

# IN SEARCH OF SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE GLOBAL EAST AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

by **Birgit Poopuu** and **Benjamin Klasche**

Over the past four years, we have focused closely on imperial violence and how people respond to it. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought imperialism back to Europe and to the forefront of the consciousness of the people living there. After the invasion, we too provided analysis and taught about the postcolonial moment in the East'. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where we are based, Russia's colonial and imperial ambitions have long been clear. Along with this knowledge came also strong criticism of Western Europe for failing to recognize them. Then came Hamas' assault on Israeli military bases and communities on October 7, 2024 and the subsequent violence of Israel directed at all inhabitants of Gaza. Many genocide studies scholars and international NGOs, including Human Rights Watch and the Israeli organization B'Tselem, have classified Israel's response as genocide. Some have even stated that it is a "textbook case of genocide."<sup>2</sup> Yet, pointing towards this colonial history and placing Hamas' actions in the context of decades-long Israeli oppression and "slow" genocide, attracted a lot of criticism. We have also pushed for seeing both Ukraine and Palestine in relation to each other as "interconnected and comparable in critical respects [...] where powerful states seize territory, erase subaltern identities, and deny national and minority rights".<sup>3</sup>

**GIVEN THESE** realities of imperialism and settler-colonialism ravaging Ukrainian and Palestinian communities, we were surprised to find that there was not just very little solidarity for Palestinians in Europe and the West, but also that there was very little solidarity for Ukrainians in the Global South (GS), a region fluent in iden-



Keynote speakers: Nivi Manchanda and Madina Tlostanova at the opening of the conference.

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**Organizers:** Birgit Poopuu, Benjamin Klasche and Timothy Anderson, School of Governance, and Law and Society, Tallinn University. The CEEShub (Central and Eastern European Security Hub) is a research center at Tallinn University, with

the aim of widening the security debates in CEE and uplifting new knowledge producers while increasing the capacity for evidence-informed policy making.

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tifying colonial violence. The lack of solidarity is evident, for example, in voting at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) over the last few years, where the G77 did not condemn Russian actions.<sup>4</sup> It begs the question of whether this is perhaps connected to the ambivalence of Ukraine towards the fate of the Palestinians and others in the Global South. Clearly, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's position is not ambivalent as he is openly aspiring to turn Ukraine into "Big Israel".<sup>5</sup> The fondness of Israel in Central and Eastern Europe is, of course, not limited to Ukraine, as the Estonian government just celebrated the opening of the Israeli embassy in Estonia. Estonian politicians routinely compare the country's situation

with that of Israel – a democratic state threatened by an overwhelmingly large and hostile neighbor with imperial goals (Russia and the Arab world in this analogy). It has never made sense to us how many governments in Central and Eastern Europe were able to so pointedly identify Russian past and present aggressions as colonial and imperial in nature, but failed to see Israel's settler colonial project in the Levant.

## The absence of solidarity

Naturally, the Global South has found itself quite comfortable in a rather "neutral" position towards Russia, while Ukraine has traditionally paid little to no attention to the Global South.<sup>6</sup> Yet even

more surprisingly, we saw that this divide was also present in academic debates, where scholars from the Global South denied their solidarity with Ukrainians because of their perceived privileges, and similarly, very few Ukrainian scholars used their platforms to advocate for the anti-colonial struggles of the South. Exceptions to these positions confirm the rule. It was this conundrum, the reluctance to see “other” oppressed, that led us to start thinking about the conference theme. We were further propelled by the notion of the Global East (GE), most prominently put forth in Martin Müller’s article *In Search for the Global East: Thinking Between North and South?* in which he asks for strategic essentializing of the Global East to allow countries of the post-soviet space to escape its pertinent “in-betweenness” between North and South due to the fact that they are “too rich to be in the South, too poor to be in the North”. You might ask: Where is the Global East? But Müller importantly notes that the important question is not where, but what it is. He calls it “slippery, hard to categorize” as it “contains colonizers and colonies, aggressors and victims; [and] some countries were both at the same time.” Therefore, the Global East needs to be unpacked in a contextual way, and the essentializing refers to the importance of creating knowledge from the GE, and we further call for the distinguishing of the language of the political elite and many other groups who are more attentive to the risks of buddying up to the imperial project of the US.<sup>8</sup>

**BUT IT IS NOT** just that Soviet modernity is harder to grasp and less coherent; it is also that much less is known about it. The brutal colonial crimes of Western Europeans have created a Global South that has waged an incredible fight to create more visibility about its struggles in global centers of power. On the other hand, the Global East has almost no representation; it remains unknown - it is a silent bystander and has yet to make its perspectives known in global politics. This led to the comfortable myth of viewing the “Soviet Utopia” as a great alternative to US imperial violence. But this negates the experi-

ences of peoples of the Global East that have been violently occupied, repressed and brutalized by the Soviet empire and want to “leave” it badly and join the West without adequate criticism of the project. Perhaps this is where we find the root of the lack of solidarity between the Global South and the East? In our view, a confident Global East can push back against the West’s claims to universality and stand with the Global South in its long-running struggle over whose knowledge counts. Using the Global East as a method can “push towards an analysis of global connections and a decentering of knowledge production...It helps us avoid hemispheric binaries of rich and poor, powerful and powerless when thinking of the global”<sup>9</sup>. This matters because empires often manipulate the oppressed and turn them against one another. For many people, being trapped between two forms of power is an everyday reality. Again, we need to be able to hold the complexity of the notion that the Soviet Union brutalized the GE region and its people while it at the same time sided in solidarity with whoever happens to be on the other side of the US imperial project.

### **The Western gaze on Eastern Europe**

The conference was not only about the connection of the two regions but about viewing security differently – a core theme of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub (CEEShub). Security has been at the center of European political discourse since 2022, yet it has also revealed enduring hierarchies in whose security is prioritized and who is authorized to “speak security”. While the visibility of Central and Eastern European (CEE) actors has increased, dominant frameworks continue to center Western insti-

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tutions and state elites, sidelining other voices. This is where the lack of epistemic power also carries over into the lack of agency assigned to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which are either demoted by Western geopolitical thinkers to buffer zones or seen as an “Empty Steppe”<sup>10</sup> or *Bloodlands*<sup>11</sup> filled with disposable humans. Recently, a special issue discussing Ivan Kalmar’s book *White but not Quite. Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt* carefully interrogates how the people in the East have been variously racialized and, owing to that, abused by different powerful actors from the West and by the imperial project in the region (then the Soviet Union, now Russia). For instance, the *Western gaze*, as Lewicki argues<sup>12</sup>, has created stereotypical caricatures of Eastern Europeans so that they can be easily abused (e.g., cheap labor and human trafficking) and can be subject to civilizational projects as they are always seen as “not yet European enough”.

The CEEShub has been actively working towards strengthening the CEE agency by highlighting its epistemic power by centering knowledge from the region, especially by pointing to the marginalized and their experience. This is, of course, the theme the Global South is only too familiar with. These patterns echo broader dynamics across both the Global East and Global South, where lived experiences are often excluded from official security discourse. In places like Palestine and Syria, discourses that render civilians expendable remind us that security does not mean the same thing to everyone – and is not always experienced as safety. Our conference began from that shared terrain of marginalization to ask: how can we rethink security relationally – and from in-between spaces of knowledge and power?

### **Anti-colonial solidarity**

Embracing the themes above, this conference offered a space to think through how our conceptualization of security changes once we start from a position of anti-colonial solidarity. Or as we put it: when we inhabit a space “in between peripheries”. What changes in the way we think of security when we resist treating CEE as an exceptional case and instead situate it

within global structures of inequality, militarization, and securitization, alongside the Global South? We did not aim to flatten differences, but rather to carefully consider which privileges we hold and to what extent our security analyses resonate, if at all. We envisioned this conference to bring together thinkers from/on/ in CEE and the Global South to understand each other's lived experiences and oppressions, and to extend solidarity. We set out to create a space where we can safely start this conversation and think together.

### Postsocialism and postcolonialism

Next to the open call addressed to a variety of scholarly communities, we actively attempted to guide the discussion towards debate and ultimately solidarity between the Global South and East by inviting keynote speakers broadly representing anti-colonial thinking in both spheres. First, we reached out to Professor Nivi Manchanda for her pathbreaking work on theorizing the role of race in security studies. In her writing, she asks “whether an anti-racist (sub)discipline is possible, and what strategies might tackle, and ultimately overturn, the racialized logics at the core of security studies”<sup>13</sup>. She also critically asks us to think about security from the margins, arguing that we need to “pivot towards the movements, the actors and the events that are shaping and challenging the contemporary security landscape.”<sup>14</sup> This is very much in line with the CEEShub's critical-relational project. To “represent” the Global East, we turned to Professor Madina Tlostanova, who, in many ways, is one of the only scholars in the region centers on exploring coloniality in the post-Soviet space. Her exploration of the relationship between postsocialism and postcolonialism has offered some insights into why there is no solidarity between these spaces. She highlights, for example, that the Anglocentrism of postcolonial theory and the uneasiness of postcommunist thinkers to embrace the anti-capitalist and neo-Marxist critique that is inherent to postcolonial theory complicate intellectual and material solidarity. She further lays open the struggles of the Global East as a space emerging from defeatism and

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feelings of backwardness; and yet calls attention to the inadequateness of both postcolonialism and postsocialism to express a universal experience across these spaces but that all differences and local peculiarities considered, she asserts that “there is a lot in the experience of the ex-second and ex-third worlds that allows for a meaningful dialogue and joined agency in the future”.<sup>15</sup>

**WE IMAGINED** it might be difficult to come together and start conversations that have not been happening so far. During the conference, we noticed that rather than engaging with one another's positions, participants appeared to speak past one another or remain narrowly focused on struggles within their immediate contexts. Overall, rather than taking the sometimes-difficult steps required to imagine solidarity between the Global East and the South, there was a marked tendency to remain enclosed in the familiar narrative of one's own struggle and to elevate it. Often, the panels were visited by like-minded people, and there was a certain reluctance to meet and listen. We noticed that participants were at times still constrained by their positionalities and found it difficult to extend understanding. Hence, the opening and closing sessions were particularly tense, as the “two sides” appeared to encounter each other for what seemed almost for the first time. Nevertheless, there were clear indications of listening and learning. At the same time, fundamental disagreements on certain issues were openly expressed, which occasionally created discomfort among participants. This can nonetheless be considered a significant achievement of the conference, as it compelled scholars to step outside

their academic bubbles and engage in dialogue with one another. For instance, one participant admitted that “the conference was deeply illuminating for me, especially on the topic of Ukraine”. It felt uncomfortable at times, but all change is grounded in these feelings.

### Epistemic violence

This matches patterns of engagement similar to those that have played out on recent scholarly platforms. Scholars from CEE have positioned themselves against the West's ignorance, erasure and epistemic violence.<sup>16</sup> Yet this is often done without deeper questions about colonial and imperial erasure elsewhere. At times, it seems the Global East has newly discovered the very real coloniality of the West against them, but an important analytical frame tends to be missing: the need to connect this discussion to the West's ongoing coloniality *vis-à-vis* the Global South. It is our suspicion that this situation is a product of not considering the role of whiteness or even white supremacy. What we mean is that questions about how and when the Global East has benefited from the global colonial structure, and what this means in relation to past and present violence in world politics, are usually not considered. Lewicki suggests the question of “what is [the CEE country's] relationship to Whiteness?” needs to be probed beyond prejudices and across histories of racism.<sup>17</sup> Further, the Global East has attempted to find fault with the Global South's project, either by citing its poor track record of extending solidarity to the GE or by pointing to its problematic relationship with the Soviet Union. At the same time, it is clear that there is insufficient awareness of the state-led authoritarian socialism practiced by the Soviet Union. We will now discuss these matters in turn.

**AS SOON AS** Russia's aggression took place, the West and East looked upon what they labelled African alleged mutism on the matter of Ukraine. Yet, as Siba Grovogui stresses,<sup>18</sup> the matter is much more complex and cannot be seen in an acontextual way. The West and the East cannot turn a blind eye to US imperialism and then

ask for immediate solidarity from African states when they are in a position of need. Grovogui explains this in the following way:

*Put differently, Africans are only called upon to express themselves on international relations only if and when their penchant for consistency and bluntness supports Western positions and interests. Otherwise, their views, however coherent, are disregarded and the persons and entities pronouncing them presented as nuisance. If pressed, I suspect that vast majorities of African jurists would categorically deplore Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an abomination and a crime. The crime would be the crime of aggression. The one crime that Western powers and Russia coalesced to exclude from the initial list of punishable crimes in the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court. Weren't Africans among ones that fiercely advocated that the crime of aggression be added to the Rome Statute. This inclusion finally happened in Kampala on the 20th anniversary of the treaty. Even so, barely 40 states have ratified the Kampala Amendments. The US and Russia have yet to sign the actual treaty, let alone the Kampala Amendments.*

This suggests that solidarity is difficult to emerge when it is expected only in one direction. It instead requires a shared practice of condemning crimes and impunity wherever they occur. The problem with dealing with global coloniality and the relations this entails is that for a very long time, different parties have positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* the imperial power in their neighborhood rather than staying vigilant about how the US and Russia, in concert, uphold global coloniality. Which always leads to the question: Who, at the end of the day, benefits from violence in Ukraine, Palestine, Venezuela, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Lebanon, Iran, the DRC and elsewhere?

**ANOTHER ISSUE** is that historically the Soviet Union has been positioned as an antithesis to the US imperial project and thus its politics has been romanticized and unfortunately often not studied from the point of view of those who had to live under the brutal terror and violence of this state-led socialism. The reasons for this are multiple, but two that we should carefully interrogate are: First, there is not a lot of awareness about the racialization of Eastern Europeans and the crimes and cruelty of the Soviet Union's policies<sup>19</sup>. Second, there is a refusal to critically assess why the Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements in the Global South. This was not done to offer alternatives to imperialism and colonialism but to engage in inter-imperialist struggle with the US.

### Non-arrogant perceptions

We locate a certain reluctance to listen to one another. The first keynote speaker, Madina Tlostanova, in an effort to set the stage for the conference, argued that "bottom-up transversal agency" is needed to truly think through the predicaments we are currently facing. Turning to Maria Lugones, Tlostanova gestured to her idea of a "non-arrogant perception" and invited us to relax the binarism in our gazes. Lugones's term of playful world-travel is invaluable, as it posits<sup>20</sup>:

[...] a horizontal practice of resistance to two related injunctions: the injunction for the oppressed to have our gazes fixed on the oppressor and the concomitant injunction not to look to and connect with each other in resistance to those injunctions through traveling to each other's 'worlds' of sense.


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Maria Lugones reminds us to carefully think through our complex relationality with others. Can this not be a link for a coalition of non-arrogant perceptions from the peripheries? Perhaps, from here, we can offer a critical-relational imagination of security that is curious about imperial violence in all its guises, from the perspective of the oppressed.<sup>21</sup>

The second keynote by Nivi Manchanda teased out what the privileged owe to those living under oppression and discussed "fugitive solidarity" as a critical concept that could perhaps shed light on the question many writers have asked: how should the more privileged extend solidarity? Looking at Jean Genet's experience of extending solidarity to the Black Panthers and Palestinian resistance, Manchanda offers a preliminary roadmap for how one can use their privilege to stand against the oppressors and the death worlds they have created. In this way, as Manchanda argues, Genet's praxis was characterized by refusing the borders that structured life between him and his comrades by using his white privilege against racism in the US and against the genocide of the Palestinians.

### "Between Peripheries"

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion that underlined once more that thinking through the violence we are witnessing now is uncomfortable, painful and difficult. This roundtable demonstrated quite clearly that we need to be willing to sit with uncomfortable realities and not deflect. A particular exchange that captures the work ahead and was reiterated multiple times went something like this: The audience asked: "How can we make commensurable the efforts to support Ukraine with weapon systems while the same weapon systems and the military-industrial complex that produces them are delivering these weapons to Israel to slaughter Palestinians?" And a response to this question, but also to other versions of this question, was that "I don't like that my country (Ukraine) is used to create a response to violence in Gaza." Furthermore, "Why should we rank suffering?"

**THIS EXCHANGE** illustrates how analyses of imperialism often remain tied to identifying a single culprit rather than recognizing that imperialisms exist in plural; and that they are deeply connected with each other. Further, discussions of solidarity require contextual analyses that attend to the privileges and power relations different actors hold, and to how these shape both their praxis of solidarity and their analysis of imperialism. Indeed, this dialogue clearly portrays the value of thinking about resistance and solidarity “Between Peripheries,” as the aim of our conference explicitly emphasized. The example above underscores the importance of the concept of global coloniality. It raises the question of how we can remain critical of the harms inherent in the military-industrial complex, while at the same time, with contextual nuance, analyze how this system may, in one instance, support the efforts of the oppressed groups in their struggles, and in another, stifle their cause and violently suppress them. There is an urgency to understand these dynamics if we want analyses of colonialism and imperialism that offer a more relational understanding of how they operate across spaces. This is not about creating a hierarchy of suffering; rather, it is about interrogating how the present system of militarism itself produces and solidifies such hierarchies. In other words, it is possible to recognize that oppressed peoples have the right to defend themselves in both contexts, while also acknowledging that in some cases the wider structures of global coloniality operate decisively against them. Under such conditions, resistance cannot be sustained in isolation. We therefore cannot afford security conceptualizations that leave some insecure; celebrate and analytically legitimize militarism in one context while remaining silent in another. The generative, if at times difficult, conversations at the conference showed the need to further explore the possibilities and limits of solidarity. 

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