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Global Dialogues During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Contribution to the Special Forum

'*The Responsibility to Remain Silent? On the Politics of Knowledge Production, Expertise and (Self-)reflection in Russia's War Against Ukraine*'

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Abstract

Commendable efforts to include Ukrainian researchers in academic debates on the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022 nevertheless reflect knowledge hierarchies that characterise contemporary academia, which is compounded by the difficulties that scholars face when they study violence in their own countries. First, Ukrainian researchers were busy performing the physical work of surviving or, if based abroad, the emotional work of worrying about the safety of friends and family. Many volunteered their time and resources for Ukrainian causes. The pastoral care and public engagement elements of their job expanded. This left limited time for contributing to academic debates. Second, Ukrainian scholars engaged in tone (self)policing in order to prevent their arguments from alienating key audiences or being dismissed as irrational. Third, peculiarities of Ukrainian contemporary history and politics – for instance, its self-perceived belonging to 'the West' and the embrace of economic and political liberalism – at times resulted in a lack of common vocabulary with postcolonial, critical, and 'progressive' scholarship. This article calls for deeper understanding and closer engagement between academics and activists working in and on the 'Global East' and the 'Global South', as well as for more self-aware and caring ways of researching war.

Keywords Knowledge production; Ukraine; Global South; Global East; Russian Invasion

Introduction

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, there were calls for greater inclusion of Ukrainian researchers in the debates about the war (Khromeychuk 2022). Yet Ukrainian researchers inside and outside Ukraine encountered barriers in engaging in such debates. Some of these challenges were linked to increased demands on Ukrainian researchers' time. Others arose from the expectations in international academia about what knowledge is valuable and how it should be produced, presented, and disseminated. Finally, some challenges also related to the difficulties in building global dialogues with other researchers (and survivors) of war, imperialism, and mass atrocities due to disciplinary, ideological, and geopolitical divides into which Ukraine does not neatly fit (Labuda 2023).

As a scholar of peacekeeping and international organizations, while conducting research on conflicts in Africa, Southeastern Asia, and the Caribbean, I followed the debates on the difference in the status of 'global' and 'local' expertise (e.g. Marchais, Bazuzi, and Amani Lameke 2020; Kessi, Marks, and Ramugondo 2020). Ukrainian researchers, especially those based in Ukraine, are also sometimes seen as a source of a 'local' perspective on the Russian invasion rather than a 'global' or comparative understanding of war. Even though the full-scale invasion created a demand for their input, it still had to be delivered in accordance with disciplinary conventions, media cycles, and political sensibilities in countries of the 'core West'(Chaban and Headley 2023; Hendl 2022; Kurylo 2023).

In this article, I discuss three types of challenges that Ukrainian researchers faced when producing knowledge on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: care, service, and emotional labour; tone (self)policing; and variable levels of sympathy and solidarity from colleagues in postcolonial, critical, 'progressive', and at times feminist quarters. In the concluding section, I offer some cautious and preliminary reflections on how dialogues across disciplinary, ideological, and geopolitical divides could be fostered. The personal observations that I offer

are necessarily tentative, subjective, and incomplete, and I certainly cannot speak about the experiences of the entire Ukrainian research community. More systematic studies in the future would be a valuable contribution to the growing literature on hierarchies and inequalities in academic knowledge production (e.g. Stavrevska et al. 2023; Mälksoo 2021a; Kaczmarska and Ortmann 2021; Zvobgo et al. 2023).

Care, Service, and Emotional Labour

Contemporary academia is characterised by intense competition and 'individual hyperproduction' (Stavrevska et al. 2023, 17). After the full-scale Russian invasion, researchers based in Ukraine struggled to maintain their pre-2022 productivity levels.[1] Many researchers joined the defence forces, engaged in volunteering, or became displaced within or beyond Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ukrainian researchers based at institutions outside Ukraine had the enormous privilege of not experiencing the violence first-hand and 'only' worrying about the safety of friends and families. Many helped Ukrainian relatives and acquaintances flee and adapt to lives in new locations. Many taken part in protests and donation drives. Many provided pastoral care to Ukrainian students and participated in initiatives by 'core Western' institutions to assist universities in Ukraine. All this came on top of regular responsibilities in terms of teaching, research, administration, and applying funding.

Ukrainians academics based abroad also witnessed the expansion of the academic service and public engagement component of their job. Many volunteered to speak to the media and participate in academic or policy discussions on the implications of the full-scale invasion as universities competed to provide analysis of the unfolding events. Ukrainian academics' participation in these discussions was driven in part by a sense of duty to correct prevailing

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[1] It is important to remember that even before the 2022 escalation, many researchers based in Ukraine were affected by the Russian invasion that began in 2014 if they lived on, or fled from, temporarily occupied territories.

misconceptions (e.g. Sonevytsky 2022) and in part by an awareness that their employers needed to showcase expertise on this key matter, scarce as it might have been due to the underfunding of research on the 'Global East' (e.g. Kaczmarska and Ortmann 2021). At the same time, media directed their requests to Ukrainian scholars based at universities outside Ukraine rather than in the country. Ukrainian scholars based abroad were at times asked to comment on the war regardless of the primary focus on their research and, as Chaban and Headley (2023, 12) note, '[m]ost felt it strange to be asked to speak on areas outside their direct expertise and refused to do so.' As for myself, after one short piece in *The Conversation* on how the notion of international hierarchy applies to the relations between Ukraine and Russia, I suddenly received multiple media invitations to comment on the military-strategic aspects of the Russian invasion. I had to turn many of them down, particularly when they were anchored by the question of 'when Ukraine would (finally) make peace with Russia'. This question not only insinuated that Ukraine was somehow at fault for the start and continuation of the Russian aggression but also implied that Ukraine should accept the continued occupation of its territories.

Since there seemed to be more Ukrainian researchers in the field of the humanities, area studies, and comparative politics than International Relations or strategic studies, and since war is usually narrowly seen as 'an IR issue', foreign experts quickly filled the niche. My own identity as an IR scholar had been shaped both by my interests and the career incentives of contemporary academia that 'privileges IR theorising over empirical research on and from places outside of the Western core' (Kaczmarska and Ortmann 2021, 821). Since my surname is not obviously Ukrainian to people from outside the region, I embraced the ambiguity (a colleague who saw it on a university website confessed that they assumed I was either from Japan or Nigeria). It might have helped me avoid being pigeonholed as an expert on 'my' region, which is a typical experience for scholars from Eastern Europe (Burlyuk 2019). It came as a surprise to some colleagues that I was from Ukraine when the full-scaled Russian invasion

began. Upon discovering it, they (in a well-meaning way) invited me to panels and events to discuss the invasion. I sometimes had to decline for reasons outlined in this section, as well as due the occasional lack of energy to brace myself for hearing Russian propaganda repeated at me by seemingly well-informed audiences of colleagues and students (see also Sonevytsky 2022). When I declined those invitations, I noticed that some colleagues were disappointed, while I was worried that I came across as insufficiently dedicated to the Ukrainian cause or the IR discipline that tried to understand this 'new' major 'crisis'.

Of course, issues faced by Ukrainian researchers based outside Ukraine paled in comparison to the experiences of academics in Ukraine. For the latter, their living standards, mental health, and work patterns were disrupted by Russia's terrorist tactics of targeting civilian objects and energy infrastructure, while for the former, it contributed to 'survivor guilt' (Axyonova and Lozka 2023). Eventually, many researchers, both in Ukraine and abroad, found a 'war-life balance'. Yet they might have been disappointed about not producing more academic 'outputs' or not doing enough for Ukraine. For some Ukrainian researchers based abroad, the pressure to maintain high levels of productivity in order to attain (more senior) academic positions stemmed not only from the quest for wealth or prestige but also the need to be ready to absorb further shocks associated with the continued Russian aggression (more relatives and friends could require assistance) or the desire to donate to Ukrainian NGOs helping the frontline. Wherever they were based, Ukrainian researchers fulfilled additional duties to support their communities and prevent misconceptions about the Russian invasion, which was one of the challenges they faced in participating in international knowledge production.

Tone (Self)Policing

In addition to these challenges, Ukrainian colleagues appeared to choose their words especially carefully when speaking or writing about the war. They might have been apprehensive that some of their statements would make 'core Western' audiences uncomfortable, such as declining to discuss possibilities of reconciliation between Ukrainians and Russian in situations of ongoing mass atrocities This could, in turn, weaken support for Ukraine in the long run. Some avoided mentions of graphic violence out of fear that 'emotional' testimonies would be dismissed, especially if they came from women scholars (Kurylo 2023; Tsymbalyuk 2023). Interestingly, emotional testimonies were sought after at certain stages of the war and in specific arenas: as Chaban and Headley (2023, 12) observed, in the first months of the full-scale invasion, media were often 'looking for emotional responses from academics with personal connection to the war rather than to hear their informed analysis'. Similarly, Hendl (2022, 81) noted that Ukrainian voices, which 'used to be deemed biased and untrustworthy, suddenly in wartime they are being sought, to fill knowledge gaps and popular demand for the anticipated emotional performance'.

Yet as time passed, some event organisers conditioned invitations to Ukrainian speakers on being *non*emotional, seeking those able to connect the case of Ukraine to 'broader' IR discussions. For this reason, it is unclear whether a return to pre-February 2022 *status quo ante* looks likely, whereby Ukrainian scholars who speak out vocally against the Russian aggression and describe the horrors of Russian war crimes accurately would be again dismissed as 'irrational, emotional, paranoid, biased and Russophobic', contrasted with 'Western' experts who position themselves as 'noble, rational, impartial, qualified and civilised' (Hendl 2022, 70). It was rare (but not impossible) to encounter spaces where emotions were neither silenced not instrumentalised for public performance. For example, at a presentation of a book on fascism in Russia (Garner 2023), a student from a country that had also experienced Russian aggression asked a question about such policy failure, ending their remarks with an apology

for being emotional. The book author responded that they should never apologise for being emotional because what was happening was 'fucked up'. This was a rare affirmation of what Ukrainians (as well as Georgians or Syrians) thought of the world around them.

Another aspect of tone self-policing entailed being careful not to emphasise too much the policy failures by the 'core West' that had enabled the Russian aggression. They feared that they could be perceived as ungrateful for the military, economic, and diplomatic support provided to Ukraine. Yet tone (self)policing deprives the broader scholarly community of unique perspectives that Ukrainian researchers have. It also perpetuates the fiction that 'full impartiality and detachment' is possible or desirable in research on violence and injustice (Vogel and Musamba 2022, 8). The subconscious work of checking if public or scholarly arguments were 'too much' made Ukrainian researchers slower at writing and disseminating their work in times when the speed at which research is 'produced' is privileged (Stavrevska et al. 2023; Kessi, Marks, and Ramugondo 2020). Furthermore, when Ukrainians researchers self-policed their arguments or did not intervene to correct misconceptions, it left them with a feeling of guilt for not defending the Ukrainian cause (Kurylo 2023). Yet speaking candidly about their lived reality could alienate research communities that could be expected to offer sympathy to the Ukrainian cause.

Sympathy and Solidarity

Arguments by Ukrainian researchers did not always find a sympathetic reception in circles that may describe themselves as 'critical', 'progressive', 'postcolonial', or 'feminist' (Kurylo 2023; O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023; Sonevytsky 2022; Hendl 2022). The following discussion is not a critique of any intellectual movement or political position but only an elaboration of the barriers that Ukrainian researchers may face in participation in such scholarly communities. As Mälksoo's (2021b) argued, Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) 'experience with colonialism

and imperialism [is] too distinct from that of the global South to be an organic ally in the debates on decolonising knowledge production in IR'. Therefore, the 'critique of postcolonial inclusion' often excludes people from CEE (Hájková 2022, 101).

However, some voices in critical scholarship recognised that 'Ukraine should be supported in its struggle against occupation and genocide on the grounds not only of human rights but of national self-determination and opposition to imperialism, colonialism and land grabbing' (Hall 2023, 42). Yet there were also voices urging Ukraine to give up in the mistaken hope for a return to the pre-February 2022 era of complacency and ignorance about Russian imperialism. Sometimes, these calls were made in the name of global (food) security, or because Ukrainians were paternalistically seen as incapable of seeing their own best interest or knowing history, as the phrase 'all wars end at the negotiating table' exemplified.

Additionally, the (justified) focus on 'Western' crimes created a situation in which 'the biased focus on western perpetrators or even subtle anti-Americanism has prevented exposure of Russia as an imperial actor' (Düvell and Lapshyna 2022, 210).[2] The restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, demanded by the 141-to-7 majority in the General Assembly, was framed as being somehow beneficial only to the US. This led to such bizarre developments as the May 2023 resolution of the UK University and College Union that called, among other things, upon the UK government to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine,[3] which would significantly undermine Ukraine's ability to continue its self-defence. I do not know if during the Battle for Kyiv, British NLAWs or American Javelins stopped Russian troops 40 kilometres from the house where my parents live, so every time I hear about the 'core West' allegedly 'pumping Ukraine with weapons', I flinch. It also makes me wonder how the concept of reverse causality

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[2] On the long history of denying and downplaying non-Western imperialism and colonialism, see Lachlan McNameeis, 'Settler Colonialism', *Aeon,* 5 October 2023, available at https://aeon.co/essays/settler-colonialism-is-not-distinctly-western-or-european (viewed 5 October 2023).
[3] For coverage of the events, see Hamish Morrison, 'UCU Sparks Row With Call to Stop Sending Arms to Ukraine', *The National*, 29 May 2023, available at https://www.thenational.scot/news/23554258.ucu-sparks-row-call-stop-sending-arms-ukraine (viewed 29 September 2023).

can be so misunderstood: Russian invaded first – in 2014 – and then some international military assistance followed.

Furthermore, critical and 'progressive' studies often juxtapose themselves to 'liberal' worldviews and question 'core Western' notions of human rights and capitalism. Again, with the crucial disclaimer that I can only speak about *some* Ukrainians, many experienced liberalism and capitalism in ways that were different from those in both the 'core West' and the 'Global South'. The standard narrative is that Soviet economic stability, even if it was coupled with unfreedom, gave way to the 'wild 1990s' from which Ukraine struggled to recover. In reality, during the last decades of the Soviet rule, Ukrainians (unless part of *nomenklatura*) endured shortages of basic goods, not 'only' political or cultural repression. While the 1990s were undoubtedly difficult – ultimately as the result of dismantling the Soviet colonial economy aimed at preventing self-sufficiency of its republics – decades of economic growth followed, barring a drop in Ukraine's GDP due to the 2008 financial crisis and am even steeper decline due to the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2014. While poverty and the lack of social protections in Ukraine were serious problems that governments worked to address, in 2017, Ukraine was the world's most equal country by the Gini index. The examples of Lithuania and Estonia, where GDP per capita is higher than in Spain or Portugal, underscored the impact of the end of Soviet communism in CEE.

Thus, Ukraine's experience with liberalism and capitalism differed from that of the 'Global South', which endured from legacies of European colonial extraction, or the 'core West', which was marked by extreme wealth accumulation by the ultrarich at the expense of the racialised poor. In independent Ukraine, many found prosperity through state-guaranteed property rights after suffering from Soviet expropriation of property that targeted Ukrainians with brutal force, including through genocidal violence in the 1930s. Both Nazi and Soviet symbols are banned in Ukraine (as well as in several other CEE countries), so encountering

hammer and sickle in public spaces came as a shock to Ukrainian students or researchers displaced to the UK. Liberalism is perceived favourably by most Ukrainians (after all, Zelenskyy's party is liberal) as they associated it with rights-enhancing policies. Therefore, narratives that attribute all the world's ills to liberalism and capitalism (see Makarychev and Nizhnikau 2023) come across as puzzling to Ukrainian researchers and activists. The expectation that researchers from Southestern, Central, or Eastern Europe have a special expertise in Marxist theory (e.g. Alejandro 2022) might create one more pigeonhole into which researchers from CEE are placed, leading to disappointment when they do not conform to those expectations.

Scholars on the political left also harbour a distrust of nationalism. While postcolonial scholars recognise that national resistance against foreign domination can be liberating (see Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019 for the application of Fanon's notion of 'anticolonial nationalism' to Ukraine), many still fear nationalism as too dangerous of a force. CEE in particular is often seen through the lenses of far-right ideologies (O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023), and countries outside the 'core West' are in general assumed to be incapable of having other types of nationalism than the exclusionary kind (Dudko 2023). Yet this not the case for *mainstream* contemporary Ukrainian nationalism, which, as Onuch and Hale (2022) document, is characterised by civic attachment to the Ukrainian state and not rooted in language, ethnicity, or enmity towards any group (except for the groups involved in the ongoing territorial aggression). In this way, Ukrainians' lived experiences may stand in the way of their inclusion in scholarly communities that should be sympathetic to a country fighting off an imperialist invasion. This is unfortunately, since postcolonial scholarship on foreign interventions can deepen the understanding of the imperial nature of the Russian invasion (Oksamytna 2023; see Kušić 2021 for another example).

Concluding Reflections

Having outlined several barriers that Ukrainian researchers may face, practically and intellectually, in generating knowledge on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I suggest ways of strengthening dialogues between different research communities. First, there are laudable initiatives by Ukrainian activists, journalists, and artists to build connections with survivors of war, imperialism, and mass atrocities in other regions of the world. Late Victoria Amelina, who brought Colombian writers and journalists to the frontline regions of Ukraine, was one such example. Another example was the invitation of Peter Biar Ajak, a South Sudanese activist, to the *Ukrainian Spaces* podcast, where a fascinating discussion took place on how the Yalta Conference of 1945 has a similar meaning for CEE as the Berlin Conference of 1884 has for Africa.[4] Such initiates can make a valuable contribution to building global solidarities. Collaborations and co-authorship between scholars based in, or working on, the 'Global East' and the 'Global South' would be productive, despite the career incentives for each research community to work with academics in the 'core West'. In case research funding is redirected towards the study of the 'Global East', those who work in or on the region should find ways of maintaining or developing dialogues and collaborations with scholars of and in the 'Global South'.

Yet there are also risks that Ukrainian researchers who chose to work on Ukraine might get sidelined by large international teams for whom the war is just another case study – of military aid flows, the economic impact of war, or wartime sexual violence.[5] When this 'new academic gold rush' (Tsymbalyuk 2023, 9) begins the moment Ukraine is deemed safe for fieldwork, Ukrainians will find themselves in the position of providers of research data, being asked potentially trauma-inducing questions, such as whether they 'feel Russian' or about their

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[4] Maksym Eristavi and Valeria Voshchevska, 'South Sudan, We See You, with Peter Biar Ajak', *Ukrainian Spaces,* 16 November 2022, https://podcastaddict.com/ukrainianspaces/episode/148548275.
[5] The author is grateful to Felicity Gray for a conversation clarifying her thinking on this point.

wartime experiences.[6] 'Local' Ukrainian researchers might find themselves overworked and reliving the horrors of the war as fixers or translators, which is often the case across 'post-conflict' settings (Mwambari 2019). Particularly vulnerable groups of Ukrainians, for instance, children who have experienced Russian abduction, might become over-researched. As academics, we need to continue looking for ways to do research in more empathetic, responsible, and self-aware ways.

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[6] According to June 2023 opinion poll, 78 percent of Ukrainians had close relatives or friends who had been injured or killed due to the Russian invasion, with 63 percent reporting having a close relative or friend who died. Kyiv Institute of Sociology, 'How Many Ukrainians Have Close Relatives and Friends Who Were Injured / Killed by the Russian Invasion', available at https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1254&page=1 (viewed 29 September 2023).

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