Imperialism in Contemporary Russian Liberalism: Alexei Navalny's Rhetoric

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GABRIELE KAMINSKAITE, OCT 25 2024

On the eve of the Soviet Union collapse that marked the end of the Cold War, Balakhonov (1989, 6) famously said that "among Russians the imperial instinct is tremendously strong, and we cannot as yet imagine any form of existence other than our current empire, stretching from Brest to Vladivostok". Two decades later, in 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea, Alexei Navalny, a prominent liberal Russian opposition leader and an advocate for democratic Russia, expressed his opinion on the matter. Asked whether he would return Crimea to Ukraine if he was in power, Navalny replied he would not and asked whether Crimea is a "sandwich or something that you can take and give it back?" (The Interpreter 2014). Did Alexei Navalny's reluctance to return Crimea to Ukraine come from the Russian imperial instinct that Balakhonov (1989) warned about, and if so, what is this instinct?

These are the questions that inspired this research, but they are also particularly relevant as Russia unleashed its unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The invasion, ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, was condemned by Alexei Navalny, who was imprisoned in Russia at the time and later died in custody (Navalny 2022a). Navalny advocated for a different Russia, one that is against wars, democratic, and corruption-free. However, Navalny's statements about Crimea have called into question his commitment to the European values that he claimed to stand for, such as the respect for territorial integrity. What is more, the current literature on Navalny primarily focuses on his domestic and foreign politics (Patalakh 2018), his political success (Kolsto 2014, Dollbaum et al. 2021), and his prominent nationalist views (Laruelle 2013). Little has been said in academia whether Navalny was an imperialist. Thus, to better understand the legacy that Navalny leaves behind, a further examination is required to evaluate the reach and prominence of the imperialist discourse in his political rhetoric and the wider contemporary Russian liberalism.

This paper uses postcolonialism as its theoretical framework and, therefore, will also revive debates on the compatibility of the Second World and the postcolonial theory, which has initially excluded Russia and countries formerly under the occupation of the Soviet Union (Shokat 1992 and Said 1993). The paper defines imperialism "as the practice, theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling in a distant territory" (Said 1993, 8). Whilst imperialism takes its name from the historical empires which have acquired territories and exerted dominance over them, such acquisition was only possible when the imperial state deemed itself to be inherently superior through knowledge production (Said 1979). Thompson (2000) argues that the orientalist discourse in Russian literature allowed to Other neighbouring ethnicities, reducing them to a subhuman level. She notes subtle themes whereby indigenous communities are denied agency as they await Russia to show them civilised ways of life. These narratives legitimised Russian colonialism, and the repressions that followed. Plokhy's (2017) research argues that Russia imagines itself as the 'legitimate political, cultural, and religious successor to the medieval state of Kyivan Rus" (Plokhy 2017, 9). As a result, Russian nationhood includes both Ukrainians (Little Russians) and Belarusians (White Russians). This historical imaginary legitimises Russia's colonial war in Ukraine. Therefore, whilst imperialism manifests itself in the acquisition of territory, it also encompasses the processes that legitimise territorial acquisition, which takes multiple forms, such as cultural, knowledge, religious or economic domination (Galtung 1971).

The research questions are as follows:

- How did Alexei Navalny contribute to Russian imperialist discourse?
- In what ways is imperialist discourse present in contemporary Russian liberalism?
- What postcolonial theory can bring to the analysis of Russian imperialism?

Alexei Navalny and Russian liberalism

Before his death in 2024, Alexei Navalny was the main figure of the Russian opposition, more notably since the murder of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, another prominent liberal. Navalny, considered a conservative liberal, initially gained popularity due to his extensive work against corruption. His strong stance against corrupt oligarchs and the Kremlin, savvy use of the internet and nationalist agenda proved to be a great success across different parts of the Russian population and attracted Western attention (Kolsto 2014). Navalny advocated for creating a genuine democracy in Russia, placing ethnic Russian interests at the heart of his politics. As a result, he gathered enough followers to call mass protests in Russia and gain electoral success during his political campaigns. In 2021, Navalny survived a poisoning attempt, likely orchestrated by the Russian government. Despite this, he returned to Russia, where he was subsequently imprisoned in the same year. He remained active on social media via his political associates, communicating both in Russian and English to capture wider audiences until his untimely death on the 16th of February, 2024. It was from prison that Navalny expressed his opinions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

To understand Navalny's political rhetoric, a brief summary of the development of Russian liberalism is necessary. The individual freedoms, rule of law, property rights and middle class, the general preconditions for liberalism, were all absent in imperial Russia in the 19th century. Leontovitsch (2012) argues that whilst the essence of Western and Russian liberalism was the same, Russian liberalism lacked deep historical roots and linear domestic development compared to Western liberalism. He continues that Russian liberalism came to be adopted from the outside rather than developing internally. Chizkov (2022) also notes the peculiarities of Russian liberalism, citing the lack of a classical liberal school, the limited nature of reforms, the poor state of the legal system and general anti-legalist sentiment as key factors shaping Russian liberalism. Russian liberal foundations are, therefore, entirely different to those of the West.

As a result, contemporary Russian liberalism was built on a somewhat fragile foundation of Russian liberal philosophy, where it also had to contend with the historical tradition of imperial rule. Indeed, Brzezinski (2001) argues that long periods of subordination of Russian society through tsardom or Mongol domination have led to a lack of appetite for freedom and democracy in Russian society. However, in the post-communist period, liberal parties did emerge. Weigle (1996) identified three strands of post-communist liberalism in Russia – Statist (right-leaning), rule-of-law (centre-leaning) and social (left-leaning). The first two take a conservative stance and argue for a strong Russian state and Russian national identity. Russian national identity and the strong state are closely linked to Russian imperialism; hence, conservative liberalism inherently carries imperialist undertones (Plokhy 2017). In contrast, social liberals seek universal human rights and associate strong Russian identity sentiment with imperial legacy and interventionism. Social liberalism in Russia, however, is often attributed to Western intervention as it promotes European values (such as LGBTQ rights) that are deemed alien to Russian culture and society (Weigle 1996). Whilst conservative liberalism may appear incoherent to Western eyes due to a peculiar mix of liberal values and imperialist rhetoric, it remains the more popular liberal strand in Russia.

Post-Soviet Russian liberal parties altogether, however, have gained only marginal support in elections, and liberalism remains unpopular to the present day. In 2003, when United Russia (Putin-controlled party) won over two-thirds of the seats in the parliamentary elections, the only other parties gaining enough seats were either nationalists or communists. The leading social liberal party, Yabloko, gained just 4% of the vote. In later elections and with Putin's firm grip on power, liberal parties faded away altogether. The failure of Russian liberalism post-1990 is attributed to incompatible liberal values (Domrin 2003), post-Yeltsin liberal reforms deemed to be the key causes of corruption, failure to restart the Russian economy (Kulberg & Zimmerman 1999) and diminishing middle class to support the liberal thought (Reddaway & Glinski 2000).

The fragile foundation of Russian liberalism, centuries-long authoritarianism and the chaotic Soviet Union collapse have led to the low popularity of liberal parties. It is particularly important to highlight the lack of popularity of social

liberal parties. Social liberals are the only fraction that opposes the unique Russian culture and path of development (often attributed to imperialism) in favour of European integration. However, they have gained only marginal attention and little to no electoral success. Conservative liberals, with Navalny formerly at the lead, on the other hand, continue to be popular and remain the main serious opposition to Vladimir Putin. Conservative liberals, however, support the Great Russian culture and the strong Russian state. Thus, dominant Russian liberalism, which Navalny was part of, already appears to be somewhat tainted with imperialist sentiment at the very core. What is more, stronger support for conservative liberalism, as opposed to social liberalism, also hints at the presence of imperial sentiment across Russian society.

Russia and the postcolonial theory

Postcolonial theory focuses on the colonial legacy and argues that the contemporary world can only be understood in relation to its colonial relations of the past and present. It is primarily concerned with the political, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonialism around the world between the 18th and 20th centuries (Ling 2002 and Young 2001). The "post" in "postcolonial theory" does not suggest that colonialism has come to an end but rather that it is a continuation of the remaining legacies of Western colonisation (Gandhi 1998).

Thompson's (2000) book, the pioneering work on orientalism in Russian literature, was one of the first calls to include Eastern European theatre in postcolonial studies. It was met with considerable scepticism that permeates to this day. When Said (1979) published his seminal book that formed the basis for the postcolonial theory, it primarily focused on the colonial relations between the First and the Third Worlds. These relations are centred on overseas imperial conquests – Said (1993, 10) particularly excluded the Russian Empire from his analysis on these grounds. Shohat's (1992) mapping of colonialism in the world also targets nearly all states except the Second World – Russia and states formerly under the occupation of the Soviet Union. Eastern Europe, despite having the most durable empire of all time, was never prominently featured in postcolonial discussions until after the 1990s.

The primary hesitation in including Russia in postcolonial theory is Russia's conquering of nearby, as opposed to overseas, lands. It is the element of distance and metropole/colony distinction that has been the focus of Said's (1979) work and postcolonial theorising. Moore (2001), however, accurately points out that not only did Russia not have workable sea access to engage in overseas imperialism, but the land it did conquer was treacherous, taking much longer to advance compared to sea travel. Ironically, he continues, the distance element of postcolonialism is somewhat more applicable in the Russian case. Thompson (2014) also reminds us of British/Irish colonial relations that are rarely challenged for their adjacency but are well established in postcolonial studies. Hence, based on nearby conquest, Russia's exclusion from postcolonialism is unjustified.

Further critique is noted on the settler population movements to the colonies and the nature of rule. Post-dependency studies (a field primarily focused on the situation of Eastern Europe) note that Eastern Europe was largely dependent on the Soviet Union, but mass Russian populations were not physically relocated (Borkowska 2014). Furthermore, locals were still in charge of the local government, although Moscow made final decisions. Such an argument may hold true for countries like Poland; however, the Baltic States, for instance, were both under the rule of the Russian Empire and later fully incorporated into the Soviet Union with limited autonomy. The occupations led to mass deportations of local populations and the importation of Russians, resulting in a high number of Russian minorities present in the countries to this day. In Lithuania, for example, where the Russian population is the lowest compared to the other two Baltic countries, this was due to peculiar circumstances and local Soviet leadership – not because Lithuanian SSR was under less pressure to accept Russian populations (Tininis 2000; Kelertas 2006). This is just one illustration; however, postcolonial applications to Poland (Cavanagh 2004; Grzechnik 2019), the Baltic states (Račevskis 2002), Chechnya (Russell 2007; Hughes 2007), Hungary (Ginelli 2020), Ukraine (Grabowicz 1995; Riabchuk 2009; Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019), Belarus (Gapova, 2004; Oushakine 2013) or Czechia (Slačálek 2016) provide excellent insights into particular colonial circumstances of each state and form persuasive arguments to consider Russian imperialism through a postcolonial lens.

Finally, there is an ideological barrier to including Eastern Europe in postcolonial scholarship. Western imperialism was largely motivated by capitalism and the need for exploitative lands and subjects to sustain it (Ling 2002;

Jameson 1990). Russia, on the contrary, was largely still an agrarian state. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, it became the first Marxist state, with Lenin himself a staunch critic of imperialism and capitalism that drives it. Indeed, Marxism was a key element in postcolonial emancipation in the Third World. To declare Russia a colonial empire is to somewhat accept Marxism as complicit in the colonial expansion. Kolodziejczyk (2010) argues that Western academia is unwilling to accept this interpretation of Marxism and that this has led to the Second World being excluded from postcolonial theory. She further explains that the Western hegemonic knowledge allows this exclusion to remain and be maintained. Thompson (2014, 71) also notes that most Western academics are left-leaning, leading to "mindless carbon-copying of Western-produced descriptions of colonialism". The ideological differences and Western hegemony show considerable difficulty in bridging Eastern and Western scholars, leading to miscommunication between academia and failure to find a suitable place for the Second World in research, allowing Russian imperialism to proliferate as it launched yet another war of aggression (Khromeychuk 2022). The exclusion of Russia from postcolonial theory on ideological grounds is, therefore, not only biased and Eurocentric but also carries serious moral consequences.

Despite a few notable attempts to include Eastern Europe in postcolonial discussion, it remains largely excluded. Whilst the Russian Empire engaged in the conquest of nations, its colonial status remains debatable due to the proximity of the colonies, perceived lack of settler movement and ideological clashes with Western academia. It needs to be mentioned, however, that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought Russia's imperial character again to the forefront, although it is still too early to assess the full effect the war will have on academic debates. Malksoo (2022), for instance, defined the invasion as a postcolonial moment for Eastern Europe and Zaporozhchenko (2022) warns of a third stage of Russian Imperialism – Putin's Empire. It is yet to be seen if the invasion will pave the way for Eastern Europe's rightful place in postcolonial studies.

Theoretical framework, method and data sources

This article utilises two concepts of postcolonialism – critique of eurocentrism and orientalism to answer its research questions. Eurocentrism is an epistemological position that the world affairs revolve and are dictated by the West (Hobson, 2012). Eurocentrism emerged as a result of colonial expansion and the Enlightenment (the knowledge revolution that emerged and was formulated by white European men). Ideas of the Enlightenment, coinciding with colonial expansion, were then forced onto colonies under the pretence of European modernity (Chakrabarty 2000). Since Western colonialism conquered and dominated foreign lands, their historical narratives have also become dominant. They are and continue to be reimagined to evidence Western superiority from Ancient Greece to Pax Americana (Hobson 2007). As a result, Eurocentrism and the ideas of the Enlightenment continue to dominate modern science. The knowledge that is produced outside of the Western narratives is inferior, and, in fact, the majority of times, it is not even seen. Eurocentrism is problematic because Western knowledge is not objectively true but is produced as such (Hobson 2012). This leads to the suppression of other forms of knowledge that may provide a deeper understanding of the world, allow better dialogue between different subjects, and help bridge the Self/Other separation. However, Western hegemonic power maintains Eurocentric knowledge, which, in turn, reinforces the dichotomy and, in essence, further solidifies Western hegemonic power.

It is imperative for this research to address Eurocentrism, as Russian imperialism did not primarily involve the Global West or the Global South. Instead, it occurred in what is now regarded as the Second World, excluded from Shohat's (1992) colonial spaces. The reason for exclusion and general reluctance for academics to agree that Eastern Europe is a postcolonial theatre stems from deeply held Eurocentric assumptions as to what postcolonialism can and cannot be. Kolodziejczyk's (2010) argument mentioned earlier that Marxism is complicit in imperialism is one challenge to the Eurocentric order. Kravtsova (2022), in her excellent analysis of Russian literature, also notes how a Russian novel tainted with orientalist discourse was positively received by Western readers with little awareness of its racist undertones, illustrating ontological blindness to the colonial experience of Russia that exists to this day. More recently, deeply anti-imperialist Western left circles have withdrawn support for Ukraine on the pretence that the war is waged on behalf of the hegemonic US, denying Ukraine agency and, ironically, reinforcing neo-colonial narratives that they deem to oppose (Kassymbekova & Marat 2022). These conflicting knowledge paradigms stem from the inherent differences between Russian and Western imperialism and the divergent experiences that followed. Western understandings of colonial rule may not be applicable in the same way when analysing Russian imperialism;

however, they both retain the key dynamic of postcolonialism – power relations between the dominating and the dominated. Therefore, this paper takes an epistemological stance away from eurocentrism.

Orientalism is defined as a "systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'' (Said 1979, 3). Looking at Western discourses about Muslim populations in Asia, Said (1979) argued that such discourses are not objectively correct but instead are the result of Western colonial domination over those populations. Orientalism, he continues, stems from the Western hegemony whereby these narratives come to represent the truth about populations. The West becomes a subject with hyper-agency that possesses a superior culture, is of superior race, religion, and mode of government, and its history becomes that of progress. In contrast, the colonised (or the Other) is then an inferior object continuously in regress. As a result, a dichotomy emerges between the coloniser and the colonised, which allows for the further consolidation of one's domination over the other. This dichotomy is not based on an objective truth; rather, it is a product of colonial expansion and domination that continues to exist in the contemporary world. Yet, Said (1979) cautions the very fact of domination renders such knowledge to be perceived as the truth. It also provides justification to exert dominance over those regions under the same narratives of superiority and the need for Western intervention to save inferior populations.

As noted earlier, one of the key differences between Western and Russian imperialism is that Russian conquest was overland, as opposed to overseas. As a result, unlike Western colonial domination based on biological racism sustaining hierarchical distinctions, Russian imperialism largely operated through assimilation (Morrison 2012). This is not surprising – nearby conquered nations tended to be the same or similar in race, ethnicity, culture, and even language. Western imperialists went abroad where race and culture were in great contrast to the West, and a clear difference between the metropole and the colony was established as a tool of domination (Said 1979). The colonised, branded as inferior, could never be like the coloniser, who is educated, intelligent and civilised. In the Russian case, since the conquered lands were not at all that different, such a narrative would be difficult to establish. Therefore, Russian imperialism largely dominated through sameness – the idea that the colonised is the same as the coloniser and cannot be any different (Yermolenko and Ogarkova 2023). Various policies of russification emerged during the imperial period by banning non-Russian languages, books and cultural practices (Waldron, 2007). It must be highlighted that sameness did not mean that the metropole and the colony had equal power – the idea of sameness allowed the metropole to usurp the colony, erase its differences and, thus, its existence.

Consequently, domination through assimilation has implications for orientalism in Russia and for the Self/Other distinction. For indigenous/non-Slavic populations within Russia, Russia continues effective orientalist practices mirroring similar processes as those described by Said (1979). Kravtsova (2022) provides an outstanding analysis of a recent Russian novel called "Zuleikha Open Her Eyes". The novel is about a Tatar girl named Zuleikha who, driven by Stalin's repressions, moves to St Petersburg, gives herself a new Russian name and marries a Russian man. Kravtsova (2022), in a similar vein to Thompson (2000), notes deeply embedded imperialist discourse in the novel. The author of the novel portrays Zuleikha as belonging to barbarian Tatar culture, but in the end, she is saved by a civilised, educated Russian man. The novel was not only well received across Russia, but it was also largely deemed to be appreciative and promoting of Tatar culture. However, it reinforces imperialist discourse. Zuleikha's change of name to Russian, portrayed as the character's complete transformation to a civilised being for local Tatar populations, brings back memories of highly repressive russification policies aimed at eliminating Tatar national identity, with russification of names as one of the many policies. Whilst orientalism permeates both Russian and Western imperialism, the Russian case still appears to be deeply in denial as orientalist practices continue to go unchallenged and are often even celebrated, with a clear separation between the Self and Other.

Russia's orientalist practices towards its Eastern European neighbours, especially towards countries like Ukraine and Belarus, are more nuanced and somewhat diverge from Said's (1979) orientalism. This is due to the historical relationship between the three countries and decades long domination through assimilation. There remain contentions to this day whereby Russia disagrees that the Kyivan Rus gave birth to Ukraine, Belarus and Russia as three separate ethnicities. Russia's nationality policies have varied over the years, but Russia generally maintains that it is the legitimate successor of Kyivan Rus, with Belarus and Ukraine being part of Russia and its national identity (Plokhy 2017). Indeed, upon Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Vladimir Putin (2022) justified the invasion

by proclaiming that Ukraine is not a real country, that Ukrainians and Russians are one people and that the Kyiv regime is neo-nazis. This narrative reveals a different Self/Other relationship between Russia and Ukraine to that of Western colonialism. Ukrainian government seeking to join Europe is trying to be different from Russia and is, therefore, an outright threat to be eliminated (reimagined by Russia as neo-Nazis). At the same time, Ukrainians and Russians, portrayed as one people, speak to the centuries of the Russian Empire's domination through assimilation. Russia bears the responsibility to protect Ukrainians because it deems itself to be the main successor to Kyivan Rus, with Ukraine historically proscribed as Little Russia. Therefore, there is a much lesser Self/Other distinction between Russia and Ukraine – the Kyiv government is regarded as a foreign, Western-influenced entity to which the Ukrainian population have fallen victim; hence, they need Russia to save them. Russia is, therefore, not a dominating but a fraternal, caring, capable power seeking to protect itself from foreign intervention as it deems Ukraine to be a part of Russia. The very lack of the Self/Other distinction (in ethnic/national identity terms as opposed to power relations) becomes the key feature of Russia's imperial power over Ukraine and other Eastern European states.

A further aspect that differs from the Western colonial experience and has implications for the Self/Other distinction is the belief that Russians themselves were subject to state repressions. Western ideas of people's rule and freedom were largely incompatible with the autocratic Russian Empire at the time. Thus, debates emerged around the late 19th century about whether Russia should follow European values or preserve its unique Russian path (often going hand in hand with authoritarianism). Whilst the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ended the tsardom in Russia, the country plunged into chaos, and the Soviet Union slowly drifted back into authoritarianism and imperial practices of coercion, forcing other nations to join the proletariat family or be destroyed as a capitalist enemy. Repressive policies, however, were also targeted at ethnic Russians who opposed the state apparatus throughout Russia's history. Even today, Russians who advocate for more European values are often regarded by the state to be Western agents seeking to destroy the unique Russian identity. The oppositionists, in contrast, accuse Russia of authoritarianism, demand freedom and regard themselves as hostages to the regime (Etkind 2003). Etkind's (2013) argument that Russia colonised its peasantry is a proposed explanation for this statehood/nationhood divergence. Etkind (2013) highlights that the majority of Russians are victims of the regime as a result of internal colonisation. His theory, however, has two implications. One is that he implies Russia be the victim as it sets a clear separation between the Russian state and the Russian people. Second is that victimhood somewhat erases or draws attention away from Russia's external colonisation. Further notable consideration to highlight is that Etkind's (2013) theory is the most well-known postcolonial scholarship from a Russian scholar in Russia. Thus, it appears that Russian society itself tends to understand its relation to postcolonialism only in terms of victimhood rather than the perpetuation of colonialism, despite being the most durable empire of all time, continuing aggressive foreign interventions long after losing its official empire status.

Orientalism in Russia is, therefore, hybrid and complex. Within indigenous communities in Russia, the orientalist discourse resembles Said's (1979) analysis of inflated superiority, knowledge production about the orient and domination through culture. The continued practice of orientalism through literature, such as the novel about Zuleikha and the lack of postcolonial scholarship in Russian academia, suggests there is a denial of Russia's complicity in colonial expansion. The repression of Russian society under authoritarianism allows for further masking Russia's colonisation and placing Russian victimhood in the spotlight in Russia's colonial experience. Denial is further reinforced by Russia's relationship with its near abroad in Eastern Europe. Russia, dominating through assimilation, portrays itself to be the paternal figure in Eastern Europe, protecting what it deems inherently belongs to it. It also reveals the fraternal nature of Russian imperialism, whitewashing its repressive nature. It is with these themes in mind that this paper will demonstrate how Alexei Navalny's political rhetoric is full of imperialist discourse, as understood in postcolonial theory.

The primary data sources are Alexei Navalny's Twitter feed that was managed by his political associates on his behalf, and articles that he has written in English. Whilst Navalny discussed various topics, this article focuses on statements that demonstrate his views towards Russia's foreign policy and neighbouring countries. Due to relatively low volumes of data in English, this paper was able to review all the material and observe common themes across his statements, prompting that the data collected was adequate to identify key imperialist discourse themes in Alexei Navalny's political rhetoric. This paper acknowledges that Navalny does not solely represent all Russian liberalism and that all material in the Russian language was excluded. However, this article and its methodological framework

are intended to be innovative and exploratory, inviting further research. Whilst numerous articles are written on Navalny and on wider Russian liberalism, no research has yet linked postcolonial theory, Russian imperialism, and Russian liberalism. Thus, this and further research will help fill this gap and deepen the knowledge and understanding of the relationship between Russian imperialism and Russian liberalism.

Denial

Navalny's political rhetoric absolves Russian society of imperialism. He makes a clear point about separating Russians from Putin and his oligarchs. Considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Navalny states that "Vladimir Putin bears the full responsibility for the conflict'' (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2022a) and claims that the "urge for aggression is coming from a minority in Russian society'' (Navalny 2022a). He explains that the majority of Russians do not support the war; only those with imperial views do – Putin's cronies and a very small minority of people in Russia whose imperialist views are only alive through the constant exposure to propaganda:

"Yet the aggressive imperialists do not have absolute dominance. They do not make up a solid majority of voters, and even they still require a steady supply of propaganda to sustain their beliefs.'' (Navalny 2022a).

Navalny describes Putin's circle as "cynical and corrupt Soviet imperialists" (Navalny 2022a), "criminals" (Navalny 2022a) and "bandits and thieves" (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2022a). He proclaims Putin's government to be the source of all problems in Russia: "This self-generated imperial authoritarianism is the real curse of Russia and the cause of all its troubles. We cannot get rid of it, despite the opportunities regularly provided by history." (Navalny 2022a)

Navalny is known to openly criticise political figures, including Putin, citing that their aggressive policies are built on imperialist ideology (Laruelle 2013). He emphasises the need to place Russian interests at the forefront, and in the past, he often spoke against providing economic assistance to the North Caucasus region, seeing it as a drain on Russia's economy, especially when this money could be given to the ethnic Russians living in poverty (Kolsto 2014). Navalny believes that historic Russia's domination over the North Caucasus and the region's subsequent loss of independence are only to enrich Putin's regime and his oligarchs and to consolidate their power. Such campaigns are detrimental to the welfare of the general Russian population and are a continuation of the flawed Soviet system. He echoes similar views toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine: "Too many people in Russia are interested in normal life now, not in the phantom of territorial gains." (Navalny 2022a).

Whilst Navalny here proclaims disinterest towards territorial expansion and deems to promote the interests of the Russian people, he has a very clear demarcation as to who he regards as Russians and their hierarchy. His party manifesto advocating for the welfare of Russians as the key priority continuously uses the term *russki* (ethnic Russians) as opposed to *rossiyanin* (Russian passport holders) (Navalny 2007). He deems North Caucasians to not form part of the Russian society, this way displaying outright racist views towards them, short of advocating for secession of those regions from Russia. He further notes that any autonomy in the North Caucasus should be decided by Moscow (Laruelle 2013). As a result, Navalny denies agency to the indigenous populations living in Russia. What is more, his main concern regarding the conflict in the North Caucasus is its detrimental effect on ethnic Russians, rather than the occupation of it or the war crimes committed by the Russian armed forces against the Caucasian populations. Thus, Navalny also shows disregard and denial of his own imperialist tendencies through power dynamics and the Self/Other distinction. Regarding Ukraine, Navalny believes that Russians and Ukrainians are one people (The Interpreter 2014) and referred to the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 as "fratricidal" (Navalny 2022b). The fraternisation of Russian and Ukrainian identities is also imperialist as it promotes Russia's mode of domination through assimilation and denial of the distinct Ukrainian identity. Therefore, Navalny's claim that only Putin and his circle are imperialists is flawed at best as Navalny himself promotes imperialist discourse through orientalism, denial of agency and echoing of Russia's domination through sameness.

Navalny's orientalist tendencies and denial are further displayed when he directly states that he does not believe all Russians to be inherently imperialistic and continues to prove this, ironically, by making an outright orientalist comparison to Belarus:

@navalny: 9. Are all Russians inherently imperialistic? This is nonsense. For example, Belarus is also involved in the war against Ukraine. Does this mean that the Belarussians also have an imperial mindset? No, they merely also have a dictator in power. There will always be people with imperial views in Russia, just like in any other country with historical preconditions for this, but they are far from being the majority (Navalny 2023a)

Navalny here, similarly to Etkind (2013), conflates authoritarianism with imperialism and does not pay attention to the vastly different histories of Russia and Belarus. Belarusians are not historical or present conquerors and were never a distinct empire, nor are Belarusian soldiers currently fighting against Ukraine. Rather, they were also victims of Russian imperialism, russification and denial of their own sovereignty as an independent nation. Navalny's view that Belarusian and Russian experiences are the same again points to Russia's domination through assimilation and erasure of years of mass repressions against Belarusians. The denial of all Russians to be imperialist, therefore, is one form of imperialist discourse in Navalny's statement, and the orientalist comparison to Belarus is another.

Navalny's narrative that Russians do not support the war and that the war is solely waged by Putin is further flawed because it is frequently in contradiction with itself. For instance, he states that Russians do not support the war, providing authoritarian repressions as his evidence:

@navalny: And the first thing you need to understand is that there is no 75% support of war with Ukraine in Russia. This is yet another Kremlin's lie. (Navalny 2022c)

@navalny: what kind of sociology is there even to talk about when both the question "Do you support war in Ukraine?" and the answer "no" could result in 15 years of imprisonment for the sociologist and the respondent respectively? (Navalny 2022c)

However, on a separate occasion, Navalny also indicates that Putin's regime tends to solve domestic problems by waging wars due to their popularity and cost-effectiveness: "War is not expensive, it solves all domestic political problems, it raises public approval sky-high" (Navalny 2022a)

Navalny contradicts himself by stating that Russians do not support the war but that wars tend to raise the public approval of persons waging it. What is more, the unreliability of surveys is also questionable. Kizilova & Norris (2022) looked at various surveys in Russia, and whilst they note several elements, such as repressions, response bias and brainwashing, that could influence polling results, these factors could not influence the scales to shift to the opposing side. They comment that cultural and historical circumstances would bear the ultimate weight on Russians' opinions towards the war. Therefore, the support for military action against Ukraine points to deeply embedded historical preconditions rather than the unreliability of data. This is further evidenced when Navalny (2022d) states that the "war can only go on as long as it has some support inside the country"; however, at the time of writing, the war is still on-going.

What is more, despite criticising surveys, Navalny conducts his own to prove that Russians do not support the military aggression towards Ukraine. He surveyed 700 Moscow residents, whereby he monitored shifts in public opinion (Navalny 2022b). For instance, people viewing Russia as the aggressor increased from 29% to 53% and Russia being guilty of the conflict increased from 14% to 36% (the paper notes that the West remained between 39% and 34%). Finally, Navalny shows that 79% (rising from 68%) of respondents have agreed with the statement "Conflicting parties should immediately cease all military operations and engage in peace talks". Not only does this statement fail to differentiate between the attacker and the attacked but it also resembles the Kremlin's call for negotiations (as opposed to the Russian army's immediate withdrawal from Ukraine). In addition, Navalny (2022e) also quotes his Anti-Corruption Foundation survey where respondents, when asked where they would like additional revenues to go, chose education, pensions and healthcare above military spending. Given that Navalny himself frequently mentions poor standards of living and poverty among Russians, it is not surprising to see that Russians would prefer additional spending to go to areas that they would first-hand benefit from. However, according to Navalny, such a response displays unpopularity for military aggression:

@navalny: 7/15 Putin's propagandists call what is happening World War III, in which Russia is opposed by the whole

world. But do Russians "buy" this rhetoric? Apparently not: only 7% of respondents believe that the extra money should be spent on war (Navalny 2022e)

Navalny's position that Russians do not support the war and that the main source of imperialism comes from the Kremlin shows that there is considerable denial about Russia's imperialist past and present. Denial can be difficult to establish through data as it may also be the absence rather than the presence of statements. Indeed, Patalakh's (2018) analysis of Navalny's foreign policy notes that Navalny pays marginal attention to Russia's politics abroad and instead sees Russia's domestic issues as a priority. This may have several meanings. On the one hand, he proclaims that Russia should focus on its domestic issues rather than occupy nearby lands suggesting Russia should stop its expansionist campaigns: "It's not in the interests of Russians to seize neighbouring republics, it's in their interests to fight corruption, alcoholism and so on – to solve internal problems" (Dolgov 2014)

On the other hand, paying marginal attention to Russia's imperialist ambitions when such ambitions are met with public approval (rather than public discontent) indicates that he is avoiding confronting Russia's imperial legacy. Navalny continues that Russian elites see war as solving all problems: "The elites simply know from experience that war works — better than anything else." (Navalny 2022a)

He does not delve into reasons as to why such wars are attractive besides their ability to mask internal problems:

@navalny: 5/16 Both of them [Putin's men] need one thing: to divert the attention of the people of Russia from real problems – the development of the economy, rising prices, reigning lawlessness – and switching it to the format of "imperial hysteria." (Navalny 2022f)

It is therefore evident that, whilst Putin's government uses imperial hysteria to draw attention away from domestic problems, Navalny uses domestic problems to draw attention from Russia's problematic foreign policy and imperial legacy. What this also hints at is that Russia's political leadership is not an ideological contest between dictatorship and democracy but rather a contest for power, whereby imperialist ambitions would remain in either's victory, albeit in different ways.

Denial is also persistent in wider Russian liberalism whereby it continues to reinforce Russian imperialism. Whilst countries such as Ukraine or the Baltic states began to reimagine their history through a postcolonial lens, this approach in Russia remains absent. In the words of Chernetsky (2007, 12), "postcolonial theory remains the only major contemporary theoretical discourse overlooked by Russian sociologists and political scientists". Chernetsky (2007) argues that works of postcolonial scholars, such as Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak are rebranded by Russian scholars, including on the liberal spectrum, as a radical left or feminist ideology, incompatible with Russian conservatism. When postcolonial scholarship does emerge, it is by way of Etkind's (2013) theories about internal colonisation. Etkind (2013), however, by placing Russian society's internal colonisation at the centre of analysis, denies indigenous nations within Russia and formerly occupied nations now outside of Russia their suffering. Furthermore, it portrays Russia as a victim, rather than a perpetrator of colonisation. As a result, pathways for denial emerge in Russian liberal thought which is then reflected in Navalny's statements, enabling Russian imperialism to continue unchallenged.

Denial of Russian imperial conquest is also not accidental – it helps Russia to promote its superiority over the West. Krivonos (2018) argues that Russia's voluntary self-exclusion from postcolonial studies allows Russia to proclaim itself to be the dominant global power in the world that will become the beacon for traditional, conservative values. This way, whilst the West contends with the moral consequences of the colonial legacy and racism, Russia instead will carry a white man's burden for the West as the most progressive nation, completely uninvolved in the processes of colonial conquest. For instance, when the Black Lives Matter movement swept across the world in 2021, Russian liberals saw it as entirely a Western problem, ignoring their own highly orientalist culture that is embedded in society (Kravtsova 2022). Denial of imperialism, therefore, enables Russia to produce discourses that proclaim Russia's global moral leadership further consolidating its imaginary superiority. This is also evident now as Russia proclaims itself to be the bastion for traditional, conservative values opposing the rise of gender studies, political correctness, the LGBTQ movement and the "woke" culture.

Whilst Navalny advocates to put an end to the war in Ukraine and, as time passed, has gone as far as to demand Russian troops to withdraw from Ukraine (Navalny 2023a), his failure to see his own persistent orientalism through racism and denial of agency as well as continuous negligence to highlight imperialism that goes beyond Putin reinforces Russian imperialist discourse. His reluctance to return Crimea to Ukraine after it was annexed by Russia shows the disregard for the importance of Ukraine's territorial integrity and statehood, although, reacting to the public outcry, he later retracted this statement and said he respects Ukraine's 1991 borders (Navalny 2023a). The honesty of this retraction will remain questionable as Navalny has continued to associate Russia's imperialist practices with Putin's government and a small fraction of society. His views have failed to explain large popular support for the war, such as Putin's increasing approval rating after wars in Chechnya, Crimea and Ukraine (Levada Center 2023). As Navalny continued to deny Russia's imperialist character and failed to start a conversation about Russia's role as a perpetrator of colonial expansion, Russian imperialism continued to proliferate. Navalny's reluctance to return Crimea to Ukraine in 2014 is one example of how persistent denial can lead to direct support for expansionism.

Victimhood

Navalny's denial of imperialism is enabled by portraying Russians and Ukrainians as victims of the same authoritarian regime. His statements continuously frame Russia as a victim and often place Russians and Ukrainians as equal sufferers:

@navalny: Our miserable, exhausted, Motherland needs to be saved. It has been pillaged, wounded, dragged into an aggressive war, and turned into a prison run by the unscrupulous and deceitful scoundrels (Navalny 2023b)

"Putin is tormenting the neighboring country, killing people there, and now he is throwing a huge number of Russian citizens into the meat grinder that is this war, people who are supposed to just live normally and take care of their families." (Navalny 2022g)

Despite evidence to the contrary, Navalny comments that the consequences of the war will be the same for both Russia and Ukraine*:* "@navalny: 12/16 Thanks to Putin, hundreds of Ukrainians and Russian citizens may die now, and in the future, this number may reach tens of thousands. Yes, he will not allow Ukraine to develop, he will drag it into the swamp, but Russia will pay the same price." (Navalny 2022f)

Through the denial and fraternisation of Russian and Ukrainian identities, he also proclaims Russians to not just be victims but also innocent like Ukrainians: "I oppose the fact hundreds of thousands of our people are being sent to kill other people, innocent people like them [Ukrainians]." (Navalny 2022h)

Whilst Russia is the aggressor that has invaded Ukraine and committed numerous war crimes, such as the mass kidnap of Ukrainian children, torture and rape, Navalny instead separates the Russian nation from the Russian government, equating the suffering of Russians to that of Ukrainians. This is problematic as, similarly to Belarus, Russians and Ukrainians have different perceptions of the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation. Russia has historically proclaimed itself to be a superior Slavic nation with Ukraine continuously subjugated, repressed and its identity erased (Plokhy 2017). For instance, the Ukrainian language was frequently banned by Russia throughout different periods of history; however, Russians could always freely speak their language. Thus, by claiming equal suppression at the hands of the Russian state, the Ukrainian suffering is erased. Proclaimed innocence is also problematic. Whilst Russian soldiers may be unwillingly mobilised, the reported instances of rape, torture and deliberate murder by Russian soldiers' led Ukrainians to question whether Russians can fully be exonerated, especially in conjunction with official polls in Russia that continue to show overwhelming support for the invasion in light of the mass atrocities committed by the Russian armed forces (Human Rights Watch 2022; Levada Center 2023).

Navalny refuses for Russians to claim responsibility for imperialism and instead places them as equal victims of an oppressive regime. By separating the nation and the state, Navalny's political rhetoric helps Russians shake off all responsibility for imperialism. Instead, expansionist practices are masked within the centuries-long authoritative rule. This is problematic because, whilst Russian people suffered from authoritarian regimes, formerly and presently

occupied nations suffered, and continue to suffer from an imperialist regime. This difference matters – authoritarianism suppresses freedom; and imperialism suppresses agency. The victimhood rhetoric, therefore, spoken by Navalny, attempts to erase the ordeal of nations such as Ukraine by indirectly denying such policies existed exclusively targeted at those nations. In this sense, the victimhood of the aggressor forms part of the imperialist discourse in Navalny's rhetoric.

Navalny's perception of Russian and Ukrainian identity allows the framing of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an unjust war for both, Ukrainians and Russians. Navalny was known to believe Russians and Ukrainians to be one nation (The Interpreter 2014). Whilst Ukrainian civilians, including children, are being killed, tortured and raped and Ukraine's infrastructure is being destroyed, for Russia war means global isolation, economic degradation, and dead Russian soldiers. Navalny, however, does not see Russia as the aggressor – the aggressor is just Putin and his cronies, and the victims are Russians and Ukrainians. Plokhy's (2017) analysis of the relationship between identity politics and imperialism mentioned earlier is particularly useful in identifying the roots of imperialist sentiment in Russian identity politics. The author produces a historical account of the intertwined history between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus whereby he shows how Russian identity politics went hand in hand with Russian imperialism. In the 18th century, Russia was already an empire and its nationhood included Ukrainians and Belarusians. After the Russian revolution of 1917, there was a superficial attempt to untie the imperial construct of Russian national identity, however, it ultimately failed. Due to continuous russification policies in the near abroad and Russia's own unstable identity, Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991 struck a great blow to Russian nationhood (Plokhy 2017). Russia's centuries-long domination through assimilation and blurred identity politics led to a common belief in Russian society that Ukrainians are the same as Russians despite Ukraine's declared independence. Thus, with the help of persistent denial, the domination through sameness allows Russian society, including Navalny, to reimagine Ukrainian victimhood as similar to Russian victimhood at the hands of Putin. Authoritarianism then becomes the sole cause of both victimhoods, completely erasing Russian imperialist motivations against Ukraine. The perception of equal victimhood is also frequently bought by the West, with the most recent prominent example of President Biden inviting Olena Zelenska, Ukraine's First Lady, to six next the Yulia Navalnaya, Navalny's wife, at the State of the Union address, as an attempt to show women who suffered from Putin. Naturally, Zelenska declined the invitation (The Washington Post 2024).

Russian victimhood is, therefore, also closely intertwined with fraternisation of relations between Russia and Ukraine and it is also evident in wider Russian liberalism. Fraternisation transpires through naming Russia and Ukraine as brotherly nations, referring to friendly past relations, shared culture and language similarities. Fraternisation and victimhood are different but they are similar in that they both operate under Russia's mode of domination through assimilation, and therefore, both discourses are inherently imperialist. Brotherly nations, or fraternal relations as Navalny suggests, would imply equality or familiarity; however, Ukrainians would not regard Russia's policies towards Ukraine as such. Ukraine's statehood was continuously denied, language and culture banned, dissidents killed and the nation purposely starved to death for refusing to conform to Stalin's collectivisation (Reid 2002). Language and cultural similarities in Ukraine are not sights of fraternity but rather evidence of mass repressions and remnants of Russia's attempt to erase Ukrainian identity. The myth of fraternity denies Ukrainians' differences and subjectivity, reinforcing imperialist discourse and enabling imperialism-grounded military aggression. It also conceals the dominating nature of relations between the countries and enables Russia's mode of domination through sameness. Navalny is not the sole propagator of this rhetoric – liberal oppositionist Kara-Murza (2015) provided a brief summary between Russia and the Baltics states whereby he noted how a once-friendly relationship turned sour due to Putin's authoritarian regime, creating an imaginary of friendship that in fact never existed – the Baltic States simply freed themselves from decades-long occupation. Khodorkovsky, another Russian liberal in exile also expressed similar views of Russia's inclination towards peace and friendliness towards its neighbours (Khodorkovsky and Sixsmith 2022). Thus, fraternity becomes another tool that helps to reinforce Russian victimhood and downplay Russia's imperial nature.

Discussion

Alexei Navalny contributes to Russian imperialist discourse in two ways – through denial of the extent of Russian imperialism and Russian victimhood. Denial involves Navalny's failure to recognise his own orientalist views towards

the Caucasus region and the absolution of all Russian society of imperialism through questionable evidence and lack of engagement with Russia's colonial legacy. As a result, denial helps Russian imperialism to manifest which then culminates in military interventions, high Russian public support for the war in Ukraine as well as wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea and Syria. Navalny, however, remained firm until his death that the invasion was waged solely by the Russian government. Refusal to begin conversations about Russia's imperial legacy is also evident in wider Russian liberalism through the lack of postcolonial literature and suspicion of Western postcolonial scholars in Russia. What is more, the present literature in Russia remains deeply orientalist, and goes unchallenged, both in Russia and in the West, and Navalny himself produces orientalist views towards Russia's indigenous populations. Undoubtedly, decades-long imperial rule, a culture riddled with imperialist undertones and a national identity largely built on imperial ideations will have an influence on society over time. However, the concern with Navalny and other Russian liberal representatives is their outright unwillingness, nor any visible future prospect, to unpack the complex imperial legacy of Russia and to break the wall of denial.

The second imperialist discourse theme present in Navalny's political rhetoric is Russian society's victimhood. Despite the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine, Navalny continued to advocate for Russian society implying Russia's own victimhood under the Russian authoritarian government. Navalny was correct that Russians are denied basic rights; however, merging Russian and Ukrainian suffering into one erases Ukrainian subjectivity and Russia's imperialist ambitions towards Ukraine. The right to claim equal victimhood comes from Russia's domination through assimilation and decades-long mixed Russian identity politics that have often proclaimed Ukrainians to be the same as Russians, and Ukraine to be an integral part of Russia. The narrative of fraternity towards the near abroad has allowed Russia to whitewash its imperial character as it continues to help Russia subjugate nations. Fraternal relations and victimhood are also reflected among other liberal figures through ideas of friendship, aspiration of peace and Russia's proclaimed innocence by separation of nationhood and statehood, as Russian liberals continue to maintain that they operate separately from each other.

The relationship between denial and victimhood appears to be reciprocal, both in Navalny's political rhetoric and wider Russian liberalism. Denial is enabled by victimhood which goes hand in hand with fraternisation negating all aggression on the part of Russia. For Navalny, Russians are victims of authoritarianism; hence, they cannot be the aggressors. Postcolonialism only refers to Russia's internal colonisation; therefore, Russians are victims of colonisation, not the perpetrators. Denial, however, also enables and allows the narrative of victimhood to emerge as denial enables Russian society to maintain the idea of innocence. Navalny outright denied all Russians to be imperialist, allowing them to put away much-needed reconciliation and instead divert attention elsewhere. Domestic problems are presented to be greater than the instigation of a war that has raised anxieties over a global nuclear confrontation to an unprecedented level. Other Russian liberals also fail to acknowledge Russia's imperialist legacy – they instead promote fraternity and peace. Thus, denial and victimhood are not mutually exclusive. Both operate reinforcing each other leading to the proliferation of Russian imperialist discourse in Alexei Navalny's statements and wider Russian liberalism. Whilst Navalny opposed the war and called for Russian troops to withdraw from Ukraine (Navalny 2023a), his statements were nonetheless tainted with Russian imperialist discourse. Withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine alleviates the issue but does not tackle the root cause of the invasion – an imperialist state of mind across Russia's political spectrum enabled through denial and victimhood, continuously propagated by Navalny and other liberals.

Finally, these findings could not be identified without the help of a postcolonial lens. When Said (1979) published his seminal work on orientalism, he mapped out the complex processes involved between the coloniser and the colonised through the domination of knowledge about the Orient. Postcolonial theory, in its essence, focuses on colonial relations and the power imbalances produced by colonial history. It criticises Western hegemony on knowledge and Eurocentric assumptions. However, the theory itself is somewhat Eurocentric because it fails to account for the Second World, assuming that its power relations were not akin to the Western colonial expansion. Postcolonialism focuses on Western colonisers and the Western colonised, leaving East conquerors and the conquered unaccounted for. This is not surprising as the theory emerged and was formulated by either Western colonisers or their victims – between the First and Third worlds.

By taking postcolonial theory's key concept of power relations between the metropole and the colony, this paper has

drawn out features of power relations within the Second World. They include domination through assimilation, overland conquests as legitimate colonial campaigns, Marxist ideology's complicity in imperialism, and particular circumstances of settler colonialism. These differences do not mean that Russian imperialism does not fit within a postcolonial lens, it rather enriches it. Thus, in line with Said's (1979) and other postcolonial scholars' definitions of imperialism, just like in the West, in Russia, imperialism is a deeply embedded phenomenon that dominates knowledge and discourse and produces them as natural and objective, albeit through different ways of domination. Whilst this paper focuses on Navalny inferring wider patterns in Russian liberalism, imperialist discourse has also been identified in the Russian culture as well as in the ideas of national identity which would indoctrinate society over time (Thompson 2000; Plokhy 2017; Kravtsova 2022).

Postcolonialism also seeks to challenge Eurocentric assumptions – dominant knowledge forms that were produced as an objective during the forceful spread of European modernity across the world. Normally, it is the Third World challenging the concepts of the First by way of challenging Western democracy as the best governing system and pointing out deeply embedded neo-colonial practices, such as development and diplomacy to name a few (Young 2001). By including Eastern Europe in postcolonial theory, the Second World can challenge both, the Third and First Worlds. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there have already been some notable emerging exchanges. For instance, peace, often seen in the West as a pacifist stance and often associated with disapproval of Western interventionist policies in the Middle East, was revealed to also be a stance coming from the position of privilege. When Western politicians shied away from military support for Ukraine, promoting peace talks instead, Ukraine accused the West of denying agency to Ukrainian resistance and "Westplaining" (Kwiecińska and Skigin 2022). For a nation whose identity was forcefully merged with the coloniser proclaiming they are one nation, peace is not a choice if that nation is to survive as an independent state. Hence, postcolonial theory, when applied to Russian imperialism, can offer valuable insights and diversify knowledge beyond Western understandings of different concepts, peace being one example.

Adapting key postcolonial themes to Eastern Europe uncovers not just different themes of Russian imperialism but also allows a deepening understanding of the colonial nature of power relations outside the First and Third Worlds. As Vorgbrugg & Bluwstein (2022) note, broadening and challenging the dominant forms of knowledge considering the current invasion of Ukraine is essential. They argue that Western knowledge, when adapted to the Russo-Ukrainian war risks reinforcing imperialism. Western thinkers, coming from a Western standpoint, in an attempt to battle US hegemony, deny Ukraine all agency portraying it as a puppet of US global domination. As a result, Western hegemonic knowledge, giving disproportionate attention to the US, fails to fully grasp the ever-present Russian imperialism that continues to subjugate nations to the present day.

It must be noted, however, that the broadening of knowledge is not just representativeness of more Eastern European scholars but instead, it is a call to shake the core paradigms of existent knowledge. Khromeychuk (2022, 29) suggests that "a permanent alteration – decolonisation, de-imperialisation – of our knowledge" is needed. Whilst postcolonialism challenges the West, the East reveals postcolonialism to be a Eurocentric project, paving the way for the decolonisation of knowledge and promotion of greater equality in research production. Thus, when utilised to understand Russian imperialism, postcolonial theory is enriched, helping to make a deeper sense of global politics.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is believed to be the greatest threat to global security since the Second World War. However, the East warned long ago of poor reconciliation and unresolved identity politics between Russia and Ukraine as well as continued Russian imperialism (Plokhy 2017). Chechnya's former president Dzhokhar Dudayev, as early as 1995, in an interview famously warned that conflict between Russia and Ukraine is inevitable due to Russia's imperial ambitions (Ichkeria English 2022). In 2014, Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite called Russia a terrorist state causing Western backlash – today European states are recognising Russia as an official state sponsor of terrorism (The Baltic Times 2014; European Parliament 2022). Postcolonialism, by primarily focusing on the Western colonial experience, has allowed Russian imperialism to proliferate from the 1994 war in Chechnya to the 1999 Second Chechnya war, the 2008 Georgian war, the 2014 Ukraine war, the 2015 Syrian civil war and the 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As Russian imperialist ambitions keep escalating unchecked, Malksoo (2022)

calls to bring Russian imperialism to the forefront of global politics. This research is a response to this call. By focusing on Alexei Navalny, this paper draws attention to Russian imperialist discourse present in Russian liberalism. Navalny embodied an alternative Russia to the present Kremlin government. However, this paper shows that, despite his activism and image of a liberal alternative in Russia, Navalny was an imperialist. As Balakhonov noted in 1989, this article continues that in 2024, it remains the case that the imperial instinct in Russia is strong. War in Ukraine revealed not just Putin's appetite for expansion but also the deeply problematic and neglected legacy of Russian imperialism that, this paper has shown, has also poisoned Russian liberalism. Navalny tragically died in 2024, leaving the legacy of a brave activist who stood up against Putin's dictatorship. However, his imperialist rhetoric must be acknowledged and contemporary Russian liberalism must be scrutinised for its imperial tendencies. Only this will prevent further Russian imperial ambitions, both abroad and at home.

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