

Russian colonialism, Eastern Europe and global anti-colonial struggles

Saturday 28 October 2023, by [KRIVONOS Daria](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2023).

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency among scholars and activists in Eastern Europe to draw parallels and links between the “postcolonial” and the “postsocialist”. In its extreme, as Adem Ferizaj argues in his recent [review](#), the use of postcolonial approaches in the context of postsocialism “leads to the false analogy that postsocialism is more or less the postcolonialism of all populations affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall”. Russia’s unprovoked invasion into Ukraine has given a new push to this discussion. For example, the framing of Ukraine and other Eastern European countries as former Soviet/Russian colonies sometimes led to some expectations that countries in the “Global South” would solidarise with Ukraine and find the links with the experience of Soviet/Russian imperialism in the region of Central Eastern Europe more broadly. The logic follows that the experience of colonialism and oppression should drive solidarities across Ukraine, Europe’s East and the “Global South”.

Yet it is telling that the move to build solidarities and to seek connections between postsocialism and postcolonialism, Europe’s East and the “Global South”, has been unidirectional and has predominantly, if not exclusively, come from those located in the East of Europe. Here, it is a good place to reflect on the connections which the analysis of Russian imperialism allows us to make between Europe’s East and the non-European South.

There should be no doubt that Russia’s invasion should be understood as both nationalist and imperialist, and that Russia’s white majority should rethink Russian history through the prism of imperialism, while scholars of the region engage with extensive work which has discussed the applicability of the “colonial” to the case of Russian Empire/Soviet Union/Russian Federation. Another question to be asked is where the discussion of Russian imperialism leaves us in relation to global anti-colonial struggles, and what would be the grounds for seeking solidarities with those (formerly) colonized in other parts of the world. In this essay, I suggest that the jump to build analogies between postcolonialism and postsocialism might be too quick and, at the very least, requires examining the region’s active participation in the policing of the physical and symbolic borders of “Europe”.

“Return to Europe” and the policing of EU borders

As critical scholars of postsocialism note, one of the narratives through which post-1989 era was understood by Western and East European elites was the story of a “[return to Europe](#)”. It is narrated as a liberation from Soviet occupation/colonialism, “orientalist Bolshevism” and a return to the “European civilization” and a “common European home”. Underlying the innate Europeanness has become the priority for many identity discourses in the region. Notions of Europe and Europeanness again became central in the narrative of the war in Ukraine: Ukrainians do not only defend their right to exist as a nation, but they fight “for European values”, which supposedly should strengthen the support of Ukraine. This framing also suggests that the values of freedom, fairness and equality

are inherently European, which overlooks [the struggles for exactly same values in a non-European world](#). The appeal to “European values” was also visible in the context of the ongoing tragedy and sanctioned violence at the Polish-Belarusian border, where some activists argued that Poland should embrace “European values” to prevent life-seekers’ freezing and starvation in the forest, even though one would argue that it is precisely the value of “defending our European way of life” which sanctions people to death in the forest and the sea.

But what did the return to the “European home” entail for those who became EU member states? Among other things, the so-called “eastern enlargement” (indeed, a problematic term on its own) in the EU posed new challenges for the protection of the EU’s external frontiers considering that [the new member states had to become responsible for the internal security of the union](#). East European accession states got to be seen as vital to the containment of illegalized migration. As a result, the new EU member states had to change their legislative arrangements in increasingly restrictive ways, including the [readmission agreements](#) which became instruments enabling the removal of aliens from a state’s territory now part of the EU.

In fact, the capacity for effective border control has been vital for the admission into the EU’ member states. The EU channeled considerable funds to shore up the infrastructure and operational capacity of border guards to prepare them for their new responsibility of patrolling the EU’s eastern external frontiers. In the aftermath of Europe’s 2015 so called “refugee crisis”, many countries in Eastern Europe refused to accept quota refugees claiming they “never had colonies” and thus have no responsibility for the legacies of Western colonialism. In the summer 2022, Poland, with the endorsement of the European Commission, completed a 186 km steel wall on its border with Belarus to expel asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East, to mention just one among many examples of the ongoing violent pushbacks at the EU borders. EU’s eastern and southeastern borders have thus become spaces for surveilling and incarcerating illegalized migrants. It is in this context that scholars argue that Eastern Europe is a [peripheral extension of Europe’s coloniality](#).

Ethnographic work conducted among border guards in Latvia captures this seeming [“paradox of Europeanness”](#): while the border guards of the new frontiers of the EU were trained to become “tolerant” and respectful of human rights in line with the “European values”, they simultaneously were required to stop the movement of those threatening the “European way of life”. This paradox is not as illogical as it may seem: the European migration apparatus is a space of violence precisely due to its commitments to the liberal politics of human rights, which were not meant to be extended to those from the colonized world. One immediate example is the the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention), associated today with the very idea of a universalised rights-bearing human being. Initially, however, [the convention was meant to only protect those displaced in Europe before 1951](#). The idea of universal human rights was put to the test by the right to seek asylum as it threatened the principle of state sovereignty of the powerful states part of the UN maintaining their colonial possessions. Most of the world population was prevented from being considered refugees. It is only through the resistance of the colonial states who gained independence and used the language of anti-colonialism that the amendment to the Convention was made. It was only in 1967 that the UN responded to this anti-colonial resistance by adopting the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (“Protocol”) and, therewith, removing the spatial and temporal focus.

This is not just a reminder that today’s violent pushbacks across EU borders are neither a recent development nor an exception to the limited applicability of the “universal”. It also shows the longer legacies the new EU member states become part of when asserting their Europeanness and becoming new policemen of the EU’s external frontiers. This perspective positions these nation-states not only in relation to the EU and Russia, but also in relation to the global setting of coloniality of migration, borders and race.

Claiming whiteness

Discussion of coloniality in the region, especially if isolated from global anti-colonial struggles, can also easily sidestep questions of race and the desire to affirm belonging to European whiteness. In fact, one can securely do postcolonial studies without ever critically addressing questions of race – an important conversation which has been largely missing in the recent discussion of the postcolonial in the region. My [ethnographic work](#) showed that migrant workers coming from post-Soviet countries often choose Europeanness and whiteness over class and struggles against exploitation and poor working conditions as a base for solidarity with other negatively racialised workers. When experiencing deskilling and social downgrading in migration, many told me that they were more deserving of social advancement unlike non-white others as they were, as many said, “educated, European and white”. Before the full-scale invasion, some Ukrainian migrants living in Poland talked about their desire to move further “West”, [to Europe “proper” \(read Germany\)](#), and talked about the “influx” of refugees from the Middle East as a reality that disturbed their image of what “Europe” should be like. This is not dissimilar from many other migrants from Eastern Europe reproducing the norm of whiteness when being negatively racialised themselves.

The engagement with the postcolonial in the context of postsocialism can easily become selective and a convenient tool on its own to affirm own Europeanness and whiteness vis-à-vis the “Asiatic Empire” when disconnected from global anti-colonial struggles and the global question of race. The desire to be recognised as white in the process of liberation from Russian colonialism precludes solidarities with other anti-colonial struggles. The language of the postcolonial in the region can be then easily coated in claims to whiteness and the desire to buttress “European values” expelling people from the EU borders. In fact, although the discussion of colonialism has been increasingly accepted in relation to Russia, for many in Eastern Europe the worst offense is to be compared to the “Third world”.

Alternative narratives

One of the ways out is to narrate the region not only through the liberal narrative of a “return to Europe” – extensively critiqued by many scholars in Eastern Europe in the last decade – which has meant, among other things, the embrace of the violent EU border apparatus, but also through the histories of “Second-Third world” internationalism and global anti-colonial struggles. This is not a call for a postsocialist nostalgia for a colonial-less and colour-blind socialist progress. In fact, socialist states often failed to account for the violence against racialised minorities [“within”](#) their own states. Rather than this quick romanticised return, revisiting these histories can be an invitation to put the question of solidarity across anti-colonialisms globally and examine the region’s current complicity with the violence against the “Global South”. This not only requires revisiting histories of what has been termed “alternative globalizations” – the connections between “second” and “third” worlds that sidestepped the West – but also seeing the region as positioned within global racial capitalist orders, militarized border regimes and the histories of thinking with global (anti-)colonial struggles.

This is the thinking *across* anti-colonial experiences that the interest in the postcolonial in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion could invite us to do. As the discussion on the “postcolonial” in the region and is becoming more popular inside and outside of academic circles, we must resist the temptation to ascribe the region into the [“white enclosure” as fulfillment of forward-moving European “integration”](#) at the expense of those fleeing the same Russian bombs falling further away from “Europe”.

Daria Krivonos

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

LeftEast

<https://lefteast.org/russian-colonialism-anti-colonial-struggles/>