

RESEARCH NOTE

What Ukraine Teaches Us About International Relations and Vice Versa

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Abstract

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is seen by many as a catastrophe of global proportions and a critical juncture for International Relations, both as an academic discipline and as a political practice. In this review essay, I offer a stock-taking exercise that puts Ukraine-specific debates into the broader context of the International Relations (IR) discipline. My aim is twofold: to show how debates about Ukraine go right to the heart of major meta-theories in IR and to use Ukrainian specificity and complexity to problematize compartmentalized approaches to “area studies” and to some strands of “postcolonialism”. I conclude by showcasing recent publications of scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine to provide a glimpse into this relatively small but vibrant academic community. I further argue that Ukraine’s predicament helps highlight the persistence of Cold War binaries, with their strong colonial baggage, including within the so-called critical IR.

Keywords: International Relations; Global IR; Ukraine; postcolonial critique; decolonisation

Introduction

Scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine¹ have been deeply affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine - fearing for their lives and wellbeing or for that of their families and friends, seeing their hometowns or sites of fieldwork indiscriminately bombed, coping with trauma as well as with a sense of guilt and of responsibility, frustrated by ignorance, superficiality, and often outright political manipulation of the public debate. It is no surprise then that this relatively small transnational community has been arguing for a paradigm shift. For them the world will never be the same. This is indeed a unique standpoint, from which new ideas and approaches can emerge, but how far can these ideas travel?

In this review essay, I offer a stock-taking exercise that puts Ukraine-specific debates into the broader context of the International Relations (IR) discipline. My aim is twofold: to show how debates about Ukraine go right to the heart of major meta-theories in IR and to use Ukrainian specificity and complexity in order to problematize compartmentalized approaches to “area studies” and to some strands of “postcolonialism”. I conclude by showcasing recent publications of scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine to provide a glimpse into this relatively small but vibrant academic community.

¹ I owe this term – “scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine” – to Tsymbalyuk, D. (2023). What my body taught me about being a scholar of Ukraine and from Ukraine in times of Russia’s war of aggression. *Journal of International Relations and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00298-y> (2023), who, in her important recent article, offers invaluable insights into the meaning of “knowledge” about a country ravaged by war.

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What Place for Ukraine in the “Big” International Relations Debates

Since 24 February 2022, Ukraine came centerstage in several debates in International Relations. It was not just the far-reaching impact of this war, such as on energy and food security or on climate and nuclear proliferation, it was also about the ongoing meta discussions about the future world order. Shifting multipolar geometries, globalization and simultaneous rise of nationalism/sovereignism, neocolonialism and incomplete decolonization as well as a persistent sense of ontological insecurity in the collective west – the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine added a new (and many say unprecedented)² sense of urgency to dealing, practically and intellectually, with these structural issues. A set of very different responses came from within major debates or schools of thought in IR.

Many realists felt revenged. While the neoclassical realists (Freyberg-Inan et al., 2009; Hooft & Freiberg-Inan, 2019) bemoaned not having been listened to enough, structural realists basked in what they saw as their “I told you so” moment, as evident, in particular, from several interviews with John Mearsheimer.³ From the perspective of the future world order, this realist version of multipolarity is essentially about a return of the “great power politics” (Donnelly, 2019; Kazharski, 2022; Walt, 2022) that, as some argue, never really went away but was temporarily eclipsed by the post-Cold War liberal hubris.⁴ This realist version of the world order was also at the heart of Russia’s neo-imperial revisionism that led to this war. The irony, of course, is that, if simplified for popular use, this reasoning makes Vladimir Putin look like the only sober and “realistic” person in the room, rather than a megalomaniac dictator who ruined his own country before going out to wreak havoc on its neighbours.⁵

The realist vision of coming multipolarity is a strongly securitized one in that the rise of the “rest” versus the collective “west” is seen not only in terms of competition but also in terms of reciprocal security threats. Politically, the preoccupation is with the rise of a possible “axis of evil”, be that between Russia and Iran or as a bigger China-led coalition of non-Western non-democratic states. States like Ukraine are seen as “buffer” zones to regional powers (Menon & Snyder, 2017) whose agency, domestically or internationally, does not matter for the bigger political picture and is irrelevant as an object of scholarly analysis.

The liberal view of the world, on the other hand, has traditionally put much greater emphasis on cooperation and interdependence, embedded in open markets and multilateral institutions, as the driving (and desirable) force for international relations. Indeed, the end of the Cold War with its “end of history” moment created the conditions for further consolidation of the Liberal World Order. This order was meant to be based on liberal norms and democratic institutions that would gradually absorb an increasing number of states around the world via socialization and soft power (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Deudney & Ikenberry, 2018; Dunne et al., 2013). This vision of the world order was inclusive but also hierarchical with core western liberal democracies at its center. Relations

² As embodied in the oft-quoted *Zeitenwende* speech by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

³ It was probably the first time since Francis Fukuyama and his famous “end of history” argument that an IR scholar became a trope for whatever was made of his argument – *the Mearsheimer*. For a brilliant and accessible rebuttal of John Mearsheimer’s arguments see: Johnson, M. (2023, 15 February 2023). Mearsheimer: Rigor or Reaction? *Quillette*. <https://quillette.com/2023/02/15/mearsheimer-rigor-or-reaction/>

⁴ For a fascinating debate on structural realism versus liberalism between their key proponents see the Munk School Debate on 12 May 2022 available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivcSVG5eCeQ>.

⁵ It comes as no surprise that Mearsheimer’s 2014 article was cited by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a tweet in 2022. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin. *Foreign Aff.*, 93, 77.

with non-western non-democratic countries around the world were inspired by the so-called “transitions paradigm” – a linear vision of gradual democratization and economic liberalization to be implemented as a one-size-fits-all template around the world (Carothers, 2002; McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2005; Mohamedou & Sisk, 2017).

The liberal approach has been dominant within the EU studies as well, driven by the idea of “Normative Power” that would gradually spread throughout the concentric circles surrounding the EU (Manners, 2002). Postcommunist states in the neighbourhood were therefore expected to catch up with this model, even if in a differentiated manner. Some, like the 2004 enlargement countries, would qualify for the EU membership, while others, like Ukraine, were expected to emulate the EU model without any prospect of becoming part of the club, as laid out in the famous Romano Prodi’s speech about “sharing everything but institutions” (Prodi, 2002).

This liberal moment did not last. Practical and political shortcomings of replicating the liberal model around the world came under harsh criticism as early as mid-2000s, as for example in critiques of liberal internationalism and peacebuilding (Richmond & MacGinty, 2015), of democracy promotion (Bridoux & Kurki, 2014; Hobson & Kurki, 2012) and of the EU enlargement (Kuus, 2004, 2007). At the same time, the rise of non-Western powers, be those BRICS collectively or China as a “great power” inspired much soul-searching about the decline of Western hegemony on the world stage (Ikenberry, 2008, 2009; Lake et al., 2021). Indeed, debates about the end of the Liberal World Order have been raging for over a decade now (Alcaro, 2018; Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Flockhart, 2020; Lucarelli, 2018, 2020; Parsi 2022). Although exploring the details of this debate is beyond the scope of this article, what is striking is the growing convergence between the realist and the liberal vision of the future world order as based on separate blocks, either due to self-interest or due to the growing gap between democracies and autocracies,⁶ as well as the “causal primacy” attributed to Western (colonial) powers by both schools of thought (Fisher-Onar & Kavalski, 2023).

In the liberal script, Ukraine, and other countries in Russia’s neighbourhood, are seen as “the frontline of democracy”⁷ and the war in Ukraine as a struggle for the Liberal World Order itself. Indeed, it was the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that pushed the collective west into this more combative version of liberalism. While it provided a welcome sense of political unity and purpose, at least initially, conceptually it helped consolidate a more “securitized” and more realist “strategic” approach to global politics (Youngs, 2021). Ironically, this approach is also more in line with many Russian claims about a civilizational struggle between the west and the rest.

One big IR community that has been surprisingly less vocal since February 2022 is the community of IR scholars that came together under the broad umbrella of the Global IR. Building on critical explorations of race, gender, and empire in world history, the Global IR aims at exposing the epistemological dominance of US- and Euro-centric perspectives on world politics (Acharya & Buzan, 2007; Bilgin, 2008; Kavalski, 2018; Neumann & Wigen, 2018; Tickner, 2003; Tickner & Wæver, 2009; Tickner, 2014; Zarakol, 2022). As summarized by Amitav Acharya in his 2014 inaugural address at the International Studies Association Convention, “the discipline of International Relations (IR) does not reflect the voices, experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the

⁶ In terms of policy initiatives, see for example, the “Summit for Democracy” initiative promoted by the Biden administration, described here: <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>. For analysis read: Traub, J. (2021, 12 August 2021). Inside Joe Biden’s 2-Day Zoom Plan to Rescue Democracy. Politico. , Youngs, R., Ichihara, M., Lee, S.-J., Akum, F., Xavier, C., & Navia, P. (2021). From Democracy Summit to Global Democratic Agenda? Forum 2000 Policy Paper.

⁷ European Commission, Press statement by President von der Leyen with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, Kyiv, 9 May 2023, STATEMENT 23/2661.

world, and often marginalizes those outside the core countries of the West” (Acharya, 2014). In addition to calls for decolonising knowledge about world politics, this diverse and burgeoning field has produced a number of theoretical innovations. As summarized by Fisher-Onar, “global IR incorporates constructivist claims regarding historical and social forces in world politics, but also decenters Eurocentric notions of history and society. [...] Such approaches tend to share: (i) a pluralistic approach to ontology/epistemology, with respect for multiple histories and agencies as constitutive of global patterns; (ii) an openness to methodological pluralism; and (iii) an approach to outstanding substantive questions which foregrounds the perspectives of states and non-state actors that are often ignored in mainstream/Eurocentric analysis.” (Fisher-Onar, 2023).

It is quite surprising then that the study of Ukraine as well as of its whole region has only had a marginal presence in this debate. A special issue in the *Journal of International Relations and Development* from 2021 tried to explore the reasons behind this absence.⁸ As summarized in its concluding article, in addition to local factors, such as late institutionalization and low internationalization of IR across the vast postcommunist area, there are bigger political and epistemic issues at stake. With the exception of Russia, almost two dozen countries in the region, regardless of their size or other characteristics, have been traditionally seen as “small states” or, as Alejandro puts it, as “unimportant others”. They used to be seen as one uniform block during the Cold War and became insignificant after it came to an end. With respect to the Global IR debate more specifically, it also became a liminal space because it fell outside of set dichotomies such as ‘West/non-West’, ‘North/South’, ‘core/periphery’ that structure many Global IR conversations (Alejandro, 2021). Much of the rejection of eastern European voices has taken place from the perspective of “Eurocentric postcolonialism”, whereby the primacy of the “west” or “north” is maintained but criticized and the victimhood of the “south” is essentialized (Alejandro, 2019).

This is problematic because the whole point of the Global IR normative and theoretical agenda is to go beyond binary thinking about world politics, yet scholarship that works on transcending these binaries remains a notable exception (Fisher-Onar, 2023; Fisher-Onar & Kavalski, 2023; Kavalski, 2020; Kurki, 2022). It could be argued that Ukraine and its region suffered from double marginalization – neither sufficiently “western” or relevant for the mainstream IR nor sufficiently “southern” for critical postcolonial approaches. At the same time, scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine have been increasingly vocal about the need to recognize Ukraine’s postcolonial condition and its anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggle. In the next section, I briefly review the background of this debate.

Is post-Soviet postcolonial?

“Postcolonial” is not a temporal marker, it does not refer to whatever comes after the official moment of decolonization. Rather it describes a cultural, political and epistemological condition.

Perhaps most famously espoused by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said, postcolonialism interrogates the lingering effects of colonialism after the formal dismantlement of empire and the return of self-governance to former colonies. It scrutinises those supposedly universal colonial epistemologies that

⁸ See also an earlier special issue in the same journal with contributions by Eiki Berg, Pinar Bilgin, Matthieu Chillaud, Petr Drulák, Nik Hynek, Vendulka Kubálková, Viatcheslav Morozov, Petra Roter, Oktay F. Tanrisever. For an overview see the introduction: Drulák, P. (2009). Introduction to the International Relations (IR) in Central and Eastern Europe Forum. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 12, 168-173.

continue to structure the way we know the world and also works to recover those native or Indigenous knowledges that have been suppressed, obscured, or rendered illegible by colonial discourse, as in the work of the Subaltern Studies collective (Carey & Silverstein, 2020, p.3).

The encounter between “postcolonial” and “postsocialist” dates back several decades, yet it is hardly known outside of area studies. With the end of the Cold War, a number of scholarly symposia and publications interrogated the applicability of “postcolonial” concepts and frameworks to post-Soviet area studies.⁹ Several symposia were published in order to interrogate the applicability of the “postcolonial” label and critique to the realities of post-Soviet or “postsocialist” states (Spivak et al., 2006).

One strand of this debate in particular focused on clarifying whether and to what extent the USSR (created on the remnants of the Russian empire) could be seen as a colonial empire. The assumption was that if the Soviet experience could qualify as “colonial”, then the post-Soviet states were postcolonial by definition. By bringing in the Soviet case, it pushed the boundaries of mainstream ideas on colonization, decolonisation, and state-formation.

When asked if he considered the Soviet Union an empire, Edward Said famously answered that the contiguous nature of the vast Russo-Soviet state disqualified it, attributing “an odd primacy to water” and as if “brutality by adjacency” could somehow be excused (Moore, 2001). As a counterclaim, Moore develops three most common types of colonization: 1) “classic” overseas domination via strong political, economic, military, and cultural control of “inferior” people (e.g. British in Kenya and India, French in Senegal and Vietnam); 2) settler colonialism as in the US, Australia and South Africa; 3) dynastic colonialism via conquering neighbouring peoples (e.g. Ottoman and Hapsburg empires, but also “internal colonization” by France and the Great Britain). Indeed, he recognizes that once the “dynastic” colonialism via conquest of adjacent territories is brought within the framework, there is little on the world map that was not at some point colonized land.

According to this typology, the Soviet Union was a hybrid case as it combined all three types of colonialism at different times and with respect to different colonized territories. Arguably, the Soviet project itself changed as it passed from Leninist through Stalinist and into the Brezhnevite eras. An additional level of complexity was added by a peculiar Soviet ideology that was declared to be “nationalist in form, socialist in content” (Hirsch, 2005; Martin, 2001). On the one hand, some ethnic groups were recognized and instrumentalized within the framework of the imperial rule at the expense of many others. On the other hand, violence was often perpetrated along class rather than ethnic lines, driven by what Chari and Verdery call “class racism” (Chari & Verdery, 2009).

An additional question is related to the Soviet territorial reach. At its peak, the “Soviet empire” spanned twelve time zones and covered more than one-sixth of all land mass on earth. Can we describe all twenty-seven states that ended up under the Soviet control during the Cold War as colonized? Poland or Hungary or the Baltic Republics thought of themselves as being “occupied”, which is historically correct. However, analytically, the question remains – what turns an occupation into colonization? (as asked for example by

⁹ Krapfl reminds us that long before the end of the Cold War, following Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Canadian Slavonic Papers journal hosted a discussion on “decolonization”. See Krapfl, J. (2023). Decolonizing minds in the “Slavic area,” “Slavic area studies,” and beyond. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65(2), 141-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2023.2211460>

Nancy Condee in Spivak et al., 2006, p. 830).¹⁰ Not all twenty-seven states were decolonized in the same manner either. While in places like Poland anti-colonial or anti-occupation popular movement was behind the transformation, the Belovezha Accords that put an end to the Soviet Union was an elite pact. Moreover, some parts of the Soviet empire were never decolonized, suffice it to think about the brutal Russian wars against Chechnya in the 1990ies.

Things get even more complicated if one adds to the list of Soviet colonies other states around the world that were in a relationship of dependence with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As Chari and Verdery note:

Not only were Eastern Europe and much of the Soviet Union under a form of colonial domination, but numerous other "Third World" countries - Cuba, Mozambique, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Laos, and so on - had entered the Soviet orbit as part of establishing their independence from one or another western imperial power (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p.12).

The Soviet anti-imperialist rhetoric in the Third World not only obscured these relationships of dependence but also rendered many countries across the Global South blind to the colonial and imperialist nature of the Soviet Union at home.

As Moore rightly underscored, despite its *sui generis* character, the Soviet Union could be described as “extraordinarily colonial.” Even if we face a hybrid type of coloniality, rejecting it altogether precludes seeing structural issues of power and domination and exploring comparative relations with the spatial-imperial dynamics elsewhere. In addition, as Moore rightly points out, seeing Russo-Soviet colonialism simply as a deviation would also reinforce the Franco-British type of colonialism as if it were a universal standard, which is of course in itself a form of epistemic coloniality and Eurocentrism (Alejandro’s criticism of “Eurocentric postcolonialism” cited above echoes this point).

How Ukraine contributes to decolonizing the IR

Turning to the voices of scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine, there are several lessons to be learnt. The first issue pertains to the broader discussion in social sciences about researcher positionality and hierarchies of knowledge. Building on feminist and postcolonial literature, scholars from Ukraine talk about “knowledge that comes from suffering” gained through collective and individual experiences of pain and trauma. It is a form of knowledge that is born out of mundane bodily responses to shock or intense grief, responses that are all very personal. Yet, they also add up in a collective emotional state that facilitates a unique standpoint. Just as feminist writers lamented being dismissed because they made knowledge claims that seemed too personal and too emotional to be “credible” and “authoritative”, scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine make a plea for acceptance of their particular state of trauma, grief, and rage as a legitimate position for knowledge production (Dovzhyk, 2023; Kurylo, 2023; Tsymbalyuk, 2022, 2023).

Related to this discussion, there is a question of “epistemic justice” that resonates strongly with most postcolonial literature cited above. As summarized in the seminal article by von Hagen back in 1995 “Does Ukraine Have a History”, Ukraine used to share the predicament of other Central and East European countries of being seen as “ahistorical people” stuck in-between major European empires in a peripheral “borderland” status. Ukraine, von Hagen

¹⁰ In the field of settler colonialism studies, Patrick Wolfe famously responded to a similar concern that “an invasion was a structure, not an event”. Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>

concluded, had long been denied “full historiographic legitimacy” (von Hagen, 1995). Within area studies as well, Ukraine was predominantly studied from Moscow-centric perspectives and through the “Russian gaze” (Zayarnyuk, 2022). As underlined by Dudko, “the entire region between Europe and Russia remains widely understudied and objectified” (Dudko, 2023) and subjected to “epistemic imperialism” (Sonevytsky, 2022).

Ukraine’s calls for being given a voice (quite literally) and a recognition on its own terms have become more vocal since the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022 (Burlyuk, 2022; Khromeychuk, 2022; Pigul et al. 2022; Pishchikova, 2023; Zayarnyuk, 2022). This plea is now supported by a growing community of Russia scholars as well. Writing in April 2022, Professor Susan Smith-Peter, a historian, concludes

I call on other scholars in our field to [...] join me in recovery from our addiction to the Russian state. Let’s stand with Ukrainians, their democracy, and their strong civic identity – not just on social media, but also in our work. Let us continue to create meaning in a manner inclusive of Ukrainian identity.¹¹

While organizers of The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) 2023 annual convention state that “Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to widespread calls for the reassessment and transformation of Russo-centric relationships of power and hierarchy both in the region and in how we study it”.¹²

From the perspective of Political Science, recognition is intrinsically linked to the question of “stateness”, which reflects discipline’s west-centric Westphalian bias. Debates about Ukraine, or other Central and East European states, are often derailed towards a contest of “independent state” credentials and a search for some kind of foundational ethos that would provide the necessary pedigree of statehood. The war itself was preceded by the well-known Putin’s essay written to discredit Ukrainian claims to independent statehood.

Yet, there is no reason why scholars *of* and *from* Ukraine need to take up the gauntlet and fight the Kremlin’s fight. Ukraine’s complex history need not be squeezed into the procrustean bed of essentialist mythology and methodological nationalism. Rather it could aspire to be an innovative space for the study of “subnational, transnational, and international processes” (von Hagen, 1995) or, as suggested by Dudko, “such reframing can help scholars to reimagine narratives of Europe as a ‘pluriversal’ space, where the complex and fluid histories of imperial, transnational, and cross-national networks manifest themselves and influence each other” (Dudko, 2023).

From the perspective of the Global IR, integrating Ukrainian studies into its decentered “worlding” research agenda is not just a matter of doing what one preaches by adding more peripheral voices. Ukraine’s predicament helped highlight the persistence of Cold War binaries, with their strong colonial baggage, including within the so-called critical IR.

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¹¹ See the full commentary here: <https://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/what-do-scholars-of-russia-owe-ukraine-today/>

¹² See the full statement here: <https://www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme>.

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