrary to de Waal (Waal 2025), they contend that the dominant focus on Russian-language heritage represents a distortion of Odesa's historical cultural reality and that acknowledging this distortion is a step toward genuine multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in Odesa "needs to be restored rather than preserved"; it was only after World War II that Odesa became a monolingual, Russophone Soviet city (Довгополова 2025).

The de-decolorizers have, for their part, repeatedly argued that issues concerning Russian and Soviet heritage should be addressed after the war, when transparent democratic procedures reflecting the preferences of the majority of Odesans can be ensured. The issue of "the majority" remains unsettled and contested. In the meantime, the Cosmopolis activists advance the idea that Odesa is not a "problem" for the Ukrainian nation but a "solution," serving as a model of a diverse, European, and free Ukraine (see: Inaugural Cosmo Colloquium 2024 and also: Piliavsky 2025a).

## Concluding Remarks

The controversies of decolonization in wartime Ukraine can be explained by a combination of cohort-specific historical experiences, scholarly historical interpretations, the persistence of the "post-Soviet situation," and the very methods of decolonization. Setting aside individual aesthetic preferences and popular attitudes toward particular Soviet and Russian cultural figures that fall under the decolonization paragraphs, there is a case for considering emic conceptualizations of decolonization more generally. The opponents of decolonization in Odesa and from other parts of Ukraine include those who are skeptical of Ukraine's status as a former colony on scholarly grounds (cf. Hrytsak 2015 on Ukraine's ideological and economic modernity), as well as those who have perpetuated the Soviet approach to decoloniality as a framework applied primarily to the Third World. For these sceptics, decolonization signals victimhood, underdevelopment, and mislabeling.

Moore (Moore 2001: 117–118) argued long ago that the reluctance in the post-Soviet world to analyze their situation through a "Southern" postcolonial lens might be due to post-Soviet claims of being "European": "The post-Soviet region's European peoples may be convinced that something radically, even 'racially,' differentiates them

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Economist's article, see Malichenko 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The Language Ombudsman, Olena Ivanovska (Івановська 2025), stated she would oppose any language patrols on Ukrainian streets, which she saw as a "Soviet-style practice", and which the mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk introduced to reduce use of Russian in public in 2024.

from the postcolonial Filipinos and Ghanaians.” Notably, this post-Soviet perspective has also been shared by some representatives of the official, state-driven memory regime that insists on decolonization. The Head of the Institute of National Remembrance, historian and public intellectual Oleksandr Alfyorov, appointed in June 2025, echoed Moore when he stated that Ukraine was never a colony of Russia. As Alfyorov elaborated: “... If you say we are “decolonizing,” excuse me, we are not some kind of aborigines in relation to the Russian Federation. We were the ones who taught them to read, write, and count. They took our name and called themselves ‘Russians’ because we are Rus. And when we talk about decolonization—well, that’s just not the right term”; Alfyorov suggests using the term “de-imperialization” as an alternative (Глушко 2025).<sup>1</sup> In other words, he departs from Soviet historiography and myths, yet his view of decolonization reflects the pattern described by Moore and converges with the formal Soviet vision of Ukraine as an equal partner to the Russian Federation (both subordinate to the USSR).

The controversies and tensions surrounding decolonization—what and how (not) to decolonize in Ukraine—have given rise to a language of mutual accusations framed in Soviet idioms, and have revealed continuities of, and deep attachments to, (post-)Soviet myths and “worldviews”. While the talk of “Soviet brotherhood” and post-Soviet nostalgia have now largely gone for good, as in other post-socialist states (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2014: 89; Shevchenko 2023) with the exception of Russia, the present-day decolonization practices in Ukraine has been critically compared to the actions of the Bolsheviks, lumpen-nationalists, the Komsomol members, or the Red Guards of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Hóng Wèi Bīng or *Khunveibiny* in Ukrainian) (Piliavsky 2025b).<sup>2</sup> The widespread vernacular use of this terminology demonstrates that while some Odesans see decolonization as an opportunity to imagine “alternative histories” or recover an impossible “potential history” (e.g., history of Odesa as the north of the Mediterranean rather than the south of Russia), others perceive it as operations akin to those of the repressive Soviet state—a kind of Soviet-style amnesia aimed at erasing cultural heritage and the legacies of preceding epochs to build a new, better, free world. For the opponents of actually practiced decolonization, the removal of certain imperial and Soviet-era cultural and political figures—in the form of monuments, memorial plaques, or street names—rather than marking a clear break with the post-Soviet era, paradoxically only prolongs its duration.

This critique of decolonization foregrounds that the post-Soviet is far from becoming obsolete in Ukraine. All these “Bolsheviks” and *Khunveibiny* are not simply matters of figurative speech or historical memory among older generations, but also

---

<sup>1</sup> See also the 2022 interview in which Alfyorov criticized the terms “de-Russification” and “de-colonization”: Факти ICTV 2022. Ukrainian Cosmopolis welcomed Alfyorov’s dismissal of decolonization and de-Russification. “We confer [on Alfyrov] the honorary title of Cosmopolitan... and hope that his position will not change, and that the Institute of National Remembrance ... will not cast Ukraine as a nation built on a sense of inferiority” (Piliavsky 2025b).

<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian MP Maksym Buzhanskij writes, for instance, about the Komsomol members running around the country and prying off memorial plaques. See also: YCI 2024. The civic activist and journalist Leonid Shtekel commented on decolonization that “the ones who always take the lead are the Red Guards (*Khunveibiny*), who destroy everything”. For a response to the opponents of decolonization and accusations of “Bolshevism” in Odesa, see e.g., Odesan historian Taras Goncharuk: DW Українською 2025.

indicators of how Soviet political habits are perceived by a segment of the Ukrainian citizenry as being reproduced by present-day Ukrainian power (*vlada*). Kasianov made a similar observation in his discussion of the implementation of decommunization in 2015, pointing out “a pattern reminiscent of Soviet practices, characterized by a top-down approach, the utilization of administrative and bureaucratic pressure” (Kasianov 2024: 331). The alleged absence of transparent public and expert consultations regarding the objects and strategies of decolonization in Odesa is seen as a lingering aspect of Sovietism as a style of government.

Decolonization has, nonetheless, also actualized post-Soviet dynamics in the discourses of its opponents among Odesa’s overseas diaspora and local residents, where elements of “amorphous post-Soviet identity” have become manifest in their attachment to the old (post-)Soviet Odesa myth. This attachment has precluded not only the possibility of rethinking Odesa’s old mythical qualities and its “genealogies” in the context of lived realities, novel aspirations, and new diversity, but has also resulted in intolerant or even hostile attitudes toward those who have actively chosen a new, different orientation. This attitude is well illustrated by online commentators who responded to a video of the well-known Odesan “native” restaurateur Savva Libkin speaking Ukrainian, which he was still learning: “Savva, speak Odesan!”

This brings me to the argument regarding the relevance of a minority–majority binary in the tensions of decolonization. As seen in the Odesan case, and with similarities observable in other Ukrainian cities, these tensions do not occur along ethnic or linguistic lines (although these may, of course, play a role). Overall, multiculturalism is, at least formally, supported by both opponents and proponents of decolonization. There is, instead, a clash between two self-proclaimed patriotic perspectives: one that focuses on Ukraine’s fight against neo-imperial Russia and Russian occupation here and now, and the other that frames this struggle as both a war against neo-imperial Russia and a broader decolonization, understood as liberation from the Russian and Soviet past once and for all. Whereas current scholarship on wartime Ukraine’s culture and heritage seems to give precedence to accounts and analyses of decolonial release and postcolonial dynamics, it remains to be seen whether the postcolonial will supersede the post-Soviet. Amid the Russian war, these two “situations” coexist, albeit uneasily.

### **Bibliography:**

- Appadurai, A. (2003). The production of locality. In Fardon, R. (Ed.). *Counterworks. Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*. Routledge, 208–229.
- Azoulay, A. A. (2019). *Potential history: Unlearning imperialism*. Verso Books.
- Besters-Dilger, J. (2023). Language policy in Ukraine—Overview and analysis. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest* (1): 2–6.
- Biedarieva, S. (2024). *Ambicoloniality and War. The Ukrainian-Russian Case*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bilocerkowycz, J. 2019. (1988) *Soviet Ukrainian dissent: a study of political alienation*. New York: Routledge.

- Bogdanova, E., Dzenovska, D., Morris, J., Muravyeva, M., Pallot, J. (2023). Post-Soviet Studies: Crisis of Concepts, Conventions, and Compromises. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 15(2): 93–114.
- Buck-Morss, S. (2008). Theorizing Today: The Post-Soviet Condition. *Anyone Corporation. Log.* Winter (11): 23–31.
- Burda, V. (2024, December 20). Odessa Cultural MENU. [Facebook page]. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064750658824/search/?q=Vladislav%20Burda%2C> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Cancel culture (2024, December 19). Cancel culture in Ukraine. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2024/12/19/cancel-culture-in-ukraine> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Chernetsky, V. (2007). *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization*. Montreal and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Chernov, Mstyslav. (2025). Film: *2000 Meters to Andriivka*. Associated Press; Frontline.
- Dartford, K. (2022, December 29). Ukraine dismantles statue of Russian Empress Catherine the Great. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2022/12/29/ukraine-dismantles-statue-of-russian-empress-catherine-the-great> (accessed on November 27, 2025).
- Das, V. (1995). *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Description. (2020). Історія Без Міфів [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/@IstoriyaBezMifiv> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Dimerli, M. (2025, November 27). Maya Dimerli. [Facebook page]. *Facebook*. [https://www.facebook.com/maya.dimerli?locale=uk\\_UA](https://www.facebook.com/maya.dimerli?locale=uk_UA) (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- DW Українською. (2025, February 5). Демонтувати чи залишати: як проходить деколонізація в Одесі? | DW Ukrainian [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcVO8AY5Mdc> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Dzenovska, D. (2024). Triangulation: An imperial power device. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 14(2): 483–486.
- Einstein Forum. (2025, March 5). Anastasia Piliavsky: “Decolonization” as Ukraine’s Suicidal Culture War. [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DifU5qlsWCM> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Gorbach, D. (2024). *The making and unmaking of the Ukrainian working class: Everyday politics and moral economy in a post-soviet city*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Herlihy, P. (2018). *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People*. Boston, USA: Academic Studies Press.
- Hrytsak, Y. (2015). The Postcolonial Is Not Enough. *Slavic Review* 74(4): 732–737.
- Humphrey, C. (2002). Introduction. Does the category “postsocialist” still make sense? In Hann, Ch. (Ed.). *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London & New York: Routledge, 12–15.
- Humphrey, C., Skvirskaja, V. (2009). Trading Places: Post-Socialist Container Markets and the City, *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 55: 61–73.
- Inaugural Cosmo Colloquium. (2024, December 21). *Ukrainian Cosmopolis*. <https://cosmopolis.com.ua/events#projects-1> (accessed on March 11, 2025).
- Isar Ednannia (2024, December 11). Культнаступ. Дієва культурна політика як передумова української стійкості й перемоги [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nrSLmApPMU> (accessed on November 21, 2025).

- Ishchenko, V. (2024). *Towards the abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to war*. London & NY: Verso Books.
- Kasianov, G. (2024). In Search of Lost Time? Decommunization in Ukraine, 2014–2020. *Problems of Post-Communism* 71(4): 326–340.
- Kostenko, L., Tymchenko, A., Babak, G., Rich, V., Naydan, M.M. (2024). A Female Poetic Voice against Totalitarianism and War (1957, 1962, 1987, Ukraine). In Lóránd, Z., Híncu, A., Trbovc, J.M., Stańczak-Wiślicz, K. (Eds.). *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*. Central European University Press, 149–158.
- Kravchenko, V., Zychowicz, J. (2022). Odesa's Many Frontiers: Introduction. *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9(2): 11–17.
- Kuczabski, A., Kuzyshyn, R., Kuzyshyn, A. (2025). Shaping the image of Ukraine in the modern English-language information space based on the example of periodicals. *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society* 15(2): 59–65.
- Kulchytskyy, I. (2025, October 7). Andriy Moskalenko [Facebook page]. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/andriy.moskalenko> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Malichenko, A. (2024, December 28). Manipulation of Ukraine in Western media: how The Economist covers the decolonisation of Odesa. *Behind the news*. <https://behindthenews.ua/en/spetsproiekti/mifi-prohoroshih-rosiyan/manipulation-of-ukraine-in-western-media-how-the-economist-covers-the-decolonisation-of-odesa-644/> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Minakov, M. (2024). *The Post-Soviet Human. Philosophical Reflections on Social History after the End of Communism*. Hannover & Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag.
- Mokryk, R. (2022). Cultural Colonialism and the Sixtiers during the Thaw in Ukraine. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 39: 93–122.
- Moore, D. Ch. (2001). Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Towards a Global Postcolonial Critique. *Modern Language Association, PMLA* 116(1): 111–128.
- Nadkarni, M., Shevchenko, O. (2014). The politics of nostalgia in the aftermath of socialism's collapse: A case for comparative analysis. In O. Angé & D. Berliner (Eds.), *Anthropology and nostalgia*. Berghahn Books, 61–95.
- Osadcha, O. (2024). (de)Construction of "Post-Soviet" Visualities in Contemporary Ukrainian Photography. In Biedarieva, S. (Ed.). *Art in Ukraine Between Identity Construction and Anti-Colonial Resistance*. Routledge, 61–77.
- Piliavsky, A. (2025a, October 11). Anastasia Piliavsky. [Facebook page]. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/apiliavsky> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Piliavsky, A. (2025b, October 7). Anastasia Piliavsky. [Facebook page]. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/apiliavsky> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Purici, Şt., Sabol, H.M. (2021). "Built to Last". Defining Identity by the Statues of Chernivtsi. *Journal of Settlements & Spatial Planning* (Special Issue) 7: 51–64.
- Redbird, B., Homaniuk, M. (2024). What Ukraine Teaches US about Colonization. Footnotes. *A Magazine of the American Sociological Association* 51 (1). <https://www.asanet.org/footnotes-article/what-ukraine-teaches-us-about-colonization/> (accessed on November 11, 2025).
- Shcherbak, A. (Ed.). (2024, January 21). Ukraine declares banned Communist Party leader Symonenko a wanted man. *NV*. <https://english.nv.ua/nation/leader-of-banned-communist-party-petro-symonenko-declared-wanted-by-ukraine-50385938.html> (accessed on March 11, 2025).
- Shevchenko, O. (2023). Book Review. Stalin's Millennials: Nostalgia, Trauma, and Nationalism by Tanitin Japaridze. Lanham: Lexington Books. *The Russian Review* 82: 546–547.

- Shevel, O. (2016). "No way out?" Post-Soviet Ukraine's memory wars in comparative perspective. In Hale, H.E., Orttung, R.W. (Eds.). *Beyond the Euromaidan: Comparative perspectives on advancing reform in Ukraine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 21–40.
- Shevel, O. (2024). Some Lessons from the Post-Soviet Era and the Russo-Ukrainian War for the Study of Nationalism. *Ethics & International Affairs* 38(3): 333–353.
- Sklokina, I. (2024). World War II Monuments in Ukraine. Protection, Dismantling, Reuse since 2022. *Kunsttexte* 1, <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/kunsttexte/article/view/102638> (accessed on April 11, 2025).
- Skvirskaja, V. (2009). "Language is a Political Weapon" or on Language Troubles in Post-Soviet Odessa". In Juliane Besters-Dilger (Ed.). *Language Policy and Language Situation in Ukraine. Analysis and Recommendations*. Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, Peter Lang, 175–200.
- Skvirskaja, V. (2010). New Diasporas in a Post-Soviet City: On Nostalgia and Other Experiences of Migration in Odessa. *Studies of Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10(1): 76–91.
- Skvirskaja, V. (2014). The many faces of Turkish Odessa: Multiple alliances across the Black Sea. In Humphrey C. and V. Skvirskaja (Eds.). *The Black Sea Currents: State Practices, Coexistence and Migration*. *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 70: 49–66.
- Skvirskaja, V. (2024). National self-identifications and coexistence in war-affected Ukraine: Preconditions for recovery. *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 102: 88–102.
- Spivak, G. Ch., Condee, N., Ram, H., and Chernetsky, V. (2006). Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space. *PMLA* 121(3): 828–836.
- Tlostanova, M. (2024). The deadlocks of memory and the (no longer) post-Soviet coloniality, or can memory be decolonized? *Baltic Worlds* 17(4): 57–66.
- Torbakov, I. (2022). Revisiting a "Sad Saga" of Russo-Ukrainian Relations Twenty Years On. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 30(4): 403–409.
- Ukrainian Cosmopolis (n.d.). *Ukrainian Cosmopolis*. <https://cosmopolis.com.ua/> (accessed on November 11, 2025).
- Verdery, K. (2002). Introduction. Whither postsocialism? In Hann C. (Ed.). *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London & New York: Routledge, 15–28.
- Waal T. de (2024, October 25). Odesa's cosmopolitan history is under threat. *Prospect*. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/europe/ukraine/68347/odesa-ukraine-russian-cultural-heritage-statues> (accessed on November 11, 2025).
- Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Yurchuk, Y. (2024). Introduction. Decolonization of memory in the former Soviet spaces. *Baltic Worlds* 17(4): 37–39.
- Yuriy Romanenko. (2024, October 31). Дацюк высказался про "мерзкую суть Культнаступа" [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZ8lqpc9gGg> (accessed on November 21, 2025).
- Балаба, А. (2023, November 18). Сколько нужно еще российского оружия на наши головы, чтобы мы отказались от советских идиологов? *Oboz.ua*. <https://www.obozrevatel.com/novosti-obschestvo/skolko-nuzhno-esche-rossijskogo-oruzhiya-na-nashi-golovyi-chtobyi-myi-otkazalis-ot-sovetskih-idolov.htm> (accessed on January 12, 2025).
- Баранов, Н. и др. (1978). *Краткая художественная энциклопедия. Искусство стран и народов мира*. Москва: Издательство «Советская энциклопедия».
- Боднарук, Б. (2024, October 12). Владлен Мараєв, «Історія без міфів»: Історією можна обґрунтувати що завгодно — це найзручніший інструмент пропаганди. *Детектор Медіа*.

<https://ms.detector.media/trendi/post/36927/2024-12-10-vladlen-maraiev-istoriya-bez-mifiv-istoriiyu-mozhna-obgruntuvaty-shcho-zavgodno-tse-nayzruchnishyy-instrument-propagandy/> (accessed on January 12, 2025).

Болдирев, О. (1994). *Одеси - 600: історичний нарис*. Одеса: ТПКП "Юг".

Глушко, Д. (2025, July 25). История как оружие: Александр Алферов - о борьбе с мифами, Россией и забвением. *Апостроф*. <https://apostrophe.ua/ru/articles/culture/istoriya-yak-zbroya-oleksandr-alforov-pro-borotbu-z-mifamy-rosiyeyu-i-zabuttyam.html> (accessed on November 11, 2025).

Голубев, М. (2024, October 22). #культнаступ как внутренняя война. *Укррудпром*. [https://ukrudprom.com/digest/kultnastup\\_kak\\_vnutrennyaya\\_voyna.html](https://ukrudprom.com/digest/kultnastup_kak_vnutrennyaya_voyna.html) (accessed on June 12, 2025).

Горемыка, Н. (2024, July 11). Одессе готовят новый устав: без имперского прошлого и с другим гимном, а еще будет проще достучаться до Труханова. *Думська*. <https://dumskaya.net/news/odesse-gotovyat-novyy-ustav-bez-imperskogo-prosh-185004/> (accessed on June 12, 2025).

Довгополова, О. (2025, January 8). Мультикультурність в Одесі треба відновлювати, а не охороняти. *Infopost*. <https://infopost.media/multykulturnist-v-odesi-treba-vidnovlyuvaty-a-ne-ohoronyaty/?fbclid=IwY2xjawHrKsxleHRuA2FlbOIxMOABHXzu-D4HMnmZbixw> (accessed on March 11, 2025).

Жадан, С. (2024, October 27). Виступ письменника, військовослужбовця Сергія Жадана на Форму Культнаступ. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61566660901073> (accessed on November 21, 2025).

Закон (2023). Про засудження та заборону пропаганди російської імперської політики в Україні і деколонізацію топонімії. Верховна Рада України. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3005-20#Text> (accessed on January 12, 2025).

Зеленський, В. (2022, November 29). Зеленский презентовал заявку Украины на участие в ЕХРО-2030: "В Одессе вы почувствуете потенциал всего человечества". *Думська*. <https://dumskaya.net/news/zelenskiy-prezentoval-zayavku-ukrainy-na-uchasti-170895/> (accessed on March 11, 2025).

Земля О'Деса. (2025). Тканки національних спільнот: топоніміка. [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD5hV2djbUFgTHBjxw7WglRC5Xj65La-x> (accessed on November 21, 2025).

Івановська, О. (2025, October 30). Українська мова має звучати впевнено, без агресії, але й без вибачень. *Gazeta.ua*, [https://gazeta.ua/articles/opinions-journal/\\_ukrayinska-mova-maye-zvuchati-vpevнено-bez-agresiyi-ale-j-bez-vibachen/1233790?](https://gazeta.ua/articles/opinions-journal/_ukrayinska-mova-maye-zvuchati-vpevнено-bez-agresiyi-ale-j-bez-vibachen/1233790?) (accessed on June 12, 2025).

Історія Без Міфів (2023, September 2). Руйнуємо міфи та фейки російської пропаганди про ОДЕСУ // 10 запитань історіку [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enlyzXnsCU0> (accessed on November 21, 2025).

КНУ. (2014, November 18). Слово—наш народ, мова—наша зброя. *НДЧ Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка*. <https://science.knu.ua/news/official/1901/> (accessed on November 27, 2025).

Любка, А. (2024, June 3). Україні дуже пощастило, що в нас є нацменшини. *InfoPost.Media*. <https://infopost.media/ukrayini-duzhe-poshchastilo-shho-v-nas-ye-naczmenshyny/> (accessed on March 21, 2025).

Маніфест. (2024). Маніфест культурнаступу. *Культурнаступ*. <https://www.kultnastup.org/> (accessed on January 12, 2025).

Огороднік, О. (2016). Причина війни в Україні—ностальгія. *Критика*. <https://krytyka.com/ua/articles/prychyna-viyny-v-ukrayini-nostalhiya> (accessed on November 27, 2025).

- Охримовская, М. (2025, September 10). Александр Морозов: "Освободить язык от тоталитарного вируса". *Радио Свобода*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/aleksandr-morozov-osvoboditj-yazyk-ot-totalitarnogo-virusa-/33526649.html> (accessed on on March 11, 2025).
- Сквирская, В., Хэмфри, К. (2007). Одесса: «Скользкий» город и ускользящий космополитизм. *Вестник Евразии* 35(1): 87–116.
- Стягайло, В. (2025, September 10). Узбережжя свободи та літературний колоніальний міф. *LB.ua*. [https://lb.ua/culture/2025/09/10/695419\\_uzberezhzhya\\_svododi\\_literaturniy.html?fbclid=IwY2xjaWNPnRtleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFqYXNBcW1GV0FWejl2STNOAR7ITg2Vmd50NTWMMh-HuAbsVDNTRdlzO\\_P74acjgC1lOcYjbgLpMk3cOM9Row\\_aem\\_DNtRo\\_Z5pcZThB-YT\\_kx6O](https://lb.ua/culture/2025/09/10/695419_uzberezhzhya_svododi_literaturniy.html?fbclid=IwY2xjaWNPnRtleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFqYXNBcW1GV0FWejl2STNOAR7ITg2Vmd50NTWMMh-HuAbsVDNTRdlzO_P74acjgC1lOcYjbgLpMk3cOM9Row_aem_DNtRo_Z5pcZThB-YT_kx6O) (accessed on on June 23, 2025).
- УСІ. (2023, March 22). Без російських назв: в Україні ухвалили закон про деколонізацію. *Українська служба інформації*. <https://usionline.com/bez-rosijskykh-nazv-v-ukraini-ukhvalyly-zakon-pro-dekolonizatsiiu/> (accessed on on March 11, 2025).
- УСІ. (2024, September 30). «Репресії проти Пушкіна—злочин перед Одесою»—під ОВА пройшов пікет проти перейменувань. *Українська служба інформації*. <https://usionline.com/represii-proty-pushkina-zlochyn-pered-odesoiu-pid-ova-projshov-piket-proty-perejmenuvan/> (accessed on November 11, 2025).
- Факти ICTV. (2022, December 1). Ми від РІЗНИХ матерів! Алфьоров розставив усі крапки над "і" щодо тези "МЫ ОДИН НАРОД" @krapivnyu [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsoVjdVulKA> (accessed on on November 21, 2025).
- Челяк, О. (2024, May 8). Валерій Пузік отримав відзнаку імені Галини Могильницької в номінації "За громадську позицію та гідність". *Суспільне. Культура*, <https://suspilne.media/culture/1014367-valerij-puzik-otrimav-vidznaku-imeni-galini-mogilnickoi-v-nominacii-za-gromadsku-poziciu-ta-gidnist/> (accessed on on April 11, 2025).
- Шлихта, Н. (2014). Православный и «советский»: к вопросу об идентичности верующих советских граждан (1940-е—начало 1970-х гг.). *Антропологический форум* 23: 82–107.