

POST-SOVIET STUDIES: CRISIS OF CONCEPTS, CONVENTIONS, AND COMPROMISES

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The roundtable is a response to the state of distress in which many researchers of post-Soviet processes, spaces, and transformations found themselves after the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. The nature of this anguish can be found, first of all, in the realization of the irreversibility of the events. But it also captured social scientists' professional sphere. The crisis of post-Soviet studies, which had already been discussed for a long time, has manifested itself in full force. Many of the foundational, widely accepted concepts that were used to explain the post-Soviet transformations—and seemed dependable—have been discredited or called into question. The roundtable, which took place in Helsinki in October 2022, was not so naive as to seek to solve any problems. The discussion that took place was an attempt to feel out and confront the underlying concepts and assumptions that have failed, as well as an attempt to capture scholarly reflections on the difficult situation that we are living through now.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Studies; Area Studies; Decolonization of Post-Soviet Studies; Crisis of Conventions; Crisis of Compromises

The idea of this roundtable came to the editorial board of *Laboratorium* out of a grave concern caused by a catastrophic event—Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. From the epicenter of the war, shock waves rippled throughout the entire post-Soviet space, and it became apparent very quickly that the history of this part of the world has been reset to a new starting point. The understanding of the need to dis-

cuss the post-Soviet framework emerged immediately—despite the fact that the framework itself had been perceived as outdated long before the war.

Preparing the roundtable took time. We believe that problems of post-Soviet studies should be primarily discussed by researchers based in post-Soviet countries. Unfortunately, we did not have much success inviting such researchers to participate in this roundtable. Some invitees thought that the topic of the roundtable was beyond their expertise; others were unavailable for other reasons. One Ukrainian colleague was going to participate, but, to our great regret, had to withdraw due to technical issues: because of regular power outages in Ukraine caused by the invasion, he was not sure he would be able to connect virtually to the discussion. But we were able to bring together four eminent scholars of the region: Dace Dzenovska, Jeremy Morris, Marianna Muravyeva, and Judith Pallot. The roundtable took place on October 19, 2022, with the support of the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki.

The outbreak of the war has caused a wave of reflections in the social sciences. They appeared especially prominently within post-Soviet studies and, in particular, Russian studies. Common to this wave of reflections among scholars of Russia and the surrounding region is a keen sense of the crisis of collective knowledge. As Regina Smyth argues in a recent essay, “Russia’s escalation of war shined a spotlight on critical research gaps and inaccurate assumptions” (2023:10).

A collection of articles and essays published in a recent special issue of *Post-Soviet Affairs*, edited by Tomila Lankina, presents the attempts to understand whether the social sciences turned out to be sufficiently consistent in explaining what had been happening in Russia prior to the war and in predicting the war itself. An equally important contribution of this collection is an attempt to discuss how to study Russia in the future, when the possibilities of empirical research are reduced dramatically and, therefore, some research approaches need to be altered. For example, Vladimir Gel’man (2023) and Tomila Lankina (2023) call for examination and explanation of the Russian case not on its own but in comparison with other contexts. Jeremy Morris (2023) and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2023) propose to use more actively the ethnographic approach and political psychology to study and explain Russian society. Gusel Yusupova (2023) and Margarita Zavadskaya and Theodore Gerber (2023) suggest pivoting away from politics-focused research to the study of broader societal issues, which for the most part is less politically risky.

The issues that we proposed to the participants of our roundtable for discussion go beyond Russian studies. We did this consciously, wishing, on the one hand, to contribute to the debate about Russian studies and, on the other hand, to consider Russian studies within the environment that has shaped it for decades and made this area of study what it is. The choice of the agenda and questions for the roundtable discussion was partly determined by purely pragmatic considerations, more specifically, by the desire to figure out what to do in the current situation with the journal, which was established by a Russian research center that now has the status of a foreign agent in Russia and which has always positioned itself as a platform for discussions about the post-Soviet and postsocialist transformations.

The debate about the crisis of post-Soviet studies is not new. It first emerged a couple of decades ago. Since 2000, there were at least two events that tested the sustainability of post-Soviet studies. First, the expansion of the European Union to the east and the subsequent transformation of former socialist regimes into new EU states marked an important stage in the development of post-Soviet studies. Second, the 2014 events in Ukraine—the Maidan protests, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the takeover of the eastern territories of Ukraine by Russia—similarly had a significant impact on the state of post-Soviet research, as the focus of researchers’ interests markedly shifted from Russia to other postsocialist countries, especially to the countries of the former Soviet Union. The war in Ukraine looks like a new challenge for post-Soviet studies. It problematized many, if not all, academic conventions and compromises that have formed within post-Soviet studies over the years of the field’s existence. Everything related to the spatial and temporal conventions of the post-Soviet worlds, including the foundations of (post-)Soviet identities (Eggart 2022; Bakke, Rickard, and O’Loughlin 2023), now needs to be reconceptualized. Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, a discussion about decolonization of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies emerged—or intensified (see, for example, the publishing agenda of *Slavic Review*).

The debate about whether the post-Soviet framing remains relevant has been going on for some time now. It is often perceived and criticized as an outdated research framework, which is perhaps informed by the desire to close that chapter of history and lean into new geopolitical alliances, new identities, and, consequently, new delineations within area studies. Terms such as “East Central European,” “Baltic,” “Transcaucasian,” “Eurasian,” and even “Global East” are increasingly being used in relation to the region or its parts, competing with the older “post-Soviet” descriptor. Meanwhile, the ongoing events in Ukraine have demonstrated the staying ideological (and military) power of the concept of post-Soviet and how it comes to bear on the social, economic, and geopolitical processes to this day.

In the process of this reconceptualization, we can also interrogate the established methodology prevalent in post-Soviet studies, which has been in the habit of borrowing explanatory models from Western theoretical paradigms, often eschewing careful critical revision when transplanting them to the post-Soviet context. This compromise of uncritical borrowing of hermeneutics makes it difficult at times to discern the specifics of the post-Soviet and postsocialist processes.

The roundtable was conceived mainly as a conversation about the present and the future; however, past experiences of doing research on the Soviet Union unexpectedly surfaced in the conversation, revealing a lot of important discrepancies in the understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions. The very understanding of the meaning of post-Soviet depends on what discipline, institution, and even generation the researcher is from. The notion of (post-)Soviet does not denote any commonly shared conception and does not on its own work as an explanatory construction. During the roundtable, we sought to figure out whether it is worth to continue developing the framework of the post-Soviet.

The range of questions that arise around the crisis of post-Soviet studies is extremely broad. Our attempt to limit the discussion to the questions prepared in ad-

vance was not entirely successful. In one way or another the discussion turned to more general issues of the social sciences, which are worth noting here. It became clear that the very mission of the social sciences and the understanding of the expertise they produce may need to be revised. Smyth (2023) invokes political scientist Stephen Hanson who argued that scholars were quite correct in their analysis of the developments in Russia and in prediction of disastrous outcomes. Historians, political scientists, sociologists turned out to be right in their evaluations of Russia and Russian society. And if so, then isn't the academic community's reaction an expression of disappointment in social sciences, not that social scientists could not predict the war, but that they could not prevent it? And if we pose such a question, then we have to ask further who the addressees of the results of social research are and what generally the value of scientific expertise is.

In addition to the matters of institutional arrangements of academic research, questions about personal choices, personal responsibilities, and personal actions became extremely acute in the current situation. Hardly any researcher involved in ongoing research in post-Soviet area can avoid an in-depth reflection on these questions. The issues of unbiasedness and impartiality of researcher's position that seemed to be finally resolved have regained relevance.

The questions we posed to the participants of our roundtable are listed below. We are convinced that the crisis faced by post-Soviet area studies is deep and complex, and the conversation needs to continue. We are extremely grateful to the colleagues who took part in the discussion. We also very much regret that researchers from Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and Poland whom we had invited could not take part in it for various reasons, and we look forward to collaboration with them in the future.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Has post-Soviet studies as a subset of area studies been underestimated and prematurely abandoned? Or has the framework outlived its usefulness and continued to linger artificially?
2. How will the ongoing war in Ukraine influence the epistemic aspects of research of postsocialist transformations in terms of temporal and spatial conventions, identities, historical memory, trends of development, and so on?
3. How can the decolonization of post-Soviet studies be realized? Will the decolonization of post-Soviet studies lead to the formation of new configurations and hierarchies in the understanding of the post-Soviet space? Will it lead to erosion—or cancellation—of Russian studies?
4. How does the current crisis fit within or expand the scope of post-Soviet studies and its traditional subjects?
5. Has the compromise of uncritical borrowing of Western theories been useful? Should researchers of post-Soviet transformations learn to theorize on their own? Can they be competitive in the international academic arena?

Has post-Soviet studies as a subset of area studies been underestimated and prematurely abandoned? Or has the framework outlived its usefulness and continued to linger artificially?

Judith Pallot: I actually misread this question because I am of the generation of Soviet, not post-Soviet studies. One of the problems to my mind is precisely the attempt to carry Soviet studies over to the period after 1991, without taking the time to reflect on what was important to take forward and what to abandon. We did not really rise to the challenge of the end of the USSR and the political fragmentation of the area. The term “post-Soviet studies” is at the root of the problem, because it has led us to search for unity across the whole region, and the commonality we lighted upon was “legacy.” And it spawned some rather lazy scholarship that focused on continuities, instead of trying to understand some of the new processes shaping the transformations in the region. We needed to answer the question of why the former communist countries are worth studying together, other than that they have a common legacy. An immediate challenge to post-Soviet studies was that specialists on some of these countries, particularly those in East Central Europe, saw their future as becoming part of European studies, which at the time was more than happy to claim them. In event, it turned out that European studies wasn’t terribly interested in knowing the finer details of the transformations in Czechia or Slovakia or Poland because there was a widespread belief that all were heading for the same end point, recognizable as Western market democracies. Now we have the problem with post-Soviet studies that there is a host of particularist publications about each of the successor countries that rely on legacy arguments to stress the unity across the region, too often without discussion of how the two actually fit together. What I would say is that the discussion you have initiated here should have taken place 20 years ago.

Marianna Muravyeva: It’s actually quite interesting that you would think that “post-Soviet” is an attempt to carry “Soviet” into the 1990s, because for me post-Soviet was like postmodern. It has always represented the way of critically thinking about the Soviet and the necessity to reassess and/or process what the Soviet was. From my own scholarly background—in history and, especially, in gender studies, a new field of research in the 1990s—I derive a very “post” approach. As a community marginalized by the dominant part of academia, we (gender studies) have been critically processing and reassessing the “Soviet” looking at it from the temporality of “post” embedded in “now.” So for me the concept of “post” has a lot of potential, and it does not necessarily lead one to think about the region as a cohesive space (for that matter, I never thought of the USSR as a unified and cohesive unit). This approach has been informing my own research from the beginning. But having said that, we actually need to return to the past discussion of the “Soviet,” because it was interrupted by the assumption that we needed to move on, to really embrace the “post” part of it. This weariness of the Soviet also responded well to the political need around the 2000s to modernize, which, in its turn, created a nostalgia for the Soviet. In the end, that is today, we ended up in a trap we had set up for ourselves: using seemingly

meaningless terminology such as “post-Soviet” and calling for its decolonization. So, what’s the alternative? Do we forget about the Soviet? We have done something like that once already and have seen the dangerous and sad results of shutting down part of our history we do not like. But if we take this route again, then potentially we need to stop viewing the region as a region, in other words we would need to look at every country separately and embrace studies of 15 different countries that also should be treated equally in their value and importance. Can scholars do that? Absolutely, especially “on the inside”; they have been doing it since the collapse of the USSR. Can politicians and experts, especially “on the outside,” do that? No. And, hence, we are back to the post-Soviet or any other regional denomination (Eurasian, Eastern, Central European, and so on). In this cacophony of terms, the post-Soviet at least has a meaning, that is, it refers to the Soviet experiences and attempts to overcome them in a variety of localities. In fact, it is a much more diverse theoretical concept than any geographical denomination of it.

Dace Dzenovska: I would like to broaden the question that was posed and consider postsocialism as a field of knowledge production alongside post-Soviet studies. There are at least three aspects to the distinction between post-Soviet studies and studies of postsocialism. First, it is a disciplinary distinction, with “post-Soviet” being a mark of more state-focused disciplines, such as political science, and “postsocialist” being preferred by disciplines such as anthropology (but not only). Second, it is a geopolitical distinction insofar as post-Soviet studies tends to be more Russia-centric, while the study of postsocialism includes Central and Eastern Europe. Third, scholarship on postsocialism has, from its early days, grappled with the tension between being confined by spatial and temporal markers (i.e., a particular region of the world and a particular period) and aspiring to become a critical space from which analytically consequential knowledge might emerge. It could be said that scholarship on postsocialism aspired to become like postcolonial studies and make a theoretical and political difference. Such a desire was evident in the work of liberal left Western scholars and diasporic postsocialist subjects, each with its own analytical and political agenda. For example, some left-leaning Western scholars hoped for the emergence of a third way for organizing human life, something that was neither capitalism nor socialism. A good example is Susan Buck-Morss’s book *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe* (2002). However, rather than holding the future open, many postsocialist subjects, aided by teams of advisors, embraced lessons of neoliberalism (though not necessarily political liberalism). As a result, rather than crafting a third way, scholars of postsocialism got busy documenting dispossession that came with freedom. In the meantime, social scientists from the region were staying afloat by working for various “transitology” institutions. Survival came with an ideological price. Then again, many did genuinely believe that history had ended and that the future path was clear. From this “transitology” perspective, the terms “post-Soviet” and “postsocialist” mark societies and subjects still held hostage by the past. In other words, these concepts have turned into ideological markers (as when Latvian elites blame the ills of the present on the Soviet mentality of certain segments of the

population). Defined in this way, “post-Soviet” and “postsocialist” seem to have outlived their usefulness. They do not help us understand the present. At the same time, they could be used as markers of the last 30 years of political and economic struggles that have culminated in the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is the 30 years of “global post-Sovietness” that have led us to where we are now. It is in this way, as an inquiry into the unprecedented effort to remake societies and individuals and the global changes following the fall of the Soviet Union, that post-Soviet and postsocialist studies could and should be repurposed.

Jeremy Morris: I’ll be brief and try not to cover the same ground as the other speakers, who all made really good points. So, like Judith, I reinterpreted, misread, whatever you want to call it, the question and thought not so much about post-Soviet studies as underestimated, but more broadly about area studies. And so it seems to me that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine provides an imperative to restate the importance of area studies. So my response is that it doesn’t really matter so much to me what people call our research. There is an argument to be made that post-Soviet studies perennially needs rebranding to make it accessible to people who actually provide money [for research]. And of course, there will be lots of money now for area studies. And again, I would argue that it’s important that we are receptive as scholars to the need to be accessible to people who have money. And so regional studies, area studies, it doesn’t really matter. But we should restate the importance of studying areas holistically. And again, we can redefine those areas. So for example, it may be now that people who study Ukraine say that we should know that this war indicates the end of Ukrainian studies as part of post-Soviet studies. I don’t take a position there. I’m just saying that there is a need to restate the scholarly significance and importance of area studies. And if I could just take a couple of minutes to remind us of what that is: in my view of, following Immanuel Wallerstein and various other scholars, area studies represents potential for holism. And of course, this is an ideal, and none of us can ever really live up to this ideal. We’re all particularists; we are all influenced by some mainstream disciplines in one way or another. But Wallerstein’s conception of holism, of area studies, argued that the collection of empirical knowledge that is specific can lead to theory building in a very constructive way, and it’s a valid way of doing it. And again, we can point to the current war as being a great example of the strength of area studies where other frames and lenses fall short. Just to take two examples. How to deal with the widespread idea on the left in Western countries that Ukraine is full of neo-Nazis, how do we best do that? By using area knowledge. And again, this would, in fact, encompass post-Soviet studies because it allows us to look at how symbols of neopaganism are appropriated within Ukraine and Russia and could be mistaken for fascism in both places. We need to take a post-Soviet lens to do that. Similarly, there’s just been a book published that purports to show that Russian youth are broadly pro-fascist. I’m not going to name the author or the book because I don’t think it’s worth reading. The book is not by really an area scholar and rests almost solely on social media research. Once again, somebody with a holistic appreciation and sensitivity, an area studies scholar, whether they call

themselves post-Soviet or not, would do better justice to a topic like that, whether or not Russian youth are broadly pro-fascist. And again, we could say that to understand whether or not this claim is true, we would have to have a post-Soviet or post-socialist sensibility. So yes, definitely, looking at this question, I go back to the defenses of area studies in general. Again, we might want to talk about regional. . . We might want to rebrand ourselves or rebrand area studies as regional studies. Maybe that will be the way to go forward. Or in my own case, I feel very comfortable calling myself a global studies scholar. I'm professor of Russian and global studies in the Department of Global Studies. And my most fruitful conversations in my own department are with scholars of Asia, which we view as a region in my department, even though of course it consists of individual countries like Japan and China and so on. So I think that would be my very quick response: focus on the value in holism that area studies, whatever we call it, bring.

How will the ongoing war in Ukraine influence the epistemic aspects of research of postsocialist transformations in terms of temporal and spatial conventions, identities, historical memory, trends of development, and so on?

Marianna Muravyeva: There are two different issues in this question. One is how Russian aggression against Ukraine impacts individual research for a lot of scholars. What kind of choices they make now, and what kind of thinking they employ in this particular situation. This is not so much about the events in Ukraine, but about one's personal strategies and choices. People are not naive about what has been going on, especially people in the region. Ukraine is not the first country ever attacked by Russia. Georgia was first [in 2008]. On top of that, other countries in the region have attacked each other and created permanent war-prone cites, such as Nagorny Karabakh for example. And if one, claiming to be an expert on the region, does not understand what happened to Georgia, then scholarship is probably not their forte. So that is that. The other issue is how scholars in the region are communicating with scholars in the West, and that's what we are discussing now. How the economic sanctions—and shutting down academic cooperation at the official level in the EU—impact Russian scholars in particular. This is not as unproblematic as it seems to be: by legally prohibiting institutional cooperation, these countries' governments eliminated competition, which effectively made their own scholars unchallenged experts on the region, a situation very similar to the Cold War era when the so-called Sovietologists propagated their thinking about the country they had no access to or, at best, had a very controlled access. This also happens at the expense of other academic communities in the region: even with all the unanimous support for Ukrainian scholars, their voices are used to illustrate whatever research Western scholars are doing, and they are not really treated as producers of expert knowledge about their own context and about Russia, for that matter. Again, the example of Georgia is very telling. Despite Georgia's close relations with the United States and European Union, hardly anyone [outside of Georgia] can name even two Georgian scholars who are

recognized experts on their own country and to whose scholarship we would all need to refer when Georgia comes in our orbit of interests.

Russian aggression against Ukraine, nevertheless, has a significant impact on regional studies, but it affects scholars from the region and from the West differently. Certainly, with the help of social and mass media there is an impression that academic communities finally started reflecting on the organization of regional studies, talking about how the field is going to change, what's happening in the region, or how this situation is going to transform our research, and so on. In addition, there is an impression that scholars have finally got to the point of serious reflection on (de)colonization of knowledge, which is most vocally expressed in Western and Ukrainian scholarship and in English. From my point of view, it is just an impression; the conversation about decolonization has been ongoing since the 1990s and in the context that has been ignored by most Western academics: invariably, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tadjik, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian scholars have made significant progress in de-linking from their Soviet pasts in favor of pre-Soviet and pre-Russian Empire historical constructs. Ukraine has been engaged in various "de-" processes all the time (de-communization, decolonization, de-Russification, etc.). Even within the Russian Federation, debate on (de)colonial theory has been ongoing and lively. Just to mention Madina Tlostanova here, who have been writing on decolonization and decolonial theory for at least two decades by now and whose work in Russian has had a profound impact on the discussion on decoloniality (see, e.g., Tlostanova 2009a, 2009b). But these debates were mainly held in local languages, mostly inaccessible to Western scholars, many of whom still entertain the idea that they can do serious research in the region without knowing any of the languages. Now, when there is a whole generation of English-speaking locals, who translated these discussions into English and made them accessible to the "West," the impression here is that this is all new.

For me, to give an example of a scholar from the region who just recently relocated to the West (but still within 200 kilometers of the Russian border), Russian aggression against Ukraine did not really change the direction or theoretical or methodological frameworks of my research, nor its contents, in the sense that scholars like myself have already been doing a lot of decolonial critical thinking, which comes with the territory if you are a human rights lawyer and researcher and, in particular, if your field is human rights of women and queer people or gender-based violence. All of us have been calling attention to the ways that Russian government shifted to authoritarian politics before [Vladimir] Putin's infamous speech to the Russian parliament in 2012 on the positives of conservatism. However, these warnings were heard mostly by other gender scholars or human rights researchers, while everyone else was preoccupied with what I call "Putin studies," or rather with "what does the despot of the Winter Palace think?" (to quote a typical headline in the British broadsheets prior to the Crimean War of 1853–1856), or much pleasanter topics, dismissing our concerns, and I quote again, as "a preoccupation of angry unmarried women" (according to one male scholar at my panel at ASEES in 2011 in response to my talk on sexual violence in conflict).

At the same time, I can see that for a lot of scholars in Russia, these past months [since the invasion of Ukraine] have actually brought quite a huge transformation, especially in terms of how they are going to be conducting their research, not so much on the theoretical level, but on a practical level. So, what kind of research can they do in this situation of authoritarian rule? Despite difficulties, many scholars already have strategies: historians have learned once again how to use Aesopian language in their research since the 2014 memory law; gender studies scholars have learned to use “men and women” and “equality” without “gender” to be able to get funding and to publish. At the same time, there are Ukrainian scholars who remained in Ukraine, and this is still a different issue because they are in the situation of war. And while we (the EU and the West generally) are happy to help and try to get Ukrainian scholars out, their academic infrastructure is ruined not only physically by Putin’s armed forces, but also by the enormous pressure from the outside to be different from the Russians, the pressure that does not take into account that Ukrainian scholarship has been profoundly different even before the collapse of the USSR.

Therefore, I would rather be focusing particularly on this: we are not a united front, and the changes that we are talking about and increasingly feel that they’re there, they impact scholars in different ways depending on locality, language, institution, race, gender, and so forth. The way I see it, the biggest challenge everyone is trying to tackle is how to sustain a dialogue between the East and the West, or rather between Russia and the West, when Russian scholars are effectively banned from the latter. Whatever the sentiment is, one cannot study the region without Russia.

Judith Pallot: The war in Ukraine has had an immense impact. We have entered a period in area studies of the region of the reshaping and contestation of conventional boundaries, both those on the ground (the material boundaries) and in imaginaries, which are equally important. With the war, everybody in area studies (with some notable exceptions, it is true) has come to understand Ukraine as part of Europe. Prior to the war, as we know, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were seen as constituting “the core” of post-Soviet space, while the peripheries were divided into macro-regions—Central Asia, the Transcaucasus, the Baltics, and so on. The war has really forced us to rethink all of this. It is not only Western scholars across the political spectrum who were to blame for reinforcing the core-periphery model for studying the region, but Russian scholars were/are as well. The war has shown the peripheries to be far from passive; take for example, the women’s protest against the mobilization that erupted in Dagestan in September 2022 that took many by surprise, including, it seems, the Kremlin. We have needed a crash course on the North Caucasus, Yakutia, Buryatia, Tuva, and other places in the so-called peripheries to understand the context for the differential responses to war. We are also having to reconfigure our imaginative geographies of the other post-Soviet states as past loyalties have been called into question by Russia’s invasion of its neighbor. In June 2022 President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan publicly humiliated Putin at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum by refusing to recognize the “quasi-state” formations in the Donbas. These are big, big changes in how we understand the mean-

ings vested in geographic boundaries in the region. The conventional temporal boundaries also need to be reconsidered. Historians of Russia have typically framed their research by the major discontinuities as viewed from the center: imperial Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, late socialism, collapse of the Soviet Union, and now, what you are calling post-socialism/-communism/-Soviet. I have to say that as an original Soviet era specialist when much time was spent dissecting the ideology of Soviet communism, I find the use of the term post-socialism to describe the successor states of the USSR unhelpful. I've had an argument with Marianna about this. I don't know what other people thought socialism in the region was, but it certainly wasn't the socialism that I was interested in when I was young, taking part in marches and engaging in left politics. I think we need to ask what the big shifts in the history of different parts of the region are, when they took place and in relation to what different problems. They do not necessarily follow the conventional pattern of Soviet or Russian history. This revision had already begun before the Russian war against Ukraine, but certainly the war has propelled the question of "what happened, when, and where" to the top of the research agenda.

The other point I want to make is that I hope one consequence of the war will be to refocus the academic effort on analyzing, and perhaps even helping solve, the "big" problems. I have been struck by how reluctant some younger scholars are to address the life-changing and global issues affecting people across the region, preferring to replicate some of the more marginal or esoteric research in Western scholarship. When I said before that we became lazy in our scholarship over the last two, three decades, I had in mind not just the often-unquestioning application of Western models to the analysis of the transformations taking place in the various countries of the region but the choice of research topic. While Western theories have been taken up and applied uncritically by Russian scholars to the topics that interest them, Western scholars, for their part, have equally uncritically transferred their current obsessions to the Russian case. If the analysis of pop-up restaurants in Western cities is the latest research fad, then you can be sure that someone will do a doctoral dissertation on pop-up restaurants in Russia. The war against Ukraine has made obvious where we should have been focusing our attention. I admit that these comments betray my age. I came into Soviet and East European studies in the 1970s, when we weren't embarrassed about making normative judgments and using totalizing theories about the problems of injustice, poverty, and inequality.

Jeremy Morris: How will it affect the systemic aspects? Well, I think it's really unfair that we are accused of only beginning now a decolonization of area studies, of Russian studies, of teaching. This decolonization has been going on for some time. I guess the latest events, including the war in Ukraine, just accelerate the process. And so that is to be welcomed, the epistemic challenge. I think there was a concerted effort in undergraduate and postgraduate curricula to defocus—or maybe decenter would be a better term—particularly in political studies, the bias toward looking at Russia as the leader, the most important place that we should study. So that process will accelerate and rightly so. But again, I don't think we should fall into this trap

that we often see where people say: “Oh, this shows how wrong and how backward Russian studies, in particular, was.” It’s just not borne out by the evidence. So decentering will accelerate and continue. And of course, part of decentering, but not everything to do with decentering, is decolonizing, bringing in comparative and contrasting perspectives from the former imperial periphery. And again, rethinking it, not referring to it as the periphery, for example. Again, though, having said that, anybody who competently taught the history of the Orthodox Church could not have avoided the fact that, for example, Ukrainian intellectuals effectively helped shape the Russian Orthodox Church way back. So again, a little note of caution there: Accelerating this process of decolonization, but at the same time, once again, renewing the need for a comparativist approach, since we can no longer adequately understand Russian politics without looking, for example, at Ukrainian politics because of the divergence in regime type. So even though there is greater divergence, this again, I think, speaks to the need for better, more holistic comparativist work. For example, in political science—right? To understand better and contextualize better the Russian authoritarian turn, we should bring in the Ukrainian case or, as has previously been mentioned, the case of Kazakhstan now, which presents, I think, a big challenge to the existing assumptions that many political scientists had about the region. I think I will end by saying that however we answer this question, we can reveal the inherent normative biases that we always had. If we kick back, if we say, “Oh, it doesn’t affect my work,” then it’s still an opportunity for us to be a bit more reflective. There is no such thing as neutral social science. There is no such thing as neutral area studies, Russian studies, or Soviet studies. So, for me personally, the greater the military violence, war-related violence, the more it reminds me of the need to continue and insist on continuing to examine the structural violences in the region, in Ukraine and in Russia. Of course, they are overshadowed to a degree by the invasion and the war. But that’s my normative bias, right? That we’re only going to continue to have a good understanding of this region by looking at, in fact, some of the structural violences that contributed toward this war being thinkable. And so, again, ironically, I would say that we should be looking to things like feminist political economy. We should be thinking about applying those lessons more forthrightly to our regions and our countries.

Dace Dzenovska: I don’t want to take away from the singularity of the war, but I do want to place it in a broader landscape of embattlement. Before the war, Taras Fedirko and I cowrote a short piece for *Anthropology Today* (Dzenovska and Fedirko 2021), based on my earlier work on sovereignty and his on liberal journalism, suggesting that embattlement is the overarching “structure of feeling” that shapes social and political encounters in the current historical moment. We argued that in today’s Europe more and more people feel existentially threatened by the intersecting effects of climate change, war, migration, neoliberal economics, and the simultaneous pluralization and polarization of politics. Instead of pursuing a better future, individuals and groups now attempt to protect what they’ve got: from social status, civil rights, political regimes, and sovereignty to culture, dignity, and the environment.

In such conditions of embattlement, we see the emergence of a new ideology—ideology of security. For example, my colleague Volodymyr Artiukh (2022) has argued that Russia is extending security without hegemony as its “gift of empire” (Grant 2009). Sociologist Michael Mann (2003) argued the same for the United States in his book *Incoherent Empire*. I think this new ideology of security, one that legitimates imperial wars but also shapes everyday life, has quite significant epistemic consequences. It calls for relational analyses because we need to understand much more than Russian imperialism; we need to understand a relational imperial landscape. This is not a popular view in the context of the war, where the Eastern European left is criticizing the Western left for criticizing US imperialism and forgetting about Russian imperialism. It is in this context that we see a resurgence of claims for agency and sovereignty by Ukrainian scholars and activists but also, more broadly, the Eastern European left. For me, the question of what it means to claim sovereignty in a relational imperial landscape is an important political question, as well as analytical question. Critical social theorists spent decades criticizing sovereignty as a political and ethical aspiration, and now it seems to be back. But is it the same thing?

As Judith put it, we need to ask big questions. And the only way, I think, we can do that is by undertaking relational analyses. This means that we also need to re-think “area” as a historically specific but relational formation, one that allows us to ask how our research sites and lives are constituted through interactions with other times and other places.

How can the decolonization of post-Soviet studies be realized? Will the decolonization of post-Soviet studies lead to the formation of new configurations and hierarchies in the understanding of the post-Soviet space? Will it lead to erosion—or cancellation—of Russian studies?

Jeremy Morris: This will depend on confronting the power structures within all of our universities. And if we’re going to be honest, these power structures do not like change. They like things packaged in “a really easy to understand way.” So in my career, when I have tried to promote, for example, Ukrainian studies, I have absolutely failed. And this was after 2014. I had zero support from senior managers, and I had zero support from my colleagues, including Ukrainianists. And I can say this freely because it’s not at my current institution that this happened. I think we should be realistic: in realizing a project that decenters Russian studies, it’s not actually up to us, it’s up to broader and bigger forces. Well, if you go above the level of dean in any university, do they understand what Russian studies or post-Soviet studies or postsocialist studies is? No, they don’t. They don’t understand what that is. So, you have to be very, very careful. Because, when quite understandably, scholars say to me, “Why aren’t you advocating for a new job line in Ukrainian studies?” of course, I will advocate for that. But again, when people attack me personally, which they do on a daily basis, for being a representative of Russian studies, it’s like, be careful what you

wish for. Actually, by attacking Russian studies, you're just giving senior management at all universities the opportunity to cancel not Russian studies but area studies, which they would do in a heartbeat if it gave them more power to reallocate resources, which is the Soviet model of the economy of universities that we all exist in.

It also is up to students. I have to say that, unfortunately, a lot of students come with more of an imperial mindset than we accuse Russians of having. They want to study Russia because they have, rightly or wrongly, this romantic idea of the vastness, greatness, powerfulness of Russia historically. And we might want to disabuse them of that. But they are our students. They very much, at least in the part of Scandinavia that I inhabit, want to major in Russian studies and nothing else. It's very hard to make that argument—that a course on politics should look at Maidan even. What else? Generally, I think things are not bright for regional studies, despite what I said at the beginning. And this is the COVID effect. So COVID and the war seem to have accelerated decline in numbers of undergraduate students in different parts of the world. And that's something we need to address. And it may well decolonize Russian studies for us.

Dace Dzenovska: I hope that whatever “decolonization of post-Soviet studies” takes place does not follow the simplistic scenario of replacing the center with the periphery as the object of study without considering the power infrastructures of research centers themselves. Nearly every Russian and Eastern European studies research center of every major university has suddenly discovered peripheries and scholars they had forgotten about or had not paid much attention to. It is commendable, of course, but there is a risk of embracing a thin identity politics approach to decolonization underpinned by a simplistic understanding of colonial or imperial power relations as a body politics of sorts. How do imperial forms of power work in our region? Is there more than one empire at work? Does it matter that Russia and the Soviet Union were perceived as “second-order empires,” ones whose “gift of empire” was never accepted by a good many of its subjects? Whose gift of civilization are we embracing today?

I see on social media and elsewhere how quickly my Russian colleagues and friends take up a variety of subject positions through which they think they can somehow inhabit this decolonization process. The analytics they resort to are complicity, shame, collective responsibility, and more. Some of these, if not all, are borrowed directly from postcolonial studies whose object of critique was and continues to be “the West.” They are used to remake Russians and Russian studies. This is not a straightforward task. To be a bit provocative: this, too, is a way of claiming “civilization status” (not unlike Latvians who, to become European, embraced seventeenth-century Duchy of Courland's colonial history, though, unlike some contemporary Russians, they were quick to refuse guilt for colonialism [Dzenovska 2018]). There is nothing wrong with borrowing per se, but one needs to borrow critically, and this takes time. A critical approach may reveal that there is such a thing as progressive imperialism. For example, I sometimes see US students in my seminars at Oxford who think of themselves as progressive regarding a variety of issues, from politics of race to politics of gender and sexuality. However, the politics of gender pronouns are not

commonly understood by students from other parts of the world, from Pakistan to Hong Kong to Moldova. US students tend to demand that all students embrace their version of progressive politics. One might call this a form of progressive imperialism.

Judith Pallot: During the Cold War and especially during the 1960s many students choosing to take courses in Russian studies were politically motivated; they were interested in whether communism or socialism had to turn out to be as it was in the USSR. So what did they do? They went to the Soviet Union on some exchange agreement to find out for themselves. Some came back and joined the Communist Party for reasons that now are difficult to understand. I would say that the majority of academics in Soviet and East European studies were on the left, in the UK, at least. This changed after 1991, when students were motivated more by the new possibilities opening up to make money and learned Russian because all the Western companies going into Russia needed Russian specialists. That was in the heady years of the 1990s. Those days are also over. Now the question is what will attract people to study Russian language and Russian culture. This is a difficult question to answer. It is obvious that studying the country is very important. But Russian studies on its own is not considered enough. Russian studies has to be combined with Ukrainian, Georgian, Baltic, or Central Asian studies, and new programs are being developed to cater to this need. There is, I think, a danger that there will be a falloff in the number of students for Russian studies, and it's going to have the consequences that Jeremy has spoken about. In the UK, posts in Russian studies that fall vacant are being replaced by Ukrainian or Central Asian posts. This is a matter of concern for research. Dace's point about relational research is relevant, not least because we now know what Russia is capable of in terms of endangering its neighbors. We need to remember that the relationships between the successor states of the USSR are going to shape the future of the broader region. On the point about decolonization of post-Soviet studies, much, in my view, depends on scholars in Russia. It is not up to us in the West to tell them how to decolonize their scholarship. They need to take the lead in decentering research across all disciplines. I am shocked and a little bit dismayed by, if you like, the lack of understanding about the need for this that appears to exist in the Russian academic community. Last November, there was the International Saint Petersburg Historical Forum. Western scholars, with a few exceptions, expressed their opposition to the war by not attending, but large numbers of delegates from across Russia and from Russia's allies did. Among them were some of the most serious, respected Russian historians who ended up sharing this conference with some of the most odious pro-war "scholars" funded by the Russian government, including the Federal Security Service (FSB). The conference did raise the question of Western boycotts, especially as one of the invited keynote speakers who did attend was a very prominent Western academic whose presence could be interpreted at the least as legitimizing the "let's carry on as normal" approach. I could not understand what this colleague was playing at. Marianna made a point about keeping bridges open. This is all very well, but we've got to do that without being naive and shutting our eyes to the state capture of academia in Russia, which I think many Western scholars engaged with Russia in the last couple of

decades have chosen to ignore. At some point, the time will come to start rebuilding networks destroyed on February 24, 2022, but that time isn't now while bombs are dropping on Ukraine and killing people.

Marianna Muravyeva: I would ask a slightly different question: Does post-Soviet studies need to decolonize? It seems to me that the genuine decolonization effort can only come from within, that is from the inside. When Western academia calls upon what they label as area studies to decolonize, they mainly think of themselves and their own issues. Or, at least, they should. From an inside point of view: if we decolonize post-Soviet studies, what is the end goal of this decolonization besides talking about it? It's not deterioration of regional studies. It's not any substitution of Russian studies by Ukrainian studies. Moreover, the term "area or regional studies" is in itself a colonial definition of the colonized who happily embrace it. As a scholar, I do not identify with any "regional studies": I am a legal and gender scholar with a specialization in gender-based violence. I happen to study Russia and other post-Soviet contexts at the moment due to the need for research of legal reform. Any UK or US scholar with similar specialization who does exactly the same is not called an American studies scholar; we call them legal or gender or sociology or social work researchers. That we (scholars from Russia or other countries in the region) were forced to embrace the "regional studies" label shows an enormous potential for decolonization.

If we look at Latin American or African experiences of decolonization, their process included the search for their authentic, precolonial experiences. They were fighting the imperial metropole and taking active stance in their own liberation from colonialism. What are we going to do with the decolonization of post-Soviet studies? What are we decolonizing from? In the case of any post-Soviet state, they at least get decolonized from the Soviet. They have that potential. But there was the Russian Empire before that, so every other territory except for the core Russia can at least search for pre-imperial experiences (and, in fact, that's what all of the post-Soviet states have been doing). But then: What are the Russians going to do? They are going to decolonize from themselves. It's a great path to take, but then one has to be really careful how they carry out that process. I agree with Dace here that all projects of decolonization are in themselves colonizing. I have always argued that any type of regional studies, be it African, Latin American, or Eurasian/Russia/post-Soviet/whatever studies, is a restrictive colonial framework. And from this point of view, for the outsiders it is much more convenient in terms of organization, management, resources, and neoliberal institutionalization to dump everything not related to the core national studies in big chunks and forget about them until the next war. Here at the University of Helsinki Ukrainian studies program was canceled last spring, because there were not only not enough students but also not enough scholars specializing in Ukraine who could comfortably teach specialized courses. So it's not sustainable. The Aleksanteri Institute's Master's Programme in Russian Studies (MARS) was turned into MAREEES (Master's Programme in Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Studies). And we all debated whether we have enough expertise to actually go beyond Russia. Because everybody who teaches in that program, of course, is a

specialist on some aspect of Russia and its development, but lacks expertise to teach beyond it, with one exception.

Therefore, the debate on the need and possibility of decolonization of post-Soviet studies happening outside of the post-Soviet region facilitates an unequal power relationship between Western and local academies. They have different and very distinct agendas. Right now, it seems that Russian “studies” can be cancelled: it is not a Russian problem, it is a problem for the Western institutions to deal with. As scholars from Russia do not think of themselves as Russian studies scholars, this would have no dramatic impact on them, only on those who are at academic institutions in the West. However, it does not seem to be a problem for American institutions either: they have successfully announced and filled old and new positions in Russia-related disciplines (historians and political scientists mostly) in the past months, double the number of annual openings before February 2022. What does it tell us? It takes a war to remind Americans what is important and who the enemy is.

How does the current crisis fit within or expand the scope of post-Soviet studies and its traditional subjects?

Jeremy Morris: So again, the challenge here is really interesting. If we look beyond our immediate colleagues, we see who is dominating the debate. It is mainstream political scientists and international relations scholars who are dominating in the public debate and saying things like, “This is a classic geopolitical confrontation,” blah, blah, blah. You have the hawkish side that says the US hegemony didn’t come down hard enough, early enough on Putin. You have the dovish side that says: “Oh, Russia has legitimate influence.” What gets lost, of course, is Ukraine’s agency and Ukrainian voices. So, the current crisis, as I’ve said before, absolutely perfectly fits the agenda of whatever version of area studies or regional studies or whatever you want to call it you subscribe to. We should be looking at, we should be championing the scholars who have evidence, have strong arguments about the roots of this war and invasion in the domestic problems, legacies, challenges of the two countries, particularly Russia. So, holism again. What was it in Russian society, history, and politics in the 1990s that led to the capture of the regime by security interests that were prepared to unleash war on their neighbor, for example. So that’s how I think it does speak to its traditional subjects very, very strongly. And again, we have an obligation to counter these, if I may say, facile interventions from international relations and political science.

Dace Dzenovska: Recently, one American policymaker said something along the lines of “this is a war that affects the world,” which is, I suppose, another way of saying that this is a world war. This is true. Like the Cold War, the Russo-Ukrainian war is affecting many more places than our immediate neighborhood. And we can—and should—also inquire into these processes in addition to, as Jeremy said, giving the front and center stage to people who are close to the ground, that is, close to the

battleground. Speaking from somewhere between the United Kingdom and Latvia, I see a rather disturbing closure of critical spaces. I see that many questions can no longer be asked legitimately (for example, about the co-constitution of American and Russian forms of imperialism or about Latvia's treatment of residents who hold Russian citizenship). There is a radical polarization: you are either with us or against us. This is justified by the fact that "we are at war," which is meant to say that there is no gray, only black and white. But there is always gray. And these are not even very radical questions to ask. In this sense, I see that the scope of post-Soviet studies is narrowing rather than expanding.

Marianna Muravyeva: I agree with both of you, Jeremy and Dace. First, in a sense that the current aggression against Ukraine, which started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, occupies a large part in all these discussions and debates. They actually reaffirm post-Soviet studies; they reaffirm the traditional subjects of study, too. I agree totally with Jeremy that the central stage once again belongs to mainstream political scientists and international relations experts. However, these experts often cater to think tanks and have a very particular agenda in their approach to international politics, political situation, geopolitics, et cetera. It is their domination of expertise that returns post-Soviet studies to the very traditional Soviet studies or, rather, Sovietology. Therefore, even those "nontraditional" subjects and themes that attempted to become part of area studies in the first decade of the 2000s were put aside in favor of hard-core traditional neoliberal politics. You know, nobody (among these domineering experts) is using feminist foreign policy analysis in application to the war in Ukraine. But everybody uses traditional foreign policy approach and standard international law "talk" to call for prosecution of, for example, war crimes. Nobody's interested in feminist analysis of nuclear policy. Everybody's using a very traditional way to talk about the war: men talk to men over women's heads even when it involves human rights of women and sexual violence. I don't see that changing. The so-called expertise as well as research on the region from "the outside" is still dominated by traditional patriarchal organization of knowledge. This is not to say that other approaches or interpretations do not exist; they do, very much so. But this is to say that the war and think tank experts put an effective hold on any further mainstreaming of, for example, feminist approaches and interpretations of war and conflict as their critical thinking potential does not fit with the patriarchal agenda of international politics.

Judith Pallot: I think this is as strange way to approach the question, because it assumes something good will come out of the war. It well might, but at a price of human lives and destruction that is not worth paying. I agree with everybody on this. The war against Ukraine has propelled us back to the priorities of the Cold War era, when scholars in European countries spent much of their time using good empirical research, knowledge of the language, and taking what Jeremy is calling a holistic approach, to critique how oversimplified the official and popular discourse about the Soviet Union was on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This is what I think the role of the outside observer of Russia's war against Ukraine should be now. We must, though, be careful

about comparing the Cold War with today's crisis in area studies. A striking feature of some, fortunately a minority, of Western scholarship is how it is using the Russian war against Ukraine to critique Western democracy: this, to say the least, misses the point of the illegality and inhumanity of Russia's invasion. The war is having an impact on disciplines across the board. Area studies specialists have an important role to play, as they always have, in complicating simple assumptions and black-and-white conclusions that often characterize the arguments of experts from individual, narrowly defined disciplines. So, on this this issue, I agree with everybody.

Has the compromise of uncritical borrowing of Western theories been useful? Should researchers of post-Soviet transformations learn to theorize on their own? Can they be competitive in the international academic arena?

Judith Pallot: Can I give a very quick answer? Of course, area studies scholars can be competitive in their theorizations in the international arena, but there isn't a single body of area studies theory waiting to be developed. Most academics in most disciplines are involved in puzzle-solving, drawing on existing theorizations, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in that. During the Cold War, scholars on both sides of the divide were engaged in debating Marxism, and I regret that the insights that were generated by that debate were lost overnight with the collapse of communism. It seems to me that we are entering a period of active theoretical debate again as we try to figure out Russia. And area studies scholars, with the knowledge of the country's languages, histories, geographies, and cultures, are best placed to make some headway to coming up with some answers.

Marianna Muravyeva: It was exciting to be a history student in late 1980s–early 1990s. I had a pretty interesting experience watching my professors deconstruct together with the “party line.” And being a history student was also challenging in those days. But I owe everything to these times, when the one correct theory we knew—Marxism—was criticized and debunked, and we were allowed to do that without any consequences. It was also exciting to be a student during a reform of the education system, when our professors were coming up with new theoretical frameworks as a result of letting go of Marxism. I remember how Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (“The Decline of Europe” in Russian translation) and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* became part of our reading and slowly substituted Marxist “formations” with “civilizations” in our theoretical training, to which Samuel Huntington added his theory of the “clash.” And everybody was so into the concept of mentalité that came from the French historical and philosophical tradition. It became immensely popular not just among historians and philosophers but also among the intellectual public. For example, for people such as Aleksandr Dugin, Huntington's framework provided a necessary key argument in his fantasy of fighting the US hegemony. Was it borrowing Western theories? Or was it, as we thought at the time, being part of the European intellectual community?

When in our gender studies community we had this discussion about theories, I think it was 20 years ago (it was published in one of the issues of *Gender Studies Journal* based in Kharkiv), we were focused precisely on this question: Should we follow Western theories? Should we come up with our own authentic theory of gender relations? Should we borrow the word “gender” from English and use “gender” as a concept? Or should we reject it and go back to the terminology of “sex” or whatever, to the sexual dichotomy. My opinion was that if it was a good theory, then why did it matter where it came from. I still don’t care where a theory comes from, period. However, I have noticed with time that all of them started coming from the West, in particular from either the US or UK contexts. Many scholars from the region, especially those who speak English, embraced the so-called Western standards (read Anglo-American) to get access to the academic market: publications, scholarships, jobs. And in this institutionally sponsored rush to join the world, they got lost in the competition. The problem here is a problem of choice, the way you are pushed to use certain theories. If scholars choose to publish in their own languages, within their own academic community, it is a very different type of writing, and also very different ways of theorizing are used. Nothing prevents scholars from theorizing at micro and mesa levels, while interpreting their data and following their hypotheses and research questions. But if you are in Russia, you follow and reference your own scholars; it is *mauvais ton* to ignore your colleagues by citing foreign scholarship. But that’s how you know what audiences people cater to. It happens quite a lot in gender studies, for example, that Russian scholars prefer to ignore their own. Is it an indication of colonial behavior? Absolutely. In Madina Tlostanova’s answer to a famous question, the post-Soviet cannot think. What we have is a canon in each discipline, and unfortunately that canon is mostly produced by the English-language scholarship. Today, though, the English-language scholarship is very different from even 20 years ago: it is not homogenous, and it is very diverse. So there are no problems with theories, but we need to decide ourselves which canon we go with.

Dace Dzenovska: Let’s not even talk about “big theory.” Let’s talk about analytical insights that are relevant beyond our specific context. Either way, an important dimension of theorizing is being recognized as such. As Marianna asked, How are theories or analytics recognized as being innovative and worthy interventions? There are institutional politics and citation practices behind our ability to recognize theories and analytics. It’s not that researchers of/from post-Soviet worlds (or the Global South, for that matter) do not theorize; the question is: Do these theories reach us, and if not, why not?

That said, there are conditions that are more—or less—conducive to theorizing. This morning, trying to help my daughter with her English essay, I reread Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own.” I couldn’t say it better: “give £500 a year and a room of one’s own.” Obviously, the sum should be read symbolically. . . In 2010, Latvian sociologists published a volume reflecting on the discipline of sociology in Latvia (Tisenkopfs 2010). Some of the contributors noted that in the 1990s Latvia’s sociologists “turned off theory” and went to work for the United Nations Development Pro-

gram, the Soros Foundation, and other such institutions, because sociology needed to sustain itself as a discipline and, well, sociologists needed to support themselves and their families. That meant that they were providing data for Western theories rather than theorizing themselves. Just recently, a colleague submitted an article for a special journal issue that I am coediting, where she reflects on being a Ukrainian scholar hired by an international NGO and sent to the frontline communities in Donbas to gather data on “vulnerable communities.” In the article, she criticizes such conceptualization of frontline communities as apolitical (Ryabchuk 2023). Funding still shapes research in our region to a great extent. Breaking out of that and connecting to knowledge practices in another way are still a challenge for a lot of people in the region. My colleagues at the University of Latvia work in five jobs to be able to pay their bills. For most, the only way to be competitive is to migrate to better-funded research settings.

Jeremy Morris: In answering this question I would focus on platforms, on creating alternative and new spaces open to collaborating and publishing and writing as a way of overcoming what we know are the problems. This roundtable is sponsored by the journal *Laboratorium*. Why not make provocation and say: “I love all articles in *Laboratorium*, but what authors tend not to do is engage in the broader theoretization and not just focus on the region.” It doesn’t have to be *Laboratorium*; it can be anybody. People and publications should be encouraged to take more risks in thinking and writing. I would really welcome that.

I would encourage young authors to problematize theories and to send their articles to the top disciplinary journals. Younger scholars easily move within different scholarly languages. They can beat disciplines. Two positive points: we can create better space to theorize, and we can encourage each other to fight back structural constraints that exist.

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