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ASYMMETRIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT DECENTERING POST-COMMUNIST STUDIES

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Eskimo family of languages has many more words for snow than English (Robson 2013). American scholars and American perspectives dominate in IR journals as well as other social sciences (Kristensen 2015). Research on Russia in the West has attracted considerably more attention and resources than the research on countries neighboring Russia that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, scholarly attention to Russia waned in the 1990s, relative to the attention the Soviet Union attracted in the decades earlier. The list of such knowledge asymmetries could go on and on. Without conflating their different drivers, we can assert that knowledge production interacts with and is shaped by different forces, some natural and some social and political in origin (Kuhn 2012). While we might not be able to shift the dynamics of knowledge production effected by the forces of nature, we owe it to ourselves to develop and show awareness of the human and societal-driven drivers. The problem for us as comparativists is that inattention to these dynamics has both steered us away from many important questions and has led to analytic mistakes where we are focusing.

This symposium brings the communist and post-communist regions of the world into the debate. For reasons of founding ideology (liberatory) and of history (these were not core European-North American colonial powers), The Soviet Union, Russia, and China have not been considered alongside traditional colonial or imperial powers. Yet their sway over the peoples they annexed and conquered, and over how we as comparativists approach the study of these regions, has been just as lopsided. Being attentive to this is as important as it has been for Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa, as the essays in this collection demonstrate.

Indeed, the forms and dynamics within the communist/post-communist worlds can enrich the comparative study of colonial and post-colonial conditions.

Being inherently political, knowledge production reflects, props, and creates inequalities. As Şener Aktürk (2023) posits in his essay: "Studying is a power relationship: What is being studied, who is studying it, and how it is being studied are three critical questions where we observe this power relationship more acutely, or where we should observe it." Confronting these realities and making them more visible are political as well as politicized processes that tend to occur in distinct historical moments characterized by ruptures that reveal the role of violence in creating the institutional and social order we all live in. As such, these processes pose a challenge to political scientists and the discipline as whole motivated by scientific aspirations of creating unbiased, comparable and cumulative knowledge. With this symposium on decolonizing knowledge-production in post-communist studies (especially the part that focuses on the post-Soviet region), we call for scholarly self-awareness in responding to the implicit and explicit biases in knowledge production associated with pre-existing power distributions.

The nature of the historical moment the post-Soviet and Russian studies face today is that the surprisingly peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed more than 30 years later by a full-scale war that Russia, the core of the Soviet state, waged against Ukraine, one of its most important neighbors. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not widely expected. Even the experts on the region following the news failed to anticipate these events. This situation has characterized the for-

mer field of Sovietology as well: the Soviet collapse caught observers by surprise, focusing much intellectual energy on unpacking the reasons for this collapse retrospectively.

Only a few people expected Russia's full-scale military invasion with such ambitious objectives as reaching Kyiv and replacing Ukraine's leadership government. Could it be an artifact of our reluctance to imagine 'the unimaginable'? Thinking about continuity might be more convenient and less intellectually taxing than thinking about abrupt changes despite the risks to scholarly acuity. While we might not be able to change the fundamental challenges of forecasting such phenomena, we can explore how we spend our intellectual energies and how we craft our research agendas. Decentering both from historically dominant focus on one or a few countries is crucial to this endeavor.

Unexpected by many, the war and the level of violence and destruction unleashed in it opened the floodgates of a new 'decolonization' agenda among scholars who have focused their research attention on the countries that emerged from the Soviet collapse. The main objective of this collective movement is to address the hierarchies in knowledge creation - i.e. epistemic injustices that, as the Russian case has revealed, not only bias our knowledge creation enterprise. They can also be reflected in the political sphere and associated with epistemic violence as we witness in the Kremlin's denial of Ukraine's legitimacy as an independent nation-state.

The collective energy associated with this - decolonizing post-communist, post-Soviet, Russian and Slavic studies - agenda is surging not only among Ukrainian scholars highlighting the long tradition of looking at Ukraine through Russian eyes and marginalizing Ukrainian voices, language, culture, and historical memory (Chernetsky 2022). As Volodymyr Kulyk argues in his essay below, one of the reasons for the Western failure to better understand Ukraine is the widespread tendency to rely on Russian-language sources of information about the region. A similar pattern applies to other countries in the region, too. The scholars and peoples of Central Asia, 'the Soviet and Russian Orient,' whose history and development have also

been hijacked for the purposes of the Russian control and domination have are contributing to this anti-colonial momentum. Erica Marat and Botakoz Kassymbekova in their contribution to this symposium raise an issue of the marginalization of Central Asia and the misconceptions about the Soviet developmental impact in the region, calling for rethinking Soviet legacies, decentering Russia and challenging the old labels.

A few signs of the decolonization agenda are emerging among Russia's ethnic minorities, too, although the public voices are limited mostly to minority representatives who find themselves outside the country (Mazaeva 2023). As of now, the issue of decolonization and Russian imperialism is not approachable from the inside; it is seen as a threat to Russia's statehood and the current political regime redirects this discourse onto the Western and American imperialism. Nonetheless, a considerable potential for change (albeit impossible within the current political realities) lies within Russia itself, endowed by so many ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse communities that have been, over centuries, socialized and subdued to live in a Russo-centric state.

The Baltic states along with Poland - Russia's western neighbors that have experienced Russian imperialism and Soviet colonialism firsthand - are the strongest allies in this decolonization movement (Annus 2017, 2016). The Western scholarly community has also supported the agenda with gusto. The leading professional associations, scholars, institutions, centers, think tanks and funding organizations are all contributing to this conversation, raising awareness and calling for real change.

Sean Roberts reminds us with his contribution to this symposium on the Uyghur problem in China that the decolonizing moment the studies of Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia are undergoing today is not the first one. Understanding the challenges of the current historical moment in comparative perspective is a crucial task that comparative politics scholars face today. Greater scholarly attention to situating these experiences in a broader historical frame, engaging with different analytical approaches that have been developed to situate and question the

knowledge created in other asymmetric power contexts and using historical specificity of the post-communist and post-Soviet experiences to advance new concepts and analytical tools are the central challenges posed by this momentum.

The comparative and historical angles can help in a number of ways. The first value added is theoretical: the processes of decolonization in other parts of the world have been associated with the rise of an entirely new field of study: postcolonialism and postcolonial theory with its founders such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and others. The postcolonial theory evolved in the direction of recognizing hybrid identities, ambivalent relationships between the colonizers and colonized, and the absent voices of subaltern subjects (or the underclass). These critical and theoretically nuanced approaches associated with postcolonialism eschew simplistic binaries and introduce more nuanced recognition of the recurring power-based injustices. However, postcolonial theory has been originally developed in the context of the First and Third World relations. Postcommunist region does not fall neatly into any of these categories. The comparative and historical angle should therefore be generative of new theoretical approaches and conceptual tools developed in the context of imperial and colonial experiences in the countries that, in the 20th century, came to be associated with the Second World or semi-periphery. This analytical work could both, enrich the field of postcolonialism, and help appreciate the nuances of these specific experiences.

A few scholars of post-communism such as Serguei Oushakine (2017, 2013), Vyacheslav Morozov (2015), Vitaly Chernetsky (2003), Ilya Gerasimov (2013, and his colleagues at *Ab Imperio* journal) have already engaged in theoretically informed excursions into the postcolonial condition of post-Soviet countries. The post-colonial lens has also been used productively in the context of the experiences of the Baltic states (Annus 2017, 2016). Nonetheless, the space for further work in this direction remains wide open.

The second value added, perhaps even more important than the first, is empirical and humanist in nature. Colonial experiences are

associated with the histories of erasure reflected in collective and individual memory, narratives and identities of the marginalized or disenfranchised groups. Historical exploration of the traditions, events and processes forgotten, collective memories erased and stories untold is an act of reclaiming the agency of colonial subjects and countering the knowledge asymmetries resulting from and propping power asymmetries.

The political passion driving the present iteration of the decolonization movement in post-communist studies should not deceive us. The outcomes of these processes in other contexts temper the hopes about the anticipated results of the decolonization agenda in post-communist studies. To the extent that this movement is politically inspired by Russia's aggressive war and the imperative of Ukraine's victory, achieving political results might not necessarily transfer into the epistemological realm in the same way. The knowledge asymmetries, while shifting away from 'Russia's gaze,' can move towards a 'Western gaze' replacing Russo-centrism with Western- or Euro-centrism (Oskanian 2023). Replacing imperialism with essentialism and nationalist myth-making is another danger, perhaps unavoidable in the context of nation-building, as Kevork Oskanian argued recently (2023). Other scholars, such as Marina Mogilner, also highlighted the dangers of reifying methodological nationalism in the present discourses of decolonization; but she advanced the virtues of an alternative analytical framework that is constructed around the analytical category of 'empire' (Mogilner 2023). The *Ab Imperio* journal has long been the focal point for developing this analytical framework.

The comparative and historical perspective in which the present debates should be situated do not have to take attention away from understanding the unique features of this moment and the immediacy of violence, war and destruction in Ukraine. Rather, it should reinforce the anti-colonial agenda comprising concrete actions and strategies such as, (1) the purposeful promotion of researchers from countries, regions and institutions that have not been as visible as others; (2) increasing the visibility of critical approaches

that question mainstream theories and methodologies; (3) encouraging and promoting interdisciplinarity; (4) creating new publication outlets that privilege locally produced knowledge; and, most importantly, (5) rebalancing and redirecting institutional and financial resources to enable these actions and strategies.

Such concrete actions have already been undertaken in the Western academia in response to the earlier decolonization processes producing new fields of research in minority studies (i.e., women's study, African-American studies, Native American and indigenous studies). These new fields of studies and sub-disciplines had a significant impact on the mainstream fields reflecting the power of such institutional interventions although, undoubtedly, the processes of rebalancing and shifting institutional practices and priorities are very much ongoing and constantly emerging.

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REVERSING THE GAZE AND DECOLONIZING POLITICAL SCIENCE

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"To formulate a question is to resolve it."
Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (1978, p.28).

Studying as a power relationship

Decolonization of the social sciences is on the vogue. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022, brought the discussion of power-knowledge nexus to the fore. "Decolonization" is the theme of the 2023 convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), which prompts the question: Roughly seven decades after the largest wave of decolonization swept across Africa and Asia, and three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, what is the state of decolonizing knowledge production in political science and comparative politics?

Studying is a power relationship: *What* is being studied, *who* is studying it, and *how* it is being studied are three critical questions where we observe this power relationship more acutely, or where we *should* observe it. The answers to these three critical questions make most sense when considered together. Focusing on the nominal identity of the scholars who publish in leading journals without much attention to their location, their object of study, and the questions that guide their study would be akin to focusing on descriptive representation alone without much attention to substantive representation. International scholars based in U.S. institutions and publishing on their home countries do suggest a measure of academic diversification. However, decolonization of comparative politics should also entail scholars based in non-Western institutions publishing on Western politics with unconventional puzzles and questions of their own.

Who studies what in the world? Who theorizes comparatively?

If we were to approach the world and the scholars who study it for indicators of (neo-)colonial power relationships, two asymmetries of relevance appear immediately: First, scholars who are from the metropole or the "core" (e.g., Britain, Netherlands) routinely study and theorize about the former colonies or the "periphery" (e.g., Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan), while also continuing to study and theorize about their own societies. In contrast, scholars from the periphery often study, and are expected to study, their "native" society in the periphery. Thus, it is far more common to find the authoritative (e.g., oft-cited) texts on Egyptian, Indian, Indonesian, or Ukrainian politics being authored by British, Dutch, German, or Russian scholars, than similarly authoritative texts on British, Dutch, German, or Russian politics being authored by Egyptian, Indian, Indonesian, or Ukrainian scholars. This is also somewhat counterintuitive in the sense one might expect postcolonial scholars from the periphery, who speak the language and know the history and the culture of the former colonizer fairly well due to generations of (often involuntary) exposure, to have a high potential to author nuanced and high-quality comparative political analysis about Western societies.

A similar imbalance is also observable in terms of scholars who are distinguished for their methodological and theoretical contributions, expertise, and leadership: scholars of the core produce, refine, revise, and disseminate the concepts, the theoretical propositions, and the methodological instruments that are then deployed by scholars of the periphery who are primarily responsible or authorized for their application in approaching the empirical material in their native countries. As such, the production and circulation of

knowledge between the core and the periphery very much resembles the production and circulation of goods in the capitalist world-system: The scholars of the periphery collect and supply empirical raw materials (data) that is processed using the methodological and theoretical tools built by the scholars of the core, which is recognized as the most “value added” segment in the process of knowledge production. Inequalities in the global value chain are observable in numerous processes, including most recently in the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which Susan Sell (2020) discusses in relation to “intellectual monopoly capitalism.”

The ones who exercise power are privileged to study “everything, everywhere, all at once” (Kwan and Scheinert 2002) and theorize about them, while the ones on whom power is applied are the ones being studied, or who can at most study their society as a data point or a case study on which externally produced theories may be applied. Bearing these inequalities in mind, a common advice I give to my students departing for graduate studies in the United States is to focus on developing their theoretical and methodological expertise, to avoid studying their native country alone as a single-case, and to avoid being intellectually and professionally trapped, as an “area studies expert” who specializes in her/his native country alone.

Comparative Politics from the Periphery as a Remedy

There may be innocuous reasons for scholars from the global periphery often voluntarily choosing to study their native countries, such as having the advantage of being a native speaker. However, it may also be the case that sometimes advisors and institutions expect the scholars from the periphery to work and produce knowledge primarily or only on their countries of origins, which often relegates them to a lower rank in academic hierarchy. Even panel assignments in international conferences may reflect such an understanding. In cases where scholars are placed to panels based on their country of origins or the location of their institutional home in the global political economic hierarchy rather than the substantive content and the theoretical relevance of their work, this reproduces the (neo-)colonial asymmetries of power in

the production of knowledge. Comparative politics is potentially the perfect instrument to “reverse the gaze” in decolonizing political science. By creating professional conditions and encouraging scholars from the global periphery to study and theorize about multiple countries, which might or might not include their country of origin, comparative politics has the promise to teach us that our worldview, value system, and normative assumptions are just one among many others. Know thyself, in comparative perspective.

The ability to think of puzzles where non-Western cases, or factors associated with non-Western societies, appear to have better, enviable, superior outcomes than Western cases, would be the true litmus test of overcoming the mental barriers and intellectual legacies imposed by colonialism.

Unasked Questions and Unnoticed Puzzles: Are Non-Western Advantages Being Studied?

Perhaps the most consequential manifestation of an enduring (neo-)colonial legacy in comparative politics can be observed in the questions asked, or rather, questions and puzzles that never occur to the researchers. “To formulate a question is to resolve it,” as Marx suggested “On the Jewish Question.” Scholars in the Euro-American core, including those of non-Western origins, almost never look for, and thus do not find, the causes of any outcome that is *comparatively better* in non-Western societies.

A typical puzzle of comparative politics in the tradition of “the great divergence” is something along these lines: Why and how the Western polities have systematically better outcomes in terms of X than the non-Western polities? The formulation of the question only

allows for two answers: Either there is something structurally problematic about non-Western polities (e.g., their culture, religion, geography, or natural resource endowments, etc.), in which case they are doomed due to their identity and/or location (geography or geology!), or it turns out that some agentic and institutional choices these non-Westerners (i.e., their leaders, or more often, their ancestors) made is responsible for their currently unenviable predicament, in which case there is hope for improvement, at least theoretically.

Focus on the Muslim Question: The Choice of the Dependent Variable

What is conspicuously missing are comparative studies that identify non-Western advantages at present, and ask whether these are the result of historical, structural, institutional, or agentic causes. The ability to think of puzzles where non-Western cases, or factors associated with non-Western societies, appear to have better, enviable, superior outcomes than Western cases, would be the true litmus test of overcoming the mental barriers and intellectual legacies imposed by colonialism. A stark example of this challenge in comparative politics is the troubling asymmetry in the study of Islam as an independent variable, and relatedly, Muslim-majority societies as cases. All Muslim-majority polities except for four came under European rule¹, and thus the study of almost all Muslim societies is relevant to the discussion of decolonizing knowledge production. In comparative politics, Muslim-majority societies have been regularly identified and studied as a category of cases for their collectively worse outcomes (e.g., in democracy ratings, economic development indicators, and various measures of human rights including religious freedom).

The choice of a dependent variables to study is the “first step” and the most consequential problem in comparative political research as it relates to overcoming colonial legacies and “reversing the gaze.” In contrast to the prolific growth of the “West versus the Rest” genre that seeks to explain the various advantages of the West, there are extremely few works of comparative politics, which identified and sought to explain a significant outcome in which Muslim-majority societies

had *better* outcomes than Western societies. I briefly discuss two such works below.

In his book, *Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence*, Steve Fish (2011) found that Muslim-majority societies have lower economic inequality, as captured by Gini scores. He argued that the Muslim advantage in having lower economic inequality becomes even more statistically significant when one controls for economic development level, level of democracy, and life expectancy, all of which are otherwise associated with lower economic inequality (Fish 2011, 217-220). In a thought-provoking discussion of comparative religious traditions, Fish suggests that the Islamic practice of mandatory annual almsgiving of 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth, one of the five mandatory acts prescribed for Muslims, known as *zakat*, may be responsible for lower class inequality among Muslims (Fish 2011, 220-227). This cross-national finding that is potentially of immense significance for anyone interested in political economy did not attract nearly as much attention of political scientists as the findings of Muslim "backwardness" vis-à-vis Western Christian-heritage polities.

In another exceptional and thought-provoking contribution, Mikhail Alexseev and Sufian Zhemukov (2017) found that Muslims returning home from pilgrimage to Mecca become both more pious and more tolerant of ethnic and religious outgroups (Alexseev and Zhemukov 2015, 2017). The US reader may also be familiar with this effect as it was clearly observable in the life of the famous Black Muslim leader, Malcolm X. However, their article and book did not motivate any other major study in comparative politics on the relationship between toleration and Islamic pilgrimage.

Positing an Islamic variable as the potential cause of a normatively commendable outcome might even provoke a negative reaction. When I was presenting part of my work on "Islamic multiculturalism" being the main discourse facilitating the legalization and institutionalization of ethnic minority expression by the Turkish state (Aktürk 2012) in New York, a scholar in the audience asked or rather asserted that "Islamic multiculturalism" is an "oxymoron," with the implication being that an Islamic variable cannot be associated

with tolerance let alone promotion of cultural diversity. In this connection, Anne Norton (2013) provocatively argued that the discussion and the study of "the Muslim question" is primarily about Western self-perceptions and anxieties rather than Muslim minorities or societies themselves, which should provide an additional reason to occasionally "reverse the gaze" between the Western subject and the non-Western object in comparative political studies.

These problems are obviously not limited to the study of Muslim-heritage societies. For example, contrary to a number of normative assumptions regarding the East-West divide within Europe, we sought to explain why the largest religious minorities in Europe (Muslims) achieved much higher levels of descriptive representation in Eastern European parliaments than in Western European parliaments (Aktürk and Katliarou 2021). In short, there are a few publications in comparative politics that identified and sought to explain normatively better outcomes in non-Western polities than their Western counterparts, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Reflections on Colonialism and Communism

Colonialism and communism were the most destructive transformative processes that a great majority of societies experienced in the last several centuries. Only a handful of non-European countries escaped being colonized by a European power at some point during their modern history.² Many European and non-European polities also suffered under communism, while some suffered under both colonialism and communism, such as Cambodia and Chechnya. There are at least three different ways in which postcolonial thinking is very relevant for the study of postcommunist world in particular. First, communism was a similar but arguably even more intrusive application of power through knowledge and identity production than colonialism in that it shaped and even created many ethno-national identities through the policy of "indigenization" (*korenizatsiia*) whereby an indigenous communist elite (*nomenklatura*) was cultivated from each ethno-national group along with a new socialist ethnic/national culture (Aktürk 2012; Hirsch 2005).

In most post-Soviet countries, including in Russia, former communist party elites, the *nomenklatura*, remained in power even after the formal transition away from communism (Snegovaya and Petrov 2022; Wengle 2023). Not only the elites, but also the cultural content of the modern "national" identities of especially post-Soviet states have been in great part created by the former communist regimes, summed up in the Soviet-era slogan, "national in form, socialist in content" (Aktürk 2012; Hirsch 2005; Wengle 2023). The ubiquitous and undeniable impact of Soviet socialism in shaping modern national identities leads to a fundamental crisis of subjectivity: What is the "national [e.g., Kazakh] culture" other than what has been created and propagated under Soviet communism? This conundrum is similar to the crisis of subjectivity or identity that one encounters in postcolonial contexts. The intensity of this identity crisis would vary significantly across dozens of postcommunist societies depending on their precommunist cultural heritage.

Second, as Dace Dzenovska (2018: 16-7) demonstrates in the case of Latvia, "the collapse of Soviet and Eastern European socialisms... lent new life to Europe's self-ascribed moral superiority by opening new spaces to democratization and liberalization initiatives, much criticized in postcolonial literature." This had a tremendous impact on Western Europe by "reassert[ing]... the moral goodness of liberal Europe by dislocating Europe's vices, such as nationalism and intolerance, to marginal people and places, such as Eastern Europe..." (Dzenovska 2018: 12). This leaves postcommunist Eastern Europeans in a double-bind: On the one hand, they seek to prove that they are true Europeans as demonstrated by the bitterly ironic Latvian emphasis and pride in the brief Latvian colonization of Tobago (in the Caribbean) and Gambia (in West Africa) as indicators of Latvians' European identity, which is based on the belief that proper Western/Europeans are "colonial powers." (Dzenovska 2018). On the other hand, postcommunist Eastern Europeans are also expected to practice ethnoracial tolerance and to atone for the excesses of ethno-nationalism as Western Europeans (are assumed to) have done, which reinforces the status of postcom-

unist Eastern Europeans as second-class or less-than-true-Europeans. As such, contradictory attitudes toward non-Western others (for example, “aspirations for colonial heritage” as an indicator of true Western/European identity historically, and the practice of ethnoracial tolerance at present) constitute the “paradox of Europeanness” that postcommunist Eastern Europeans are confronted with (Dzenovska 2018). In short, postcommunist societies are stuck between not just one but at least two major hierarchical and normative international orders, a Russocentric and a Eurocentric one, which further complicates their dilemmas.

Third and relatedly, there is seemingly broad agreement that colonialism and communism were extremely violent processes in great part because they were imposed from above, lacking in broad popular support and legitimacy. Yet challenging the interstate borders imposed by colonialism and/or Soviet socialism, for example, is still considered as dangerous and illegitimate revisionism in most political studies. Thus, the international community only recognized the independence of the 15 post-Soviet republics that were formerly designated as Union Republics within the Soviet Union (Hirsch 2005), but not, for example, Chechnya, which witnessed a more sustained mobilization for independence than most Central Asian states (Kassymbekova 2023). Similarly, borders between five Central Asian states remain as they were drawn by Stalin. In short, political science mostly reifies, however implicitly, the interstate borders inherited from colonialism and communism. On the one hand, transnational or supranational visions of identity and many regional integration schemes that seek to transcend these national boundaries, such as Eurasianism or the Eurasian Economic Union, often appear to be thinly veiled attempts to reconstruct former (often Russocentric) imperial hierarchies, although non-Russian Eurasianisms may be considered partial exceptions (Laruelle 2008). Not to reify the international borders that are often the result of colonial and communist legacies, political scientists may use “non-national” units of analysis (rather than supranational or subnational units of analysis that still presuppose nations) defined by the main empirical or theoretical puzzle.

In conclusion, much remains to be done for decolonization of political science. At the very least, we have to be attentive to who is studying what, and especially how, with a focus on the normative implications and biases inherent in choosing the questions to ask and the dependent variables to study. I do hope, however, that this intervention proves to be an important step in raising awareness regarding such critical questions of research design in a world indelibly shaped by structural inequalities that resulted from centuries of colonialism.

Notes

¹ Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are the only four Muslim-majority polities that escaped European colonialism by my count (also see footnote 2 below), although there were failed attempts by European or Western powers to occupy Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey since the early 20th century.

² According to Manuel Vogt (2019, 31), only nine non-European multiethnic polities escaped European colonization and these are China, Ethiopia, Iran, Japan, Liberia, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Turkey.

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RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE DECOLONIZING CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE UNDERSTANDING

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The war in Ukraine has mainstreamed previously marginal decolonial views of Central Asia as a place of neighborhood to larger countries. Decolonial discussions and practices are proliferating across Central Asia, especially in politically freer Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These discussions are unraveling with greater speed than what Western political scientists can produce for their audiences. New works by Kassymbekova (forthcoming), Doolotkeldieva (forthcoming), Tutumlu (2021), and Kassenova (2022) dismantle the long-held views of Russian benevolent empire. Decolonial perspectives are also flourishing in the arts, activism, and unpublished academic discussions. Central Asian scholars and activists connect to the trauma of the Ukrainians not only through empathy in the human suffering in the current war, but also through the memory of the past atrocities perpetrated by Soviet Russia.

Decolonial thinking is primarily important for the political development of Central Asia. But a decolonial view of Russia may also benefit Western studies of Russia. It's time to rethink the political science approach to Russia: the country will be better understood if academic discussions are decentered and include perspectives from non-Russian perspectives originating in Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, or Eastern Europe (Koplatadze 2019). Central Asia, in turn, should be studied from a similar decolonial lens of non-Slavic nations within Russia and Ukraine studies - both rapidly expanding fields.

Western Reluctance
to See Russia's Imperialism

Much of the marginalization of Central Asia as a neighbor to "great powers" and the misconcep-

tion of Central Asian Soviet development as beneficial for the region stems from how literature from across social sciences views the Soviet past. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, scholars have moved away from the lens of totalitarianism and colonialism, seeing it as a Cold War relic (Tutumlu 2021). In many ways, this intellectual paradigm was a result of goodwill, where scholars found it their mission to "demonize" or "humanize" Russia (which was used as a substitute for the Soviet empire) for their Western publics. Since, the logic went, the Cold War produced an anti-Russian sentiment in the West, scholars took it as their mission to provide a more normalizing picture of the Soviet state and society. In that scheme, Soviet colonies were either absent from the analysis or interpreted as policies that had the agency to craft their destinies or were violently integrated into Soviet "modernity."

Most Western and Russian political science literature premises Central Asia as Russia's near abroad, China's backwater, or just a little-known region. The five countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) often matter only as parts of their larger neighbors' security or economic interests. Such a view of the region as geopolitically marginal to larger countries also informs the policy of the West. For the past two decades, the United States approached Central Asia as adjacent to its invasion in Afghanistan.

More than any other label, Central Asia as Russia's "near abroad" sentiment fails to see countries formerly occupied by Russia as politically dynamic in their own right. What Russia scholars expected from Russia since the end of the Cold

War – a democratic country with a robust civil society – materialized with far greater success in other countries: the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan. Russia, in turn, was never a democratic country – not once did it experience the transfer of power through competitive elections. Russian leadership undermined popular revolts against kleptocratic regimes in neighboring countries. But even though Russia failed to live up to Western expectations, old sentiments of Russia as the most important country in Europe and Asia continue to prevail.

Framing Russia as a great or regional power distorts the analysis of its own colonial past and its present-day atrocities. The sentiment presumes that it is only rational for Moscow to continue to conquer new territories and enjoy influence in neighboring countries. The international de facto acceptance of Russia's occupation of Crimea or takeover of parts of Georgia are the prime examples of such logic. It also prohibits inquiries into why Moscow maintains its forceful control of Chechnya and undemocratic rule over Tatarstan, Kalmykia, and other republics. The disillusion with Russia as a great power entitled to control its "near abroad" caught the scholarly community by surprise when Russian troops began committing genocidal atrocities in Ukraine.

The fact that the Soviet empire collapsed without long anti-colonial wars suggested that the Soviet empire was not colonial and that some of the Soviet leaders were of different ethnic origins seemed to prove that the Soviet empire was not a Russian construct. The Soviet system did not produce anti-colonial thinkers like Franz Fanon or Edward Said, and hence the Soviet system was interpreted as simply a tragic experiment of a utopian idea that happened to swallow millions used for forced modernization. Furthermore, scholars rarely recognized the coloniality of wars in Chechnya and did not become a central theme to analyze Russian politics and history either. The focus on Moscow meant that Moscow's scholarly and political perspectives dominated the field.

Both Western leftist movements and scholars still praise the Soviet socialist system for emancipating women, providing universal education and healthcare, and promoting

affirmative action among ethnic minorities. Yet, as Kassymbekova often asks in her work: how can a totalitarian system ever be emancipatory or affirmative? Some myths about women's rights in the Soviet Union and equal treatment of minorities (Kassymbekova and Marat 2022) have since been dismantled. Nevertheless, the notion that Central Asia was modernized by Soviet Russia and therefore destined to benefit as a closely connected former colonial master fails to subside in

Western academia exoticizes Russia as a hard-to-understand culture, considering its "greatness" at face value. Western Central Asian studies, by contrast, view political regimes as static, parochial, and needing external intervention. Theorization produced of Central Asia in the 1990s and 2000s that see the area as dominated by clannish relations, fixed ethnic identities, and prone to wars continue to influence today's understanding of the region (...)

political science.

Russia's sense of its lost greatness in 1991 after the demise of the Soviet Union fuels sentiments of victimhood and betrayal on the part of those republics that chose a Western model of development. As a result, Russian intellectuals became preoccupied with their own imagined marginal position vis-à-vis the West, fueling denial of the true colonial nature of the Soviet regime. Russian intellectuals have largely ignored the necessity to decolonize Russian identity and culture. Instead, some either claimed colonial status themselves (Morozov 2015) or ignored it altogether. On the official level, the Russian state polices how history is written and taught in former Soviet states, such as in the Central Asian republics. Russian embassies intervene in school curricula, insisting on a positive portrayal of Russia's role in Central Asia.

Decolonizing Central Asian studies involves decentering Russia in understanding the area – or seeing it as independent from other powers. Central Asia shares a history of Russian occupation, but the region also shares both global and indigenous trends in political and economic development. Theoretical and empirical work derived from studies of Central Asia should view the Soviet occupation as colonial but also avoid generalizing the area as if it were defined by its larger neighbors. Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva (2022) unravel most myths about the benefits of the Soviet regime: "There is precious little English-language scholarship, for example, on those native intellectuals and actors who found Soviet rule incompatible with their values and beliefs. Soviet Central Asian history is still predominantly a history about (Soviet) 'victors'."

Challenging the Old Labels

If Russia is decentered in Central Asian studies, is the term "post-Soviet" still appropriate? Since chronologies and spatization are not neutral scientific tools but political engagements, we need to analyze how and why we imagine regions as we do. As Arjun Appadurai noted, it is not geographies that make histories, but "histories make geography"(2008). Also, as Sebastian Conrad argued, scientific categories are "devised to think the world" and should therefore be understood as normative claims and interpretations (2012). Rooted in European teleologies, periodization and spatialization are produced the kind of political imaginaries that influence our thinking about places and processes.

The term post-Soviet is obscure and yet revealing in different ways. It can refer both as a spatial category to devise a region (all countries that were part of the Soviet empire) or periodic category to refer to the time after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Usually an external category, ascribed from outside of the region: no institute or journal in republics of the former Soviet empire identify themselves as post-Soviet. The term post-Soviet flattens colonial hierarchies and obscures the coloniality of Soviet experience. The power of external actors to hold power of categorization only suggests the lack of agency of the local actors to claim their own identification

in the global construction of knowledge. At the same time, it is not surprising that Moscow is in favor of an umbrella term for the region as it keeps the understanding of the region as a natural monolith that belongs to each other.

The term also fails to both understand the difference in Central Asia's experience of Soviet repressions compared to other countries formerly occupied by Russia and the immense richness of social and political developments in the area since 1991. Central Asian region suffered from greater exploitation and cultural erasure compared to other parts of the Soviet empire (Abylkhozhin, Akulov, and Tsay 2021, Mustoyapova 2022, Kassymbekova 2016). The Bolsheviks standardized the languages and cultures. The region's nomadic populations were forced to settle, resulting in massive deaths. Central Asian cultivation of cotton and grain fueled Soviet economy but led to environmental degradation in the region (Micklin 1983, Obertreis 2017, Amirova 2022). Stalin used Kazakhstan's vast territory for Soviet nuclear experiments (Kassenova 2022). Central Asia survived the Soviet experiment. To call Central Asia "post-Soviet" is synonymous to the "near abroad" label.

Another unfortunate label for Central Asia is "Eurasia."¹ Russia's controversial ideologue Alexander Dugin promoted the label to highlight a territorial area from Eastern Europe to Central Asia united around Russian anti-Western sentiments, Christian Orthodox values, and the Russian culture in general. Russian-led initiatives in Central Asia focus on the Eurasia label. Leaders of the Central Asian countries promote the notion as well to demonstrate their belonging both to European and Asian regions. Similar discussions on regional labeling take place in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The Central Asian region is Asian geographically but shares similar colonial past as Eastern Europe.

Decolonizing the region both as a knower and a diverse socio-political entity must center around voices from the region. An example of Martin Müller, a political scientist, to practice decolonial agenda provides an example of how decolonizing regions should not take place (2020). Mueller proposes to introduce the epistemological category of

the Global East to place on the global map countries of the former "Second World" that do not fit the categorization of either Global North or Global South. Mueller is concerned with the supposed invisibility of these in-between regions for global (read Western) publics. The region of the proposed Global East is, according to Mueller, *terra incognita*, and he proposes to use 'strategic essentialism' to unite the countries of post-socialism and 'introduce' them to the 'world'. Mueller lends the strategic essentialism from decolonial epistemology, which coined the term the 'Global South,' to create the concept 'Global East'. Mueller specifies that the concept of the Global East should be treated not as a fixed geography but rather as an epistemic categorization, the aim of which is to reflect upon and overcome the condition of in-betweenness and marginalization of the post-socialist region.

Although Mueller's proposition to provide more visibility to the post-socialist region is understandable, one of the most problematic parts of the suggestion is connected to the question of authorship. Mueller appropriates the subaltern group's strategy of essentialism for visibility (i.e., the use of Global South as an emancipatory category), but what he misses is the fact that subaltern strategic essentialism is a 'we'-discourse that claims agency, whereas his category of the Global East is external categorization from the so-called Global North. Whereas the subaltern categorization of the Global South was theorized to critique and overcome orientalisms, the external categorization of the Global East is orientalism. External essentialism seriously differs from emic strategic essentialism because it is a practice of power, not only a linguistic exercise. An external practice of power to label, define, and categorize differs from the same practice for internal mobilization exactly because it is a practice of self-empowerment, i.e., mobilization for the goal of emancipation.

Any true emancipatory project is always self-emancipatory, i.e., it is directed at emancipating and empowering in the name of oneself or one's own group, however imaginary. We need to learn academic modesty and dislearn to speak for others and coin labels for world regions of which we are not part. This

does not mean that we can speak with and about others, but speaking *for* and speaking *about* are two essentially different things. We need to understand that we cannot emancipate others, we can only emancipate ourselves. We can also engage in equal dialogue instead of speaking for everyone. One does not have to pin oneself to one region only. Much depends on the question. Fruitful studies of settler colonialism in China and the Soviet Union are emerging (Roberts this issue). In other aspects, intellectual connections between Ottoman empire, in other question comparison with Ukraine and Baltic states (e.g. cultural erasure) make more sense. We need to embrace the messiness and inability to offer one totalizing category, which will be misleading anyways.

Epistemological inequalities

Western research of Central Asia suffers from systemic inequalities in international academia. Research of Central Asia is still divided by deep inequalities. Central Asian scholars often serve as informants to their western colleagues. Central Asians working from the home places often find their insights appropriated without attribution in published work. Western academia exoticizes Russia as a hard-to-understand culture, considering its "greatness" at face value. Western Central Asian studies, by contrast, view political regimes as static, parochial, and needing external intervention. Theorization produced of Central Asia in the 1990s and 2000s that see the area as dominated by clannish relations, fixed ethnic identities, and prone to wars continue to influence today's understanding of the region (Doolotkeldieva *forthcoming*, Sultanalieva 2019, Marat and Aisarina 2021, Dadabaev and Heathershaw 2020).

Who is involved into the conversation and on what terms is key to any area studies discussion. While scholars and commentators from Russia are invited to comment on Central Asia, scholars from Central Asia are not invited to comment on Russia. The colonial dynamics of commentary has consequences on the way the region is perceived. Lending power to scholars from Central Asia to comment not only on Central Asia but also on regions outside of Central Asia is key for how Central Asia is understood and involved into

the conversation about global politics and history. It is one of the major basis for decolonizing the region epistemically.

Moreover, the current Western commentary pays little attention to the current political imaginaries of post-war Russia discussed by exile governments of Bashkortostan, Ichkeria, Tatarstan, the United States of Siberia, and others. These alternative national political leaders are in thick conversations with analysts from Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Central Asia. The transregional discussions raise issues of de-Sovietization, property restitution to victims of Stlinims, and reparations to the victims of Russia's war against Ukraine. Listening and writing about conversations is key for decolonizing the region and will understand Central Asia as a region that is involved in the conversations about the regional future. They dramatically differed from how opposition leaders like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexey Navalny see Russia's federative subjects. Alluding to leaders who might seek independence from Russia in the future, Khodorkovsky recently told *Novaya Gazeta* how incorrigible (*otpetye*) "national patriots...will have to die", echoing Stalinist rhetoric of extermination of national bourgeoisie.²

Finally, various political science conferences grapple with where to include Central Asian studies to make the field more compelling to the general reader. Culturally, Central Asia is closely tied to Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and Mongolia. Ethnic connections with the Turkic people or nomadic traditions still preserved in Mongolia remind of the cultural heritage lost during the Soviet occupation. Soviet cultural erasure of Central Asian indigenous traditions complicates cross-national comparisons. The dilemma for how Central Asia can be better understood – among Russian colonial subjects or as part of Asia – should be answered by the Central Asian themselves. For that, political science forums need to transform as well. For instance, instead of holding conferences in the United States or Europe, Western scholars must convene in countries formerly occupied by Soviet Russia. Only there, can the voices of those formerly colonized set the decolonial agenda and pose new questions about comparative political developments or geopolitical dynamics.

Notes

¹ Erica Marat has until recently used both «post-Soviet» and «Eurasia» widely in her publications.

² "Mihail Hodorkovskiy o decentralizatsii, oligarhah Putina i strahе SShA/ Interv'yū s Kirillom Martynovym", *Novaya Gezeta Europe*, January 26, 2023 (1:07:00"). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhVp43qkml>)

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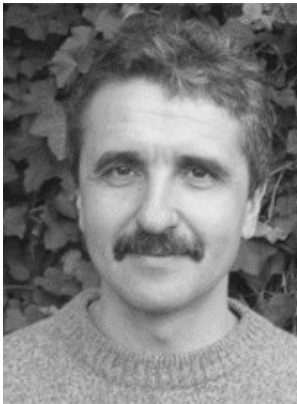
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OVERCOMING THE COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE IN UKRAINIAN STUDIES

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Decolonization of studies of Russia and the countries that used to be part of the Russian/Soviet empire became a prominent topic in academic and intellectual discourse in those countries and the West after Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Viewing the invasion as an attempt at the imperial subjugation of the Ukrainian people, many scholars call for greater attention to the imperialist policies of the Russian and Soviet states and to those countries and peoples they controlled and suppressed.

It is obvious that scholars should pay much more attention to Ukraine, Belarus, Central Asia, and other countries of the region which until recently remained in the shadow of Russia. At the same time, it is less clear what should be changed in topical priorities, conceptual approaches, and normative assumptions. In a sense, it is easier to see what change is needed in Russian studies: first and foremost, to recognize that Russia has for centuries been a colonial empire and to shift research focus toward the practices of colonial domination over the non-Russian peoples and their consequences for those peoples (Kassymbekova and Marat 2022; Shaipov and Shaipova 2023). But in research on countries other than Russia, the Russian and Soviet imperial practices have long been one of the main foci, although they have rarely been perceived as colonialism. Apart from reconsidering the colonialism issue, what exactly should scholars strive to change?

This article seeks to give some answers to this question pertaining to studies of Ukraine, a country which the West has failed to adequately understand and engage - as has been made abundantly clear by the ongoing war in which most analysts did not initially given Ukraine the

slightest chance to withstand the Russian onslaught. I will first discuss some major shortcomings of the research on Ukraine in political science and international relations, or rather that part which is presented in English-language publications. Then the focus will shift to the field I know best, namely the politics of ethnicity and language. I will demonstrate that many of the questions scholars ask and the answers they give are informed by the perception of Ukraine as intrinsically - and unequally - related to Russia, as part of its sphere of influence based on its long-term imperial domination rather than a fully independent state free to make its own political and geopolitical choices.

Ukraine's marginality in political science

I will begin with the obvious fact that Ukraine has been a marginal subject in research (and virtually nonexistent in teaching) in political science and international relations in the West and across the world. Judging by the number of publications, projects, research centers, etc., Ukraine was - and still is - considered much less worth studying than Russia or other "great powers". To be sure, there are a handful of Ukraine-focused centers and programs at top universities such as Harvard, Cambridge, and Columbia, but they are far outnumbered by the many dozens of centers and programs focused on Russia. In part, this marginality reflected Ukraine's modest role in world politics and economic relations (although the war has revealed that its role in global trade was not that marginal). No less important, however, was the inertia of perceptions and institutions which led to the continuation of Soviet studies as studies of Russia, with some addition of other countries of the former USSR. In the first decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a number of publications examined in a comparative per-

spective the political and economic transformation in its successor states, a framework that reflected both the similarity of their starting conditions and their perceived belonging – even after the proclamation of independence – to a common political and economic space. Some works also covered the former East European “satellite” states which started their post-communist transformation a few years earlier, but soon their trajectories toward the EU and NATO set them apart from the post-Soviet states which, except for the Baltic countries, did not want or were not invited to follow that path.

Because of much stronger pro-Soviet and anti-Western sentiments, Ukraine started signaling its preference for European and Euro-Atlantic integration much later than its East European neighbors. But when it did, these signals were largely ignored by Western politicians and did not lead to a much greater interest among scholars. Even after the Orange and Euromaidan revolutions clearly demonstrated the Ukrainian people’s agency in determining their country’s political and geopolitical orientation, this agency – while recognized and praised – remained a minor factor in most Western analyses compared to those of the West, Russia, and domestic oligarchy. Although the victory of Euromaidan and the subsequent Russian aggression of 2014 made the pro-Western orientation clearly predominant among the Ukrainian elites and the population, most Western policymakers and analysts still considered Ukraine’s integration into the EU and NATO unrealistic in the foreseeable future. Apart from serious deficiencies of Ukraine’s democratic reforms, the key reason for this unwelcoming attitude was an implicit perception of Ukraine as an inseparable part of Russia’s sphere of influence, largely congruent with its former imperial realm (Mearsheimer 2014; Graham et al. 2017). Even the conflict provoked by Moscow’s intervention in Crimea and the Donbas was more often interpreted in Western academic and think tank publications as a confrontation between Russia and the West than between Russia and Ukraine (Koval et al. 2022). The prominent place of Ukraine on Russia’s geopolitical agenda was recognized in the West only after the full-blown invasion of 2022.

In the first decade of Ukrainian independence, many Western publications showed the authors’ poor knowledge of the country and its perception “through the Russian eyes,” with research questions and conclusions reflecting the imperial view of Ukraine as both inseparable from, and unequal to Russia. While some scholars paid attention to Ukraine’s complex history and diverse legacies (Kuzio and Wilson 1994; Wilson 2000), most others initially emphasized the Soviet legacy and focused on relations with Russia. Apart from the deeply-rooted reduction of the USSR and, accordingly, the post-Soviet region to its Russian “core,” this Russocentric

Similarly, whether Ukrainian ethnopolitics was conceptualized as aggressive “nationalization” or more moderate “nation-building,” most Western analyses contrasted the majority-dominated state and the minority groups of citizens, first and foremost ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. They did not usually pay attention to how the state protected linguistic rights of speakers of Ukrainian, thus presuming that it was not a problem.

perception of Ukraine (and other newly independent countries) reflected most Western scholars’ reliance on the Russian language and Russian sources of information about the region. At that time, no more than a few dozen Western academics were able to read in Ukrainian and knowledgeable in local sources, most of these people being of Ukrainian descent. Moreover, Ukrainian scholars participated in the global/Western production of knowledge on the region much less actively than their Russian counterparts who benefited from the traditionally stronger ties with the West and better knowledge of foreign languages, both largely resulting from the Soviet inequality be-

tween the center and the periphery. Starting with the 2000s, younger scholars entered the field with high proficiency in the Ukrainian language and genuine interest in the country, while some older academics and think tank analysts acquired some knowledge of Ukrainian and a habit of using Ukrainian sources (many of which were also available in Russian). In addition, some Ukrainian graduates of Western universities found jobs at Western educational and research institutions, thus contributing to the production of grounded and nuanced knowledge about Ukraine. Still, the number of scholars with any expertise on Ukraine remained much smaller than those dealing with Russia. This became particularly evident in times of increased public interest in Ukraine such the Euromaidan revolution and the 2022 war when many academic events and media programs had to engage Russia experts to talk and write about Ukraine – and not only Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

Colonial perspective in Ukrainian studies

Studies in the politics of ethnicity and language in Ukraine demonstrate most authors’ failure to fully understand the pernicious legacy of Russian colonialism/imperialism, which might have to do with their internalization of the colonial perspective. Since the early years of Ukraine’s independence, two main topics Western scholars focused on were Ukrainian nationalism and nation-building, on the one hand, and the right of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers, on the other. Although some scholars argued that Ukrainian nationalism was only a “minority faith” (Wilson 1997) in society and a waning force in politics (Kubicek 1999), few people in the West recognized that there was also a Russian nationalism in Ukraine, that is, the parties usually classified as pro-Russian or even leftist (also) espoused Russian nationalist views (Kuzio 2002). In the following years, the focus in the studies of nationalism in Ukraine shifted toward the so-called radical Ukrainian nationalism, which reflected both the “anti-nationalist” (liberal or leftist) views of many Western academics and the influence of Russian propaganda presenting this nationalism as a powerful and dangerous factor in Ukrainian politics and society. Few publications viewed Ukrainian nationalism as a more moderate and popular outlook and senti-

ment whose appeal was further strengthened by Euromaidan and the Russian aggression of 2014 (Kulyk 2014).

Similarly, whether Ukrainian ethnopolitics was conceptualized as aggressive “nationalization” or more moderate “nation-building,” most Western analyses contrasted the majority-dominated state and the minority groups of citizens, first and foremost ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. They did not usually pay attention to how the state protected linguistic rights of speakers of Ukrainian, thus presuming that it was not a problem. Indeed, this was for a long time a much less salient issue in Ukrainian politics and public discourse than that of the status of Russian and the rights of its speakers (Arel 1995; Wolczuk 2007). But another important reason for such a presumption was that most Western scholars failed to recognize postcolonial features of the Ukrainian linguo-cultural situation (Moore 2001; Riabczuk 2013). As far as language processes were concerned, Ukraine in the first two decades of independence was less similar to the European nation-states than to the postcolonial states where the majority language is usually marginalized in the prestigious domains which are still dominated by the former colonial language. Accordingly, linguistic rights of majority members are routinely violated but, paradoxically, they do not protest against this as much as speakers of the colonial language who grew accustomed to being able to use it for all purposes (Kulyk 2021). It is only after Euromaidan and Russian intervention in Crimea and the Donbas that the Ukrainian state started resolutely promoting the titular language in various domains, a policy most citizens supported as long as it did not infringe on their personal freedom of choice (Kulyk 2019). Russia’s full-blown invasion of 2022 has triggered a more radical shift toward Ukrainian as many formerly Russian-speaking Ukrainians refuse to continue speaking what they now perceive as the language of the aggressor (Eisenberg 2022). Now, linguistic rights of Russian-speakers may in fact be more frequently violated than those of Ukrainian-speakers.

The internalization of the colonial perspective could also be seen in scholarly assessments of the impact of Ukrainian nation-building on the identities of ethnic Russian and Russian-

speaking citizens. In the early years of Ukraine’s independence, most authors seemed to assume that these citizens would more or less firmly object to the assimilation in the majority-dominated society and seek instead to preserve their separate ethnolinguistic identity. It is only after 2014 that a number of publications revealed an increase of Ukrainian civic attachment and its stronger appeal to people of Russian background and Russian language compared to their ethnic and linguistic identity (Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018; Sasse and Lackner 2019). A recent study demonstrated that both in public discourse and popular identifications, the boundary between people formerly categorized as Ukrainians and as Russians have all but disappeared. In fact, smaller minorities such as the Hungarians, Romanians, and Crimean Tatars turned out to be better equipped to retain their ethnic distinction than were ethnic Russians. While Ukraine certainly remains ethnoculturally diverse, its designation as an essentially multiethnic country with deep, hardened, divisions between clear-cut ethnic groups should be reconsidered (Kulyk 2022).

Conclusion

Russia’s imperialist war against independent Ukraine has vividly demonstrated inadequate knowledge of Ukraine among Western scholars, including political scientists. Not only was Ukraine studied much less than Russia and other alleged great powers but also many studies reflected the perception of the country as unavoidably and unequally related to Russia, as part of its sphere of influence based on its long-term imperial domination (which thus appeared as de facto continuing). In a sense, the authors of these studies looked at Ukraine through Russian eyes, applying the colonial perspective which they had internalized. This article has pointed out several manifestations of this perspective in the literature on the politics of language and identity which has been a prominent topic in Ukrainian studies. This literature focused on Ukrainian radical nationalism, on the one hand, and (the violation of) Russian-speakers’ rights, on the other, largely ignoring both Russian nationalism in Ukraine and the rights of the speakers of the titular language which, in fact, has until recently remained marginalized and many prestigious domains. Some of

these studies pictured a Ukraine that was in some respects rather similar to the one portrayed by Russian propaganda and Vladimir Putin himself, whatever the authors’ convictions and intentions.

“Decolonization” has become a shortcut for the much-belated effort to overcome these deficiencies. It includes both a shift of research focus from the former colonial center to the former colonies such as Ukraine and a shift of perspective from one reflecting the colonial interests to that which is based on the developments in these independent states. This new perspective should lead to a critical reevaluation of the Soviet legacy and its implications for post-Soviet politics, including the view of the promotion of the titular languages as protecting its speakers from long-term discrimination rather than violating the rights of the minorities speaking the former colonial language. It should also mean greater attention to other historical legacies and its diversity which partly accounts for differences in political attitudes in different parts of the former colonies. Beyond the politics of identity, scholarly analyses should recognize the agency of elites and masses of these countries rather than treating them merely as objects of geopolitical games between Russia, the US, the EU, and other global players.

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CULTURAL GENOCIDE AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF UYGHUR STUDIES

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In the summer of 2020, dramatic video of policemen in Minneapolis, Minnesota beating an African-American man to death without cause ignited a transnational social movement that has called out the legacy of colonialism and its impact on racism in the United States and Europe today (see Hill, et. al. 2020). Similarly, in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, it fostered a nascent transnational movement in the former Soviet states of Eurasia that has focused on the role of Russian colonialism in creating unequal power relations and structural racism in the post-Soviet space (see Kassymbekova and Marat 2022). Both of these phenomena are part of a discernible and widespread global wave of advocacy calling for further decolonization, both in the scholarly world and in society at large. This movement makes us aware of the ways that colonialism has shaped and continues to shape our world order and its hierarchy. It also alerts us to the fact that decolonization is not only a concrete process of returning people their lands, livelihoods, and sovereignty, but it is simultaneously a psychological process that challenges us to alter our worldviews that have been formed by many ideas with their origins in colonial thinking.

However, before this new wave of decolonization even began, the issue of decolonization was already being raised in scholarly discussions about the Uyghur people of China. Like the two examples discussed above, the decolonization of Uyghur studies has been precipitated by violent events that highlight the persistence of colonial relations. These are the repressive measures that have been carried out by the Chinese government against the Uyghurs since 2017, actions that many around the world deem to be genocidal. This essay outlines how these events fostered

a process of decolonization in Uyghur studies and offers recommendations for how that process should be furthered in the academic field in the years to come.

Colonialism and the Uyghurs

Most Uyghurs have long viewed their situation in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as being the outcome of China's conquest and occupation of their homeland and the colonization of their culture. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, it was the anti-colonial response to dispossession that fueled the birth of the concept of the modern Uyghur nation itself in the early twentieth century (See Roberts 2009). Furthermore, there is ample historical justification for the Uyghurs' understanding they became a part of China through colonization.

The region the Uyghurs view as their homeland has a long history of interactions with various empires based in China, Persia, India, Russia, and Central Asia, but the area had also been the seat of empires that subjugated other neighboring lands in its history. In this sense, the PRC assertion that the Uyghurs and their homeland have "always been a part of China" is entirely false. They became a part of modern China beginning in the 1750s, but their colonization arguably is a process that continues to this day. In the 1750s, the Qing empire conquered the Junggars, whose empire had ruled the territory at the time, taking over control of the Uyghur region and subjugating the Uyghurs and other local Muslims who lived there (see Millward 1998). Initially, Qing rule in the region did not resemble European colonialism as it ruled over the region indirectly through local elites (see Thum 2018). However, after a decade-long hiatus in Qing rule facili-

tated by local revolts during the 1860s, the empire established a more typical colonial regime in the 1880s that sought to assimilate the local population and promoted Han settlement in the region (see Schluessel 2020). During this period, the Qing also officially named the region Xinjiang province, which translated as “new frontier,” belying its inclusion in China through conquest.

When the Qing empire fell, the region was more tenuously connected to a weak Republican government in China. While a series of Han governors controlled the region, they operated overwhelmingly independent of any central authorities in China. During this period, Uyghurs and other local Turkic Muslims in the Uyghur region twice established shortly lived independent states on parts of the territory (cf. Benson 1990; Forbes 1987). These states, both of which were called the Eastern Turkistan Republic, were decidedly anti-colonial in character and espoused ideologies of national liberation. The second Eastern Turkistan Republic, along with rest of the Uyghur region, was subsumed into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) when a mysterious airplane accident killed most of its leaders on route to visit Mao Zedong.

PRC rule, like Soviet rule in the U.S.S.R., began with promises for decolonization of China’s relationship with the Uyghurs, but this was short-lived. In the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik revolution initially was framed as an anti-colonial revolution in the non-Russian territories of the Russian empire inherited by the new socialist state, and the new Soviet national Republics, albeit completely beholden to Moscow, were given the theoretical right to secede in the country’s constitution. If the Soviet Union’s cosmetic decolonization was incomplete, the PRC did decidedly less to decolonize the territories it inherited from the Qing empire. Under Soviet advisement, the PRC did create ethnic autonomous regions (including the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), but it neither granted these administrative regions actual ethnic autonomy nor even the ceremonious right to secede. The Chinese government at times did allow for the development of local languages and arts, but this was accompanied by a paternalistic exoticism that is reminiscent of European colonialism (see Gladney 1994).

Given this history, it is understandable why many Uyghurs recognize their situation inside China as a colonial one, but western scholarship on the Uyghurs, until recently, has mostly failed to do so.

The PRC’s actions against Uyghurs, which includes mass displacement and dispossession from the territory of their homeland, mass internment and imprisonment, and forced assimilation measures, are so blatantly colonial in their aims that the scholarly community outside China studying Uyghurs has embraced the lens of colonialism for understanding the situation in the Uyghur region both historically and today.

Uyghur Studies and Colonialism

To be fair, scholarship on the Uyghurs outside China has long flirted with the “colonialism concept” in its description of China’s conquest and occupation of the Uyghur homeland. In the late 1990s, for example, a scholarly debate played out on the pages of academic journals about whether the Uyghur region was an “internal colony” of the PRC. Dru Gladney (1998) argued that the Uyghur region of China, based on the model used by Michael Hechter (1976) to explain Britain’s “celtic fringe,” was indeed an internal colony of the PRC. In doing so, he focused on the dispossession and marginalization of the Uyghur people inside China, likening their situation to that of a colonized people. This was rebutted by Barry Sautman (2000) who, took a decidedly economic perspective on the question, suggesting that this region had none of the economic characteristics associated with internal colonialism. While this debate was important in bringing the issue of colonialism to the forefront of discussions of the Uyghurs within in China, Sautman’s characterization of internal colonialism as exclusively an economic issue de-

prived Uyghurs of their connection to a territory they view as their homeland and the critical question of their right to sovereignty in that region. The subsequent result of this debate was a general trend in Uyghur studies to obscure the question of colonialism in China-Uyghur relations due to the allegedly sensitive political nature of the question. Historians of the Uyghur region, for example, have frequently argued that China’s relationship with the Uyghur region was imperial in that it was established through the Qing’s conquest of the territory, but they remained reluctant to call this “colonialism” due to that term’s association with the large empires of Europe (cf. Millward 2007; Jacobs 2016).

There are multiple reasons for this reticence to embrace colonialism in the Uyghur case. First, the outsized role of European colonialism in creating the unequal power relations in the world today has generally led western scholarship, with some notable exceptions, to reserve the term of “colonialism” only for European forms of imperialist domination. Second, most people studying the Uyghur people have come to this research first and foremost as scholars of China itself, where colonialism is an especially complicated issue. For the PRC, the concept of colonialism is central to its narrative about the Chinese nation, but as the victims of European colonialism rather than as the colonizers of others. In fact, the PRC today goes to great lengths to perpetuate a narrative that the Uyghur homeland and the Uyghur people have always been a constituent part of a Chinese nation and state (SCIOPRC 2009). Although scholars of the Uyghurs have long criticized such rhetoric from the PRC, they have also internalized some of the logic of the Chinese state vis-à-vis the Uyghurs. Among other things, this has led many scholars studying the Uyghurs to dismiss the opinions of Uyghurs themselves about the colonization of their homeland, viewing such opinions as a reflection of an irrational nationalism.

This status quo in Uyghur studies has changed rather suddenly over the last five years. The PRC’s actions against Uyghurs, which includes mass displacement and dispossession from the territory of their homeland, mass internment and imprisonment, and forced assimilation measures, are so blatantly colonial in their aims that the

scholarly community outside China studying Uyghurs has embraced the lens of colonialism for understanding the situation in the Uyghur region both historically and today. This perhaps first became apparent to me at a conference in 2018 where, while chairing a panel on which I spoke, James Millward, one of the foremost historians in the world on the Qing empire, the Uyghurs, and the Uyghur region, noted: "Xinjiang is a colony of China – I can't believe I have avoided saying this for so many years." Millward's sentiment was one that was simultaneously being embraced by the entire community of scholars studying the Uyghur people, leading to a flood of academic works highlighting the colonial nature of China's conquest and occupation of the Uyghur homeland (cf. Roberts 2020; Schluessel 2020; Tobin 2020; Clarke 2021; Byler 2022). Not only has there been a sudden scholarly reckoning with the colonial nature of modern China's subjugation of the Uyghur people, but there are literally no reputable scholars outside China studying Uyghurs who are arguing against this stance today. Furthermore, Uyghur activists outside China have played their own role in making this happen by pushing scholars to stop using the "Xinjiang" name for the Uyghur homeland and to cease characterizing Uyghurs as a "minority" population inside China.

In the context of an ongoing cultural genocide that is erasing the Uyghur people from China's society, the scholarly recognition of the Uyghurs' colonial dispossession would appear to be of very little consequence. However, it is important to note that this scholarly discourse has substantial impact on how the rest of the world understands the Uyghurs' present plight. In many ways, the debate about whether China has colonized the Uyghurs and their homeland is merely an academic debate on what constitutes colonialism. Yet, it also has ramifications for how Uyghurs are characterized – are they a "restless minority" and alleged "separatists," or are they an occupied nation fighting for the right to their homeland. While the full impact on such lexicon of the recognition of Chinese colonialism vis-à-vis the Uyghurs has yet to be realized, it is visibly in the process of transformation both in scholarly and news publications. Such changes mean a lot to the

Uyghur population outside China, which is almost universally dealing with the trauma and guilt of disappeared family members, lost communication, and likely permanent exile from their homeland. There is also a tragic irony in these developments. While scholars have shifted their discourse on the plight of the Uyghurs, progressive political movements in the United States and Europe have largely not done so. There remains an active and widespread discourse among such actors that denies the Uyghurs recognition of their outright colonization and erasure. Ironically, these actors generally are some of the most ardent advocates for the decolonization of racial relations in the west, but they refute that Uyghurs suffer an analogous fate because they believe the narrative of Uyghur repression inside China is manufactured by the United States military-industrial complex. As such, the decolonization of Uyghur studies remains conspicuously outside the emergent global movement to "decolonize everything."

Further Decolonizing Uyghur Studies

Although the decolonization of Uyghur studies is a positive development, ideally Uyghurs would like to see the decolonization of their relations with the Chinese state. This is unfortunately virtually impossible at the present moment. Uyghur voices inside China have been completely silenced unless they serve state propaganda purposes. Some Han citizens of China likely realize the colonial nature of the state's dispossession of Uyghurs, but most are completely unaware of the nature of the situation inside the Uyghur region, instead taking state reports of development and deradicalization at face value as benevolent acts of the Chinese Communist Party. Eventually, one can hope that this will change, and the people of China will reckon with the legacy of their state's colonization of these people, but that may only come, as was the case in the United States with respect to Native Americans, once the complete damage done to the colonized has past the point of no return.

Until that happens, there is a dire need to substantively decolonize Uyghur studies outside China. First and foremost, this requires giving Uyghurs more voice in articulating their own history, culture, and reality

through scholarship. There are some positive movements in this direction. A new generation of scholars in the west is capable of reading Uyghur sources and highlight them in their work, and this trend must continue. Even more promising is that there is a growing generation of ethnic Uyghur scholars abroad who are publishing in other languages for a global audience. Unfortunately, for many of them, they are forced to publish under pseudonyms to protect their family members remaining in China, fearing the long arm of PRC transnational repression. These Uyghur scholars need protection, and their voices must be amplified. Only once this happens can we truly speak about a decolonization of Uyghur studies.

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DATASET REVIEW: WOMEN'S RIGHTS AFTER WAR (WRAW)

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Efforts to expand women's political, economic, and social rights are increasingly common features of postwar stabilization processes (see Berry and Lake 2021). As such, research on these postwar processes has largely focused on the implementation of gender quotas (e.g., Tripp 2015; Berry 2018), the extension of property and family rights to women (e.g., Doss et al. 2015; Lake 2018), and the criminalization of gender-based violence (e.g., Buss et al. 2014; Karim and Gorman 2016) among other reforms. The Women's Rights After War (WRAW) Project¹ expands upon this work by investigating (1) Who are the beneficiaries of postwar gender reforms? (2) How do these reforms and their implementation shape social fabrics, postwar peace, and security more broadly? (3) How does positionality shape access to these postwar gains, and what constitutes 'empowerment' across diverse groups of women? These motivating questions represent a central contribution of the WRAW Project—a critical interrogation of the (presumed) universality of women's rights and the conflation between (certain) women's empowerment, security, and peace in postwar contexts.

To this end, the WRAW Project examines gender reforms in six countries that have experienced armed conflict since 1980: Nepal, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and Iraq.² The WRAW dataset currently provides information on gender reforms that are intended to promote gender parity and women's representation. The WRAW researchers rely on laws, policies, and institutions within each country to collect their data, and they categorize each gender reform by issue area: political representation, criminal law, civil-family law, sexual and reproductive rights (Colombia only), economic

opportunities, and national action plans. The dataset includes variables to account for the level of government, specific law/act, year, implementation mechanism, and relevant NGOs/CSOs associated with each reform, as well as the authors' resources and notes for further contextualization. By specifying these constituent elements, the WRAW dataset underscores the potential gains and limitations of each gender reform.

Take the following sample from the WRAW data on Colombia's political reforms, for example.³ From 2000 to 2015, the legislation surrounding women's representation in Colombian politics underwent drastic changes—changes that would be understated if Colombia was coded more simply as a country that has instituted gender quota laws. Instead, the WRAW data makes clear that there were subsequent calls for political reforms beyond the 2000 gender quota law, including demands to add stipulations regarding the participation of indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and/or rural women; to expand women's candidacy opportunities; and to incentivize parties to invest in women's political participation. Likewise, the WRAW data on Colombia's gender reforms in other issue areas implies that postwar peace and security for women—particularly women who face intersecting societal barriers on the basis of race, ethnicity, and class—are distant goals without simultaneous improvements in legal, sexual, and economic protections at all levels of society.

The WRAW dataset is ideal for researchers interested in conducting within-case analyses or cross-case comparisons of the six countries included in its coverage. While large-N datasets are available for researchers interested in analyzing certain postwar gender reforms (e.g., the QAROT dataset⁴), their larger scope limits the issue areas

Table 1: Sample of WRAW Data on Colombia’s Political Reforms

Level of Government	Law/Act	Year	Mechanism	NGOs/CSOs	Notes
National and Sub-National	No. 581: women's participation in 30% of top-ranking public administration positions (executive, judicial, and Legislature)	2000	Legislative		Quota Law for public positions.
National and Sub-National	No. 731: Law on Rural Women	2002	Legislative		Stipulates the participation of rural women including indigenous women and Afro-Colombian women, in a wide range of national, municipal and local councils and other decision-making bodies. Different from the 2000 law that provides 30% in higher level positions.
National and Sub-National	Legislated Candidate Quota - Law 1475 (Art. 28)	2011	Electoral Law	Women's movement and international cooperation support from ONU Mujeres	At least 30% of candidates of each gender must be included on the electoral list of political parties for collective popular elected bodies.
National and Sub-National	Art. 17 (6) of Electoral Law 1475: 5% of the total state funding for the political parties will be equally distributed to political parties and movements in proportion to the number of women representatives elected from their lists into publicly elected offices	2011	Electoral Law		Parties receive special funding when women are elected
National and Sub-National	Art. 18 (parag.) of Electoral Law 1475: Political parties have to allocate in their annual budgets at least 15% of the public funding they received for the effective inclusion of youth, women, and ethnic minorities in the political process.	2011	Electoral Law		Parties have to expend funding on women's inclusion in politics
National and Sub-National	Art. 20, LA No. 02: (Check and Balance Reform) Stipulates parity on list of candidates in collective popular elected bodies	2015	Constitutional Reform	Women's movement and international cooperation support from ONU Mujeres	This 50% quota needs to be regulated by Congress.

and contextual nuances these datasets can cover. A potential limitation for those interested in working with the WRAW dataset is the need for background knowledge of the specified countries' conflict histories. Although Phase II of the WRAW Project includes fieldwork that might result in the publication of more detailed, supplementary case studies, the dataset currently does not specify when and how gender-sensitive reforms align with ongoing and past conflict dynamics. This uncertainty in the data leaves up for interpretation the 'postwar' element of interrogating women's postwar empowerment. Returning to the examples listed in Table 1, each of these political reforms was implemented *during* the Colombian conflict. While it is reasonable to think that the ongoing civil war directly influenced public demand for changes in political representation, the WRAW data does not currently elucidate those connections.

Overall, the WRAW Project provides a major contribution to feminist international relations and comparative politics research by demonstrating the potential disparities, limitations, and future avenues of gender-sensitive reforms in postwar contexts. These data underscore the importance of critically examining gender reforms to identify *who* they actually benefit and *how* such reforms neglect, challenge, or reinforce violent systems of power. Principal investigators, Drs. Marie Berry and Milli Lake, are both highly regarded for their feminist scholarship on marginalized experiences in conflict settings—scholarship that includes this latest data collection project. As IR and CP researchers continue strengthening our analyses of the myriad relationships between gender and war, the WRAW dataset will prove to be an invaluable toolkit for developing richer understandings of women's diverse lives and the realities of their access to postwar empowerment.

Notes

¹ Berry, Marie, Milli Lake, Sinduja Raja, and Soraya Zarook. *Post-war gender laws dataset*. V1. October 20, 2022. Distributed by Women's Rights After War Project. <https://thegenderhub.com/projects/womens-rights-after-war/>.

² Data for the Iraq case is not yet publicly available.

³ Due to space limitations, the resources used for coding these reforms are not included in Table 1.

⁴ For a review of the Quota Adoption and Reform Over Time (QAROT) dataset, see "Measuring Gender Quotas" by Dr. Amanda B. Edgell in the Fall 2022 issue of the APSA Comparative Politics newsletter (<https://www.comparativepoliticsnewsletter.org/>).

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RESPONSE TO DATASET REVIEW

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We would like to express our deep gratitude to Dr. Lindsey Goldberg for her generous review of the Women's Rights After War (WRAW) Dataset. The Dataset was one of the earliest initiatives of the WRAW project, born out of the realization that there was no single place to trace gender-related legal reforms specific to war-affected countries. Despite a wealth of literature that documents links between conflict termination and post-war women's empowerment, there is as yet a dearth of scholarship that documents legislative reforms in depth. We thus intended the Dataset as a contribution for researchers and practitioners who work at the intersection of gender, legal reform, and war legacies. In the first stages of our project, the WRAW team embarked on an [analysis](#) of each of the laws and policies enacted in each country, and their subsequent implementation. We [found](#) that, through the codification of a specific version of rights, gender progressive legislation often entrenches existing inequalities, and codifies harm in ways that circumscribe possibilities of transformative change from the outset. Although many previous studies have documented a decoupling between de jure and de facto rights reforms, we sought to first explore the inequalities embedded in legal language itself. Because laws are able to enact real change in the world - and are therefore imbued with power - our initial analysis treated the text as both discourse *and* action. Building on this work, the second phase of the project sought to scrutinize the everyday experiences of law, particularly for those living at its margins. Through a combination of macro-historical case studies, qualitative interviews, and survey research, we [explore](#) which women get to benefit from the laws-in-practice, and why. We further [trace](#) the links between legal mobilization and

various axes of conflict cleavage. To this end, we are particularly grateful for Dr. Goldberg's recommendation that we offer deeper background of the specified countries' conflict histories in the Dataset, in order to better contextualize the reforms. We plan to incorporate this recommendation in subsequent rounds, shedding light on how conflict trajectories, and particularly the logics and inequalities that undergird war's onset and evolution, continue to shape the contours of women's post-war political and socio-economic inclusion. Our preliminary analysis revealed that women who hail from dominant political and economic backgrounds, or who advance the agendas of certain conflict-era factions, benefit disproportionately from gender equality efforts, creating a veneer of progress towards gender emancipation while compounding many of the grievances, inequalities, and structures of oppression that laid the foundations for war in the first place. While the dataset alone does not yet explicitly document these findings, we hope that other scholars, researchers, and practitioners can explore the reforms enacted in tandem with our forthcoming research articles. For some preliminary reflections, we introduce recent pieces in the [Annual Review of Law and Science](#) and the contributions in our Special Forum in the [Journal of Genocide Research](#).



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