

The Wrong Kind of Colony. Russian Influences on Higher Education in Ukraine

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Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine triggered decolonization processes in Ukrainian education. Massive shelling of civilians, destruction of critical infrastructure, and war crimes committed by the Russian occupying forces significantly accelerated the processes of national "enlightenment." Today, Ukraine is a mature political nation, which shows an indomitable will in the struggle for its freedom. Higher education plays a major role in the formation of this political nation, but Russian colonial influences inhibit its European modernization. That is why the decolonization of higher education in Ukraine is an important aspect of its integration into the global educational space.

The Monomyth of Colonialism

Russian colonial influences on higher education in Ukraine were nourished by Soviet mythologems for a long time. Despite the restoration of Ukrainian statehood after the collapse of the Soviet empire, illusions about the colonial and totalitarian past still haunted Ukrainians. Myths about the "fraternal Russian people" or "unity of nations within the Russian Empire," created over centuries upon centuries, stopped many Ukrainian educators from perceiving Russian culture — and their own — critically. The focus on Russian-language scientific literature retained them in the theoretical and thematic fields of Russian academic discourse, dominated by imperial guidelines of thinking.

In addition, Russia's colonial influence on higher education in Ukraine was exacerbated by the inferiority complex still largely present in Ukrainians' minds. The persistence of the identity of a "*khokho*" — a humiliating and insulting imperial image of Ukrainians — complicated the process of national self-identification, as Ukraine was portrayed as a rural, underdeveloped country. Unlike many European nations, which have respected the principle of state sovereignty for more than a century, Ukrainians often demonstrate distrust and even contempt for their own country. Not having their own statehood over long periods of time prevented Ukrainians from showing confidence in their own social institutions, including educational ones. It is not surprising that paternalism maintained its position, depriving people of initiative and a sense of responsibility. Populism blossomed, embodied by demagoguery and cheap pandering. Unfortunately, paternalism and populism in higher education did little to rid it of influences from the colonial past.

The Call to Adventure

The decommunization process that started after the 2014 Euromaidan was intended to remove the imperial barrier to Ukraine's European integration. Higher education was given the responsibility of forming national values and civilizational priorities, a process that involved the destruction of Soviet imperial narratives. The lack of a clear educational policy regarding resistance to imperial influences resulted not only in their preservation but also in tolerance towards manifestations of anti-Ukrainian positions. Colonial conservation was aided by the fact that following the collapse of the USSR, the Marxist-Leninist ideology was replaced with

traditional Russian religious philosophy, which made the “Russian world” idea into the ideology of today’s Russia. To this day, a significant number of Ukrainian educators are fascinated by this tradition, reproducing its ideas in their academic works or classes. Even during the full-scale war, abstracts of doctoral dissertations had Ukrainian scholars mentioning Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin not as the ideological driver behind the war against Ukraine and Putin’s favorite theorist, but rather as a theoretical source of research on human existence alongside Roland Barthes, Hans Georg-Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Max Scheler, and other outstanding philosophers. This attitude towards infamous representatives of imperial philosophy can hardly be considered scientific impartiality. Rather, it is a symptom of colonial myopia and professional negligence.

The content and forms of decolonization are significantly determined by social and cultural contexts. Decolonization in Western education takes place mostly due to critical self-reflection of the academic environment regarding the colonialism of their own countries in the past. Repentance before the colonized peoples is an important element here. The decolonization of Ukrainian education, on the other hand, refers to a reaction against the modern neocolonial policy that Russia still imposes on Ukraine. Therefore, it is not the colonial past, but the future of Ukraine that determines the relevance of decolonization in its education. It is made possible through perseverance, not remorse. Ukraine’s higher education needs to be decolonized to restore the authentic contents of Ukrainian culture in the context of European values, including the key value of freedom. In this war, Ukrainians are fighting precisely for this.

Expectations of the “end of history” under a global reign of democracy and peace have not come true. Instead, authoritarianism and expansionism are gaining momentum. The policy of the Putin regime aims to restore not only the USSR, but also the borders of the Russian Empire following the conquests of Peter I at the end of the 18th century. Unlike traditional Western empires, Russian rule appropriates not only territory and natural and economic resources, but also history and culture. As famous Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak [said](#), “*The Russian Empire was a wrong kind of empire. Because in proper empires, the center is developed, and the outskirts are backward. In Russia, it’s the opposite: the west — Ukraine — is much more developed, and the center is backward.*” It is thus clear why Russia perceives its statehood as originating from the Kyivan Rus, justifying its imperial ambitions through the myth of “fraternal peoples.”

From a historical perspective, this myth has failed. It turned out that Ukrainians identified as a European nation, not as a type of Russian ethnicity. Therefore, Putin’s regime set itself the fundamental task of “restoring historic justice” and the Russian people by destroying the Ukrainian identity. According to the rhetoric of the Russian government, Ukrainians are an artificial construct whose purpose is to destroy the true nature of the Russian people. Therefore, the Ukrainian identity needs to be destroyed. This is the basis for the mission of today’s Russia — fix historical errors of the communist regime and restore Russia’s former “greatness.” To achieve the goal, it uses not only military aggression, but also educational colonial policy.

Transformations

Ukraine’s higher education can resist the “Russian world” by cleansing itself of its narratives. The ideological abominations of the “Russian world,” like opposition of the true spirituality to the for-show Western one, or discrediting intelligence as a phenomenon hostile

to an individual, in favor of passion and spontaneity, sometimes emerge in the Ukrainian educational rhetoric. Even reflections about the Ukrainian [cordocentrism](#), [antaeism](#), spirituality, and “traditional values” usually emerge against the backdrop of “Russian-world-esque” criticism of the modern world.

[The Istanbul Convention](#) was ratified in Ukraine as late as 2022, during the full-scale war. Heated debates about its main provisions went on for 11 years. The issue of gender identity was especially sensitive. The Convention aims to protect individuals against domestic violence without discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. Ratification of the Istanbul Convention delivers a major blow to Russian propaganda-inspired homophobic attitudes in Ukraine. Human rights are gaining momentum in Ukrainian society.

So, in contrast to the decolonization of education in Western countries, the decolonization of education in Ukraine is focused on the legitimization of modern European values. The decolonization of Ukrainian education emphasizes the value-based conceptual strategy of European thinking, in contrast to the “Russian world” mindset. As mentioned before, the Russian tradition still influences a significant proportion of Ukrainian educators. The main division between these traditions stems from rational reasoning and logic. The “Russian-world-esque” thinking tradition questions or even denies the autonomy of the mind, while the European mode of thought nurtures it. Further, the decolonization of Ukrainian education requires its purification from such post-colonial phenomena as pro-Soviet teaching, scientific dilettantism, low involvement in international cooperation, and toleration of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, corruption, etc.

Notably, Russian colonial influence on higher education in Ukraine continues beyond its borders, extending to international academic institutions. This is especially true of research societies in Slavic and Eastern European studies, whose projects still receive Russian funding. This way, Russia seized the monopoly of influence, marginalizing the subject of Ukraine. After February 24, 2022, the situation has changed. The decolonization of Russian studies is announced as an urgent objective at global congresses, while Ukrainian studies are becoming an object of widespread interest. The war has significantly accelerated the processes of decolonization of Ukrainian education, revealing the latter's potential for European integration and global cooperation.