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Understanding Russia's War in Ukraine. Borders, Identities, and Boundaries: An Interview with Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska, and Oleksandr Pronkevich

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For many people life has changed since February 24, 2022. The current Russian war of aggression in Ukraine also threatened to interrupt a decade-long collaboration in the field of Border Studies between Saarland University and Petro-Mohyla Black Sea National University in Mykolaiv, Ukraine. Thanks to our DAAD-East-partnership program, Volkswagen Foundation, the Chair of North American Literary and Cultural Studies, and the UniGR-Center for Border Studies we could, however, continue to work together and host several scholars from Petro-Mohyla Black Sea National University at Saarland University. In fact, we have been able to extend our collaboration between the UniGR-Center for Border Studies and other Ukrainian scholars from various institutions in Ukraine. The following transcript and revised rendition of a round-table discussion is the result of this intensified collaboration between UniGR-Center for Border Studies scholars Astrid M. Fellner and Eva Nossem and three Ukrainian scholars, Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska, and Oleksandr Pronkevich. We want to thank the UniGR-Center for Border Studies for providing us with a home for our collaborative research. And we want to thank several institutions and funding agencies for providing us with financial support: Saarland University, the DAAD, and Volkswagen Foundation.

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ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led not only to the shift of territorial and mental borders in Europe but has also driven profound changes of geopolitical visions of the contemporary world and its economic, political, and social future. In which ways is Russia's war in Ukraine related to issues of borders and identity? This interview addresses the many geopolitical, social, and existential questions about borders and identities in the current war, also analyzing the role that academia plays in this war. Border scholars Astrid M. Fellner and Eva Nossem have talked to three Ukrainian researchers: Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska, and Oleksandr Pronkevich, who share their views on the entanglements of borders, identities, and the current war in Ukraine, as they try to make sense of the new realities.

Keywords, Keywords, Keywords, Keywords, Keywords (max. 4-7 keywords)

War in Ukraine, role of borders, identity, Westsplaining

Кордони та ідентичності: інтерв'ю з Юлією Буйських, Аліною Мозолевською та Олександром Пронкевичем

РЕЗЮМЕ

Вторгнення Росії в Україну призвело не лише до зміни реальних і ментальних кордонів у Європі, а й спричинило глибокі зрушення геополітичного бачення сучасного світу та його економічного, політичного та соціального майбутнього. Яким чином війна Росії в Україні пов'язана з питаннями кордонів та ідентичності? У цьому інтерв'ю розглядаються численні геополітичні, соціальні та екзистенційні питання про кордони та ідентичність у поточній війні, а також аналізується роль, яку академічні кола відіграють у цій війні. Дослідники кордонів і пограниччя Астрід М. Феллнер та Єва Носсем поспілкувалися з трьома українськими дослідниками: Юлією Буйських, Аліною Мозолевською та Олександром Пронкевичем, які поділилися своїми поглядами на взаємоперетин кордонів, ідентичності та війни, намагаючись осмислити нові реалії.

Ключові слова

Війна в Україні, роль кордонів, ідентичність, вестсплейнінг

Comprendre la guerre russe en Ukraine. Frontières, identités et limites : Une interview avec Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska et Oleksandr Pronkevich

RESUME

L'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie a non seulement entraîné les modifications des frontières territoriales et mentales en Europe, mais a également provoqué de profonds changements dans les visions géopolitiques du monde contemporain et de son avenir économique, politique et social. Comment la guerre russo-ukrainienne est-elle liée aux questions de frontières et d'identité ? Cette interview aborde les nombreuses questions géopolitiques, sociales et existentielles sur les frontières et l'identité dans la guerre actuelle, analysant également le rôle que joue le milieu universitaire dans cette guerre. Les spécialistes des Border Studies Astrid M. Fellner et Eva Nossem se sont entretenues avec trois chercheur.e.s ukrainien.ne.s : Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska et Oleksandr Pronkevich, qui partagent leurs points de vue sur les enchevêtrements des frontières, de l'identité et de la guerre, alors qu'ils tentent de donner du sens à la nouvelle réalité.

Mots-clés

Guerre en Ukraine, rôle des frontières, identité, westsplaining

Wie ist Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine zu verstehen? Grenzen, Grenzlinien und Identitäten: Ein Interview mit Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska und Oleksandr Pronkevich

ABSTRACT

Der Einmarsch Russlands in die Ukraine hat nicht nur zu einer Verschiebung der territorialen und mentalen Grenzen in Europa geführt, sondern auch tiefgreifende Veränderungen der geopolitischen Visionen der heutigen Welt und ihrer wirtschaftlichen, politischen und sozialen Zukunft bewirkt. Auf welche Weise hängt Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine mit Fragen nach Grenzen und Identitäten zusammen? Dieses Interview befasst sich mit den zahlreichen geopolitischen, sozialen und existenziellen Fragen zum Thema Grenzen und Identität im aktuellen Krieg und analysiert auch die Rolle der Wissenschaft in diesem Krieg. Die Grenzwissenschaftlerinnen Astrid M. Fellner und Eva Nossem haben mit drei ukrainischen Forscher_innen gesprochen, nämlich Julia Buyskykh, Alina Mozolevska und Oleksandr Pronkevich, die ihre Ansichten über die Verstrickungen von Grenzen, Identität und Krieg teilen und versuchen, sich mit den neuen Realitäten auseinanderzusetzen.

Keywords

Krieg in der Ukraine, die Rolle von Grenzen, Identität, Westsplaining

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Introduction

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has caused numerous geopolitical, economical, and societal transformations, both regionally and globally. Apart from the shocking brutality of this territorial conquest and the biggest military conflict in post-World War II Europe, this war also reveals deep ideological, historical, and cultural divides in global communities propagated and amplified by digital media. These varied narratives and alternative visions of past and present consolidate around the core opposite ideas of those who object or support the Russian invasion, linking this war to other challenges like inequalities, food and climate crises, insecurity and global power domination. As a result, this war has caused many to reconsider the role of borders in Europe and beyond, especially considering the role of imperialism and colonialism, Ukraine's role in the European political landscape, and Russia's importance towards shaping the global future.

The war brings to the surface many geopolitical, social, and existential questions about identity which were obsolete or insignificant before. Who are Ukrainians? Why is Ukraine so important for European and global geopolitical stability? How can we make sense of this war? Is this war about borders? What are the aims of Russia in this aggression? What is the role of borders and identities? What is the role and function of academia in fighting these forms of aggression? To answer some of these questions, Astrid M. Fellner and Eva Nossem decided to talk to three Ukrainian researchers four months after the outbreak of the full-fledged war of aggression: Oleksandr Pronkevich from Mykolaiv, who relocated to Lviv because of the war, Julia Buyskykh from Kyiv, and Alina Mozolevska, from Mykolaiv, who came to stay in Saarbrücken. We organized a round-table on June 21, 2022, in which the invited scholars gave their perspectives on the Russo-Ukrainian war and its implications.

The Role of Borders in Russia's War in Ukraine

What roles do borders play in this current war? Is this a war about borders?

Oleksandr Pronkevich: The official reasoning provided by Russia to invade Ukraine concerns the borders of the so-called "republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk. Putin says that the objective of "the special military operation" is to restore the integrity of those "republics" within the borders defined in their constitution, meaning within the borders of the regions (oblasts) fixed on the maps of the former USSR. This is only pretext. The real objective of the war unleashed by Russia is to annihilate Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation, as demonstrated in the first stage of war with the concentration on Kyiv. It also explains the unhuman war style of Russia. What its army is doing now can be defined as genocide.

It is also important to consider the use of border rhetoric in the Russian imperialist discourse during the war. Now we can hear that Putin wants to reshape Ukrainian borders as a whole: he wants to legitimize the annexation of the territories occupied by his soldiers – Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv Oblasts, not only Donbas. A variety of blueprints of bordering has appeared in the Russian imperialistic imagination since February 24, 2022: the invaded lands must become a part of Russia through referendum, or the *Tavrida Gubernia* must be created in the South following the model of the gubernia which already existed in the 19th century, or they can exist as new quasi republics and so on. All those projects will lead to a change of the political map of Ukraine. It proves that Putin is obsessed with the concept of the border as a rhetoric tool to camouflage his hatred against Ukraine.

How are borders and identity related in this war?

Oleksandr Pronkevich: All wars between Russia and Ukraine can be traced back to the issues of identity, particularly for Russia which sees the cultural, religious, lifestyle, and linguistic differences with the Ukrainians as reasons to destroy them. The presence of this can be traced back to as early as the modern period to now. To illustrate this observation, I suggest looking at the maps of Ukraine, which reflect the identity formation process in Ukraine in the 20th-21st centuries. The first map was created for the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919 and was a product of World War I (Mayorov, 2017). We may see that the territory of the country depicted in the map is larger than it is on the contemporary maps, and it includes all territories

where the Ukrainian language was spoken. It reflects the understanding of the national identity in the Ukrainian People's Republic. It was based on ethnic and linguistic principles. Although the Ukrainian state did not control all territories represented on the map and the borders were not recognized by the world, the image of the country was a visualization of the dream of Great Ukraine which existed in the minds of many generations of Ukrainian emigrants.

The map of Ukraine during the Soviet period (until 1991) was a result of World War II. We can see that the territory is large, but it is smaller than it was reflected on the map of the Paris Peace Conference. Some lands were excluded from the Ukrainian national space and were russified (like Kuban). At the same time, the borders of Ukraine were not real, they imitated the formal borders, as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was the imitation of the nation-state. It corresponded to the idea of Ukraine as the land populated by people who identified themselves as a "younger brother" of Russia, as a second-rate nation culturally depending on Moscow.

The current map of Ukraine showing the processes of re-bordering imposed by Russia through war (see the first question) provides us with information about national identification formation which is developing now. In this context the metaphor which compares the body of the country depicted on the map to the suffering human body is of crucial importance. The territories occupied by Russian troops highlighted in red look like wounds or traumas caused by the shift the borders. It stimulates the development of the resentment, on the one hand, and, on the other, it leads to accelerating of the formation of the Ukrainian political national identity based on the values of freedom and dignity in combination with ethnocentric and linguistic principles.

Ukraine as a Borderlands: What does this mean?

Oleksandr Pronkevich: In the historiography, we read that Ukraine is a borderland country or even a frontier country (Reid 2015; Zhurzhenko 2010). However, this popular concept can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, it is the land on the outskirts of civilization, the culture located far from the mainstream. This concept has always been imposed by Russia or Poland or other colonial empires. Unfortunately, this concept is rooted deeply in the mind even today. The current war has contributed greatly to its deconstruction, but we only are at the beginning of the way. Secondly, Ukraine is a mediator, a country, a culture connecting the north and the south (the Scandinavian world and the Black Sea and the Mediterranean regions) and the east (Asia) and the west (Europe). Ukraine for many centuries was "the gateway to Europe" (the term was coined by Serhii Plokhyy (2015) and a school where the countries, like Moscovia, learned to be "civilized." Thirdly, Ukraine is a center of the world. This brave idea was suggested by Mykola Khyvliovyi and Yuri Sherekh (1949). They believed that Ukraine must take the advantage of its privileged position as a borderland country and wanted to propose to the world a synthetic lifestyle, combining European wisdom and knowledge and the creating energy of developing countries. I personally believe in this utopia.

How are borders talked about in current political discourse in Ukraine?

Oleksandr Pronkevich: I do not have enough verified data to answer this question. What I say is my opinion based on intuition and observations. I think that, unfortunately, border theory as a methodological tool in the humanities was underestimated in the Ukrainian academic discourse before the war, which leads to the oversimplification of the vocabulary related to border problems in the current political discourse of Ukraine. The most popular meaning of the border used by our politicians is "a delimitation line with Russia," or border as a representation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. As a matter of fact, the main goal the war is defined in terms of borderland discourse. When politicians (or simple citizens) are asked what they mean by "victory," the answer is always connected to the idea of borders. Victory can entail making Russia go back to the borders of February 24, 2022, or the borders of 1991. All other options are seen as defeat. No other interpretations of the concept of border are possible. I do not believe that our politicians know anything about borders as a factor of cultural dialog or creating new aesthetics or constructing new ethics of cooperation. All these ideas they will have to learn if they want Ukraine to become a part of the global world. Moreover, the position of Ukraine in terms of border theory is a controversial one. In the East and in the North, the border must be as a fortress protecting from Russia and Belarus. In the West it must become transparent and open. I am afraid our politicians have no time to focus on this dilemma because their thoughts and emotions are concentrated on the war and because they are not mature intellectually to take this challenge.

Making Sense of Russia's War in Ukraine

Is the current war only a Ukrainian war?

Alina Mozolevska: Since February 24, Ukrainians have been living in a new reality. They have undergone vastly different experiences, depending on whether they took arms in their hands to fight the aggressor or live in occupied territories on the South of Ukraine or in permanently shelled Eastern cities, or try to survive in devastated Mariupol and Kharkiv; or became refugees in Western Ukraine or abroad. "But all have one thing in common: Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has changed their lives dramatically" (Zhurzhenko, 2022). How to make sense of this war? How does this existential experience change the way of thinking and perceiving of the concept of a Ukrainian nation and identity? How does it reshape the world? We need to understand that this war is not only a Ukrainian war, but it also leads to deep geopolitical transformations in international politics and to the emergence of new threats to global security, changing the balance of world powers. It shifts physical borders between Ukraine and Russia, but also softens border regimes in many European countries. We witnessed many examples of solidarity across borders that melted cultural differences and mental barriers between Ukrainians and hosting European countries who accepted many war refugees. On the other hand, we also see new solidified walls constructed (on the Polish-Belarusian and the Lithuanian-Belarusian border) and old border regimes strengthened (EU visa ban for Russians in Baltic countries) in the attempt to contain undesirable migration and protect states from the aggression. Borders, reflecting the manifold consequences of the war, are seen again as spaces of separation, limiting for some and bridging for others.

It is necessary to remember that the Russian aggression did not start on February 24, 2022, but in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Donbas. The European community did not have a univocal response to this attempt of territorial conquest. The European states did not recognize the annexed territories, sanctions were not efficient, and Russia remained an important partner for many EU countries. Ukraine's voice was not heard; it was left on the periphery of international relations. The international community hoped to appease the Russian bear, but, as Ilryna Tsilyk, Ukrainian film director and writer, noted, it is useless "throw meat to the bear so it will eat and calm down ... The truth is that the [Russian] bear won't feel full" (Tsilyk, 2022). This imperialist war denies the reality of the Ukrainian state and Russia will not stop until it erases everything and everyone related to Ukrainian culture and history (Snyder, 2022). As Antony Blinken, the United States Secretary of State, said: "If Russia stops fighting, there will be no more war, if Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no more Ukraine." Indeed, this is the existential war, the war for the survival of Ukraine as nation. But if Russia succeeds in invading Ukraine, will it stop at Ukrainian borders? Will it be enough for the Russian bear? We have already heard many times how Russian officials and media propagandists threatened to attack with nuclear weapons the decision-making centers in Germany, Great Britain, or USA, or to "de-nazify" Poland or the Baltic countries. The cult of the Great Patriotic War (Russian *pobedobesie*) and Russian imperialism transform this aggression into a "civilizational conflict in which Ukraine is fighting on behalf of Europe," (Zhurzhenko, 2022), into a fight for European liberal and democratic values against a totalitarian regime, a war between two models of self-identification, between past and future, and a European war, too.

What is the role of digital media in this war?

Alina Mozolevska: Nowadays technological conditions not only determine how wars are conducted but also how they are communicated. It is true that this war is also an information war, it goes beyond the battlefield and individual experiences and is broadcast and processed live in old and new media by millions.

For more than eight years, we have seen the borders of the country violated; every day the front line is shifting, leaving heavy marks of Russian aggression, explosions and flashes mapped on Ukrainian geobody, spilling out into thousands of stories of heroism, resistance, displacement, and violence. Each one of these stories has wider echoes in the world, touching people who are far away from the Ukrainian cause, but now "live" the war in the digital space.

From the very beginning, Russia's war monopolized the headlines of leading world's media and flooded social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. We see how various forms of content overlap in hybrid media—the professional analytical overviews with the amateur analysis from social media influencers, the intentional reports with the incidental videos from the frontline, the funny pictures of animals and soldiers with photos of the bodies of dead Ukrainian children. Thus, the war has become content that is consumed and processed by different audiences all over the world (Chayka, 2022). Using this opportunity

to speak to the world and to be heard, Ukrainian people deploy their mobile cameras to document the invasion in detail; they share their war experiences, write war diaries, and show the destruction caused by Russian aggression, they broadcast live their fights from the frontline and share their grief. It makes Ukrainians “appear to the viewer less as distant victims than as fellow Web denizens who know the same references, listen to the same music, and use the same social networks as they do” (Mouly, 2022). The war content of the digital space creates a sense of intimacy and shapes the general understanding of the war. Although social media channels are imperfect chroniclers of wartime (Chayka, 2022), sometimes they are the only and the most reliable source that we have, and they play an outsized role in documenting and narrating the war. Maybe because of this, journalists call the Russian invasion of Ukraine the world’s first TikTok war (Friedman, 2022) or the First Social Media War (Ciuriak, 2022).

At the same time, social media platforms are amplifying mis- and dis-information on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, propagating alternative narratives and fake news. The flows of disinformation and anti-Ukrainian propaganda recirculate Russia’s own vision of the geopolitical future of Ukraine, denying its agency and the right for independence. Masking its true motifs under the slogans of “liberation” and “denazification,” Russia aims to resurrect the phantom borders of the USSR and to spread its aggressive imperialism beyond the borders of the state. Surprisingly enough, a significant part of the population turned out to be susceptible to Kremlin disinformation campaigns, especially in Africa and Latin America. As Johannes Buchheim and Gilad Abiri noted, “the ongoing war in Ukraine sheds light on crucial challenges of our digital media landscape” and “exposes a growing epistemic divide running through liberal democracies: a situation in which substantial portions of the population believe in alternative realities on a broad range of factual issues” (Buchheim and Abiri, 2022). In fact, these massive campaigns exploit the existing tensions in different regions and serve to deepen the digital divide: they create divisions, distrust in the societies, and weaken the collective response of Ukrainian allies (Blankenship and Uche Ordu, 2022). That is why we should pay close attention to these narratives and emotional patterns which they catalyze, the disinformation topics should be analyzed, their mechanism should be studied in order to prevent the subsequent spread and popularization of false information and help the people to see the truth.

Old-New Boundaries in Academia: “Westsplaining” Ukraine as the European “Other”

How has academia reacted to the violation of the borders of Ukraine?

Julia Buyskykh: The new wave of Russian’s invasion and illegal occupation since 24 February 2022 has provoked unprecedented attention to Ukraine. Despite the fact that the war in Ukraine has taken place since 2014, only the full-scale invasion has become a catalyst for the analysis of pre-existing social, cultural, political, economic issues in Ukraine and in the debates about Ukraine’s history. It seemed to be another re-discovery of Ukraine since 2014, however the price paid is overwhelmingly unbearable. A number of scholars, professional associations, universities, and research institutions have issued supportive statements that condemned Russian aggression and violence towards Ukraine. Many public intellectuals (Ukraine’s cause 2022) and scholars (Wanner 2022) followed Adam Michnik’s empathic statement “*We are all Ukrainians now.*” Written on the first day of war, he declared: “We must say it loud and clear – we are all Ukrainians now. In Warsaw and in Paris, in Berlin and in Prague, in London and in Budapest, one thing must be said loudly: today, Ukrainians are not only fighting for themselves; they are fighting ‘for our freedom and yours’” (Michnik 2022).

Following Michnik’s “We are all Ukrainians now,” there are scholars who empathize and care about the Ukrainians, showing deep sensitivity and making empathy active, engaged action, as constantly do many of my friends and colleagues from Poland, who have brought humanitarian aid to Ukraine since March 2022, and who empathize with Ukraine as researchers, translators, and volunteers. Anthropologists Catherine Wanner, Nancy Ries, and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn showed empathy already at the end of February 2022, creating the hot spot series “Russia’s War in Ukraine” at *culanth.org* and bringing voices of Ukrainian scholars on the surface (Ries, Wanner, and Cullen Dunn 2022; Ries and Wanner 2022). Historian Timothy Snyder is writing constantly about the colonial nature of the Russian invasion (Snyder 2022a, 2022b); he has come to L’viv, has engaged in help by giving public lectures, meeting Ukrainian soldiers, and conducting research on the ground. Anthropologist Fiona Murphy and documentary-maker Maria Loftus together with the Irish Refugee Integration Network have created a short empathic movie “Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home,”

telling stories of people in Ireland who had to escape the war or other forms of violence in their home countries, including Ukraine.¹

Obviously, today Western² intellectual thought dominates when talking about the war in Ukraine. However, not all the texts that emerged in the West as a response to the war in Ukraine are deep and contextualized, and not all of them encompass embodied knowledge about certain areas of life in Ukraine. On the contrary, there are texts on war that reveal high levels of ignorance, patronizing attitudes, and intellectual arrogance towards Ukraine with unreflective, colonial statements. When I read them, I think about the failure of empathy and understanding. Empathy has always been a central analytical and reflective category in the tradition of phenomenology. Anthropology embraces empathy as a key tool in fieldwork research when we are trying to step into the shoes of the other person and see the world through the eyes of someone different. Lack of empathy then means for me unreflective thinking that can lead to insensitive and even ignorant perceptions of the others.

Sadly, I experience the continuity of colonial hierarchical thinking over the acknowledgment of the insider's experience and expertise. Moreover, the Russian war in Ukraine sharpens these ruptures, deepens the divisions in academia, and makes the hierarchies in academia more explicit. As Darya Tsymbaliuk writes: "The war against Ukraine caused many academics and students to question the epistemic authority of scholarly knowledge production, when it keeps a safe distance from the wreck of reality" (Tsymbalyuk 2022).

The new concept with old colonial background, which is "*Westsplaining*," seems to have replaced Said's notion of orientalism (Kazharski 2022). The term "*Westsplaining*" is used in reaction to commentaries on Ukraine which are delivered by established Western intellectuals – be they German intellectuals (Krieg in der Ukraine 2022), American realists (Walt 2022) or cultural anthropologists and historians (e.g. Harvey 2022; Hann 2022; Fitzpatrick 2022), revealing a patronizing and privileged position when expressing their opinions and claims about "backward" Eastern Europeans who are not "able" to understand the situation in their own countries and lack basic knowledge about their region. It can also mean perceiving the world not only "by" but also "through" the West. The latter for instance can be seen in blaming the USA and NATO for the Russian invasion and its horrible consequences for Ukraine.

What are the main patterns of "Westsplaining"?

Julia Buyskykh: The followers of the "Westsplaining" thought are scholars in humanities and social sciences, intellectuals and public figures. They repeatedly invoke statements in their lines of arguments on Russian invasion to Ukraine, not even trying to look into research by Ukrainian scholars (e.g. Tamara Hundorova, Nataliya Yakovenko, Georgiy Kasianov, Ivan Gomza) and those Western experts who are deeply familiar with the region and its contexts (e.g. Tymothy Snyder, Catherine Wanner, Anne Applebaum, Andrii Portnov, Sergiy Plokyh, Serhy Yekelchuk). I believe that such line of thought as "Westsplaining" is completely out of touch with reality, misleading and may bear outrageous consequences.

The main patterns in these writings are:

1. "We should listen to Russia's opinion" (not articulating whose opinion exactly we are supposed to listen to): seeing Ukraine through the colonial prism of Russian imperialism and by this denying its sovereignty;
2. Stating that the Russian Federation was "threatened by the USA and NATO, who provoked the war," and therefore justifying Russian invasion;
3. Misreading Russian-Ukrainian history by claiming that Russia and Ukraine "share a lot in common," Russians and Ukrainians are "fraternal nations," and therefore denying that for millions of Ukrainians this is a war for independence and national statehood;
4. Treating Ukraine as a failed state, completely dependent on NATO and the USA in geopolitics;
5. Silencing the Russian invasion in Ukraine by calling it "the conflict / crisis in Ukraine," "Putin's war," "the 'proxy' war between Russia and NATO."

There are the other statements, claiming that it was not Russia but the USA the empire that started the war in Ukraine, justifying Putin's goals of invasion and therefore whitewashing Russia's aggression. This kind of rhetoric is very much like the statements issued by Noam Chomsky, an American linguist and social critic.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAa3eWbU4DM> (assessed 22.06.2023)

² The notion of "Western" is extremely problematic and ambiguous (the same as "Eastern"). However, it is still widely used by scholars since it refers to certain academic traditions and discourses, what appears to be important in reference to reflection on local historiographies and hierarchies of knowledge in academia. Also, it should be noted here that participation in what I refer to as "Western" discourse is not limited to those residing or identifying with Western Europe and the North America. Identification of this discourse as Western perhaps reflects more to the domination of a certain perspective in discussions on Ukraine these days.

Due to his claims, the fact that Ukraine needs weapons to defend itself, is “Western propaganda,” the issue of Crimea is “off the table,” and “Ukraine must make concessions to Russian’s demands” (Chomsky, Noam and Scahill, Jeremy 2022). A joint response was already issued by Ukrainian academic economists, who published an opened letter, criticizing his main points as issued out of the context, distanced and uprooted from the real situation in Ukraine (Kukharsky, Fedyk, Gorodnichenko, Sologoub 2022).

Many scholars from Central and Eastern Europe as well as some of their Western colleagues tend to find such arrogant and distanced opinions useless and moreover, harmful, as it introduces false assumptions and projections into public opinion and media coverage. In doing so, “Westspaining” strengthens existing boundaries in academia and creates new ones. Taras Bilous, the editor of the left-wing Ukrainian magazine *Commons* wrote a letter to the left in the West shortly after the war began, on 25 February, when Kyiv was under Russian siege. In his piece, he criticized the fact that the people in Eastern Europe and their political ideas – but also Russian aggressive imperial chauvinism – do not seem to exist for the left intellectualists in the West, who are instead obsessed with “NATO imperialism”: “a large part of the Western Left should honestly admit that it completely fucked up in formulating its response to the ‘Ukrainian crisis’” (Bilous 2022). There was also a considerably critical response from Ukrainian sociologist Oksana Dutchak (Dutchak 2022), England-based anthropologists from Ukraine Volodymyr Artiukh (Artiukh 2022) and Taras Fedirko (Fedirko 2022) as well as Polish journalists and publicists (Troost 2022; Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022).

What can we do to understand better the roots of the Russian aggression and the present situation of Ukraine?

Julia Buyskykh: I believe, it’s finally the exact time to rethink seriously the paradigm of “Ukrainian studies” and the stereotypical perception of Ukraine in general as a “failed” state in Russia’s shadow, monolithic in its “closeness” to the former empire and burdened with nationalistic struggles. Ukraine has been clamped down between two colonial discourses, one of Western supremacy and the other one of Russian imperial colonialism. It is revealed in the perception of Ukraine exclusively through the prism of the Russian empire, Soviet Union, and Russia, which is a very limited perspective regarding the highly diverse Ukrainian history connected with Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Romanian, and Russian political entities, and heterogeneous cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. The colonial trope of a subject-object relationship in which only particular Western thought has the right to exist should be seriously questioned and reconsidered. I don’t idealize the Ukrainian state and society. Ukraine has a lot ahead in terms of reworking the darker chapters of its painful, multi-layered, and complicated history. Also, it is too early to admit that Ukraine has fully embarked on a new stage in its history that is fundamentally different from the burdens of its Soviet past. The Ukrainian society has a lot to do on the way of reforming corruption and oligarchs’ power. Yet none of this justifies the Russian military aggression, illegal occupation of Ukrainian sovereign territory, and the growth of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of Ukraine reflected in Western academic thought. As scholars, we all have the duty to use our intellectual power to overcome boundaries and divisions, including imagined ones, and not create new ones. As Andrii Portnov and Tetiana Portnova argue, what the academic field in Eastern European and Ukrainian studies needs is to rethink existing colonial paradigms, and to deepen knowledge, training, and contextualization when studying Ukraine (Portnov A. and Portnova T. 2022).

“Westspaining” thought is speaking without sufficient expertise but from a position of power and authority, often making false assumptions that are based on the Western experience but are not necessarily relevant to the region and its embodied experience and knowledge from the ground. By blaming Russia’s attack against Ukraine on the Eastern expansion of NATO, some Western scholars are either unconsciously repeating Kremlin’s propaganda or unwittingly revealing their true attitude towards Central and Eastern Europe including Ukraine as patronizing, (post)colonial, and in fact imperial, which they ironically criticize. This way of thinking only deepens the divisions in academia, creating new boundaries which yet need to be overcome.

Therefore, the re-evaluating and recognition process should become a moment of parallel rethinking of academic language, international laws, and European values. Academia needs new tools and lenses now, more empathetic, more entangled, and more focused on local contexts, not on the global (post)colonial narratives. “Local” voices from Eastern Europe, from Ukraine, should not be silenced or muted, on the contrary, they should be fully acknowledged. And if decolonized and recentered, then anthropology has a huge potential to become a means of healing in this uneasy process. Anti-colonial, anti-imperial, historically-rooted empathy oriented towards social justice can become a new way of thinking and acting, recentering knowledge and changing hierarchies, improving communication and overcoming imagined boundaries.

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