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## Viewpoint

## Making sense of (the Russian war in) Ukraine: On the politics of knowledge and expertise

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The 2022 Russian invasion has led to unprecedented public and political attention to all things Ukrainian. In this intervention, we contend that critical geographic scholarship about Eastern Europe remains wanting and that the recent attention to Ukraine may reproduce and perhaps even exacerbate entrenched perspectives. If we are to overcome the lopsided politics of knowledge and expertise about Ukraine and the wider region, underlying biases should be taken seriously in the current debates about the war. We write in solidarity with people in Ukraine affected by the war, and with those facing repression for anti-war activities elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, we briefly revisit the problematic coverage of Ukraine in popular media and reflect on the conditions and patterns of knowledge production on Ukraine and the war in academic geography. We conclude by offering some thoughts on the possibility of decolonizing geographic knowledge production in this context.

Unsurprisingly, past international interest in Ukraine is eclipsed by the recent surge of public attention and media coverage due to the 2022 war. According to *Google Trends* searches containing the word “ukraine” over the past 18 years, international attention to Ukraine has surged twice: first after the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and much stronger in February 2022 (Fig. 1). Looking at Ukraine mainly through the lens of war and conflict, however, raises the risk of seeing and making sense of Ukraine through a narrow set of perspectives while marginalizing others.

Monochromatic views of Ukraine have already led to questionable representations in the wake of the Euromaidan, the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in the Donbas in 2013/14. Many Western news agencies were not well equipped to cover these events as few had Ukraine-based offices or correspondents (Fengler et al., 2020), and to the best of our knowledge, this remains true at present. Marta Dyczok (2016) finds that many

reports about the 2014 events presented “dramatic”, “sensational” and partly “confused” images, and fewer “delved deeper into the underlying issues, questions, and evidence that might help shed light on the story” (p. 191). Simplistic frames such as that of a new Cold War eventually “led to Ukraine increasingly being represented as an object of a power struggle between Russia and the US/EU, rather than an independent subject of international affairs” (p. 192).

Problematic representations have become further entrenched in the wake of Russia’s 2022 war. For instance, media narratives which depicted Ukraine as “civilized” and white in contrast to other contemporary contexts of war have rightly been rejected as racist. Labelling such representations as simply Eurocentric, however, misses that Ukraine does not hold a stable or unambiguous place in European or Western imaginaries (Khromeychuk, 2022b; Lyubchenko, 2022; Plokyh, 2015). Before Russia’s recent invasion, but also before the 2013/14 events, Ukraine had rarely been represented as a “European” country (Tkachenko et al., 2021). More often than not, media coverage and popular discourses have reduced Ukraine to a corrupt state run by a cabal of criminal elites, shored up by a politically divided civil society. Since the start of the current Russian invasion, the usual representation of Ukraine as a source of “cheap labour force for construction, agriculture, care work, and sex service for first-class Western and Russian citizens” (Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik, 2021, p. 126) has been complemented with images of helpless children and mothers dependent on Western benevolence, and of heroic freedom fighters (for problems with the latter see Khromeychuk, 2022a).

Academic geography is no exception to the lopsided politics of knowledge about Ukraine and the wider Eastern European and Central Asian region. Elena Trubina et al. (2020) analyse the affiliation patterns of authors, editors and board members of 22 leading English-language human geography journals from 1991 to 2017 and find a massive

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<sup>1</sup> Both of us speak Russian and have various ties (family, friends, activism, research) with the region, including in both Ukraine and Russia.

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underrepresentation of Eastern European and former Soviet countries.<sup>2</sup> Out of 27,189 total author affiliations over this period, six (0.02%) were Ukrainian, while one was Belarusian and 27 Russian. Scholars of Ukrainian origin who work at foreign universities do not appear as affiliated with Ukraine in this count, of course. *Political Geography*, according to this dataset, has not published a single contribution by an author with a Ukrainian affiliation in these 27 years. Before the launch of this Virtual Forum, only one article in this journal, published in 1999, carries *ukrain\** in the title or keywords, and six more articles have the term in the abstract. To be sure, there are specialized Anglophone journals with a regional focus, with *Eurasian Geography and Economics* leading geographical scholarship in this regard with 64 titles including *ukrain\** between 1991 and 2021. But generally speaking, Ukraine and the broader post-Soviet region have largely remained blind spots in political geography thus far. To some extent, the entire region is underrepresented (Tlostanova, 2015; Trubina et al., 2020) in Anglophone journals due to “linguistic privilege” (Müller, 2021), barriers to journal access for readers and authors, and other factors. At the same time, a “Russian-centric view of eastern Europe” (Khromeychuk, 2022a, see also Kuzio, 2018) prevails in public debates, media representations, and academic scholarship.

We emphasize these points because it matters a great deal that certain voices and topics have been largely absent from the public and academic platforms on which important discussions on Ukraine and the war are being and will be staged. We agree with Lizotte et al., Murphy, and others in this forum that political geographers can make important contributions to these conversations, not least because geographers are well-versed in taking regional expertise and context-specific complexities seriously. To us, however, this implies a need to acknowledge and glean lessons from past omissions and confront those institutional arrangements and practices through which they persist. Otherwise, geographers risk reproducing exclusionary practices, self-referential debates and generalist rather than context-sensitive knowledge. The remainder of this essay reflects on such risks and how they can be addressed.

Since the beginning of the invasion, scholars and activists from Eastern Europe have called out analyses which ignore Ukrainian perspectives, experiences and expertise, and thereby perpetuate a Western-centric politics of knowledge about the region (Artiukh, 2022; Bilous, 2022; Smoleński & Dutkiewicz, 2022). Ukrainian voices remain underrepresented in public and academic debates (Khromeychuk, 2022b) while there is a tendency to foreground certain perspectives and ignore others. Much criticism has been directed toward realist positions in International Relations and Geopolitics, and those on the anti-imperialist left who continue overlooking, if not denying Ukrainian historical experiences, Russian imperialist history (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022),

the colonial nature of Russian-Ukrainian relations (Snyder, 2022), Ukraine’s struggle for democratization and Ukrainian voices. Some not only render Ukrainian and other Eastern European perspectives irrelevant but also instrumentalize the war to further their agenda. Francis Fukuyama (2022), for instance, took the opportunity to double down on his infamous claim about the triumph of liberalism, stating that a “Russian defeat will make possible a ‘new birth of freedom’ ... The spirit of 1989 will live on, thanks to a bunch of brave Ukrainians.”

The point, of course, is not to suggest that only voices from the region are qualified to comment on the war. We argue, however, that current debates should start from seriously engaging with and learning from different perspectives and various kinds of expertise held by scholars and activists with profound knowledge of, or ties to Ukraine and the region. Our call should resonate with decolonial debates in Anglophone geography and post-colonial studies, which have raised critical questions about geographic knowledge production and its institutional conditions (Noxolo, 2017). Lindsay Naylor et al. (2018, p. 201) suggest that “[t]hrough a decolonial lens we can offer multiple readings and many representations, and the practices, performances, and ways of knowing and understanding the world can be re-inscribed”. We believe that decolonial perspectives can inform present debates about the politics of knowledge concerning Ukraine. However, decolonial thought stemming from contexts with a Western (settler) colonial history does not offer blueprints that could be simply applied to Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Translation between these different contexts and the debates and perspective emerging from them is needed. There are dialogues between postsocialist and postcolonial perspectives to build on here (Boatcă, 2013; Chari & Verdery, 2009; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), including recent contributions that explicitly address the experiences, difficulties and practical complexities of such dialogues (Karkov & Valiavicharska, 2018; Koobak et al., 2021).

Ultimately, we agree with Olesya Khromeychuk (2022b, p. 29) that a “permanent alteration – decolonisation, de-imperialisation – of our knowledge” is needed. Necessary transformations then go beyond representational questions in a narrow sense and require the decolonisation of “structures, institutions and praxis” (Esson et al., 2017, p. 384) – the very conditions of knowledge production. Representational issues will not be resolved by simply publishing more content on Ukraine while keeping existing conditions of knowledge production intact. Key obstacles here include a relative lack of regional expertise institutionalized in study programs and embodied in supervisors and reviewers, language barriers, and a dearth of collective and institutional efforts toward structural changes. Political geography is in need of Ukrainian voices, but this requires forms of funding which go beyond emergency funds, and forms of dialogue which go beyond occasional invitations to current debates to make sense of the war. New forms of learning, exchange and

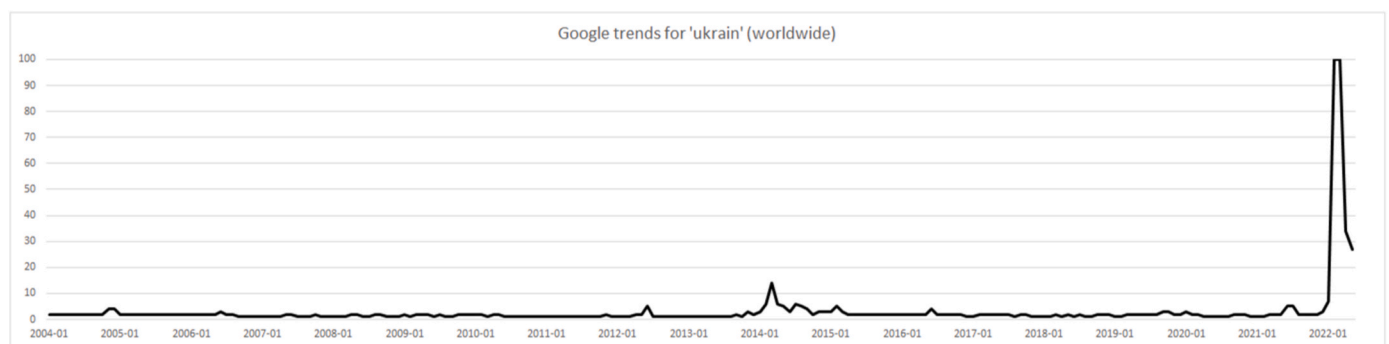


Fig. 1. Google Trends searches for ‘ukraine’ plotted relative to the keyword’s peak (100%).

collaboration will be needed to counter the lopsided politics of knowledge and expertise from and about Ukraine and the wider region.

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