

RETHINKING DECOLONISATION AND RESILIENCE OF UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR AND GLOBAL PLATFORMS

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Summary

The large-scale Russian invasion has led to a significant escalation in the necessity for a comprehensive institutional and intellectual restructuring within Ukrainian higher education, necessitating a systematic decolonisation process. This study analyses how the ongoing armed conflict fundamentally reshapes academic objects, models, and interpretive frameworks, extending beyond mere decolonisation, while concurrently exploring new theoretical approaches necessary for knowledge production and institutional resilience. The prevailing circumstances are marked by substantial infrastructural deterioration, with a considerable number of educational institutions encountering bombardment and shelling, in conjunction with an active information war and epistemic aggression from Russia. Therefore, the core objective of this paper is to investigate the intersection of decolonisation and institutional resilience, proposing a theoretical framework that integrates decolonisation, deconstruction, and the strategic utilisation of global platforms. The findings highlight that the transformation process must focus on the crucial role of genuine academic autonomy as a precondition for quality and resilience, as well as the necessity of establishing a comparative decolonial perspective that links Ukraine's struggle with diverse global experiences of colonial and post-colonial realities. This approach moves beyond the passive absorption of historical injustices to shape a future-oriented post-colonial framework actively. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates the vital function of global platforms and digital resistance (e.g., internet memes) in reinforcing institutional stability, challenging aggressor narratives, and ensuring the ethical integration of media literacy. The study concludes by asserting that the crisis must be methodologically transformed into an advantage for the universal critique of imperial control.

Key words: decolonisation, academic autonomy, institutional deconstruction, global platforms, epistemic aggression, post-colonial framework, digital resilience, higher education.

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1. Introduction

The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought about an urgent and sudden necessity for significant transformation within the Ukrainian higher education system, necessitating a rapid and systematic process of decolonisation. This institutional and intellectual overhaul occurs amidst immense physical destruction and human displacement, with recent reports indicating that “3798 education institutions have suffered bombing and shelling” and “365 education institutions have been destroyed completely” (Talanova et al., 2023).

The decolonisation process in Ukrainian academia cannot be viewed in isolation; the global theoretical discourse must inform its trajectory (Starkova et al., 2025). The objective is not only to shed Soviet and post-Soviet legacies but to establish a robust, internationally compatible, and ethically grounded system (Ivanenko, 2023; Hrynevych et al., 2023). In this context, the argument is made that “To decolonise knowledge successfully, scholars should not focus just on their Ukrainian experiences as being unique. Instead, there is a need to establish connections between the various experiences of colonial and postcolonial studies” (Starkova et al., 2025). Such comparative perspectives are crucial, as they echo work that challenges conventional narratives of rupture. For instance, the archaeological finding that “European contact’ was not a defining event” for continuous Indigenous presence (Beranek et al., 2025) focuses on the “moral ecologies” that underpin colonial encounters (Trigg & Mrozowski, 2024).

The twin priorities of achieving independence and resilience necessitate a focus on institutional governance and pedagogical integrity. The enhancement of university autonomy is of the utmost importance, yet its successful implementation remains challenging despite formal legislation (Nalyvaiko, 2025; Oleksiyenko, 2020). As Nalyvaiko observes, “University autonomy, comprising academic, organisational, financial, and staffing dimensions, is a fundamental principle for ensuring the quality, responsiveness, and resilience of higher education systems” (Nalyvaiko, 2025, p. 105). Moreover, the information war and the rise of global digital platforms are indispensable contexts for this re-evaluation. In the contemporary context of the Ukrainian media education sector, there is a growing recognition of the pivotal role that new content and information literacy play in engaging audiences within the context of a constantly evolving information landscape, characterised by intense competition and conflict. This assertion is supported by the findings of Ivanova et al. (2022). Concurrently, global digital platforms are reconfiguring social processes and engendering regulatory dilemmas, thereby illustrating their capacity to “fundamentally change (urban) political processes, as their gatekeeping principles provide a powerful frame by which projects are selected” (Chiappini & de Vries, 2022).

This article synthesises the challenges of wartime educational continuity, the imperative of decolonisation, and the regulatory complexities of the digital age in order to propose a cohesive model for the future development and resilience of Ukrainian higher education. This analysis of the current situation forms the foundation of this endeavour.

2. Literature review

A review of the literature on Ukrainian higher education reveals a fundamental dichotomy: severe systemic challenges, documented in the extant research, that have been inherited from the imperial past; and legislative progress towards European integration, which is verifiable. This section explores this critical dialogue, detailing the persistence of colonial legacies and documenting the momentum of ongoing reforms.

2.1. The persistence of colonial and corrupt legacy: the suppression of meritocracy

Systematic review of the extant literature consistently confirms the pervasive nature of system challenges inherited from the Soviet era, directly linking institutional inertia to the persistence of corruption. Despite the legal guarantees of academic freedom, the pursuit of critical inquiry and creativity remains constrained by the lingering influences of a totalitarian political culture (Oleksiyenko, 2020; Oleksiyenko, 2022). The most substantial manifestation of this legacy is the pervasive phenomenon of academic non-compliance and fraud, which serves as a formidable apparatus for sustaining elite control and subduing authentic meritocracy.

- Corruption as an imperial control mechanism. Corruption and academic dishonesty have been confirmed as widespread phenomena, encompassing bribery, fraud, and non-objective assessment (Bilyk et al., 2024; OsvitaIN, 2020). These practices are widely viewed not merely as isolated ethical failures but as part of a systemic crisis rooted in the Soviet-era system of nomenklatura, where privileges were conferred by status, not merit (OsvitaIN, 2020). In the media sector, this phenomenon translates into economic control, as evidenced by research demonstrating that the quality of “journalism skills in the regional media” is frequently undermined by “the impact of the business environment,” wherein financial and political factors exert a significant influence on editorial policy (Starkova, 2022).

- The documentation of fraud and elite capture. The practice of acquiring academic qualifications through both legal and illegal means is evidenced by the persistent problem of academic plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification in dissertations (Zubyk et al., 2021; NAQA, 2025). The comprehensive documentation of large-scale academic misconduct underscores the close association between fraud and mechanisms that enable political and financial elites to obtain degrees and privileges without scholarly effort (Zubyk et al., 2021).

- Insularity and global disconnect. The issue of academic insularity is further compounded by a national focus and limited proficiency in international research languages (Ivanenko, 2023). A substantial body of research has identified considerable challenges associated with the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Tytarenko (2021) asserts that “EMI teaching nowadays has become one of the key elements of the strategy for the internationalization of higher education in Ukraine” (Tytarenko, 2021, p. 93). Nevertheless, the effective transition remains problematic due to a paucity of teachers with sufficient language skills and inadequate student preparedness. It is therefore essential to address the “existing challenges, preserve and improve the efficiency of EMI teaching in Ukraine” (Tytarenko, 2021, p. 93). In a similar vein, difficulties persist in the domain of English for Specific Purposes (Hildebrant, 2025).

2.2. Documented progress and reform momentum: The European horizon

Despite the entrenched inertia of the corrupt legacy, academic literature also documents significant, deliberate progress, demonstrating that the legal and institutional foundations for change are already in place (Brintseva, 2025).

- Legislative Triumph of Institutional Autonomy: Since 2014, Ukraine has taken resolute steps towards democratising the academic environment (Nalyvaiko, 2025). The 2014 Law on Higher Education formally guaranteed extensive institutional autonomy. However, its practical implementation remains inconsistent due to bureaucratic regulation and ineffective safeguards against political interference. Nalyvaiko emphasises that autonomy “is not merely a declarative legal principle, it is a dynamic institutional condition that depends on the effective interplay of law, governance, and academic culture” (Nalyvaiko, 2025, p. 113).

- Deepening European integration: Ukraine has demonstrated a resolute commitment to a democratic, pro-European system. This institutional alignment is a clearly articulated and

documented strategy to replace the outdated post-Soviet model with international standards (Ivanenko, 2023; Talanova et al., 2023).

- Pedagogical and institutional resilience. The sector has demonstrated notable resilience during wartime (Popović, 2025; Polovko & Glotov, 2023). Moreover, pedagogical reforms, most notably the New Ukrainian School (NUS), emphasise the cultivation of critical thinking, civic responsibility, and competency-based education, marking a pronounced departure from the Soviet-era practices of rote learning. In their 2023 publication, Hrynevych, Linnik and Herczyński observe that the NUS reform “builds on advanced pedagogical experience, best education practices, European competency frameworks and the promotion of national values,” with a focus on “competency-based content for teacher professional development, safe learning environments, inclusion and the digitalisation of education” (Hrynevych et al., 2023).

3. Materials and methods

The present article is of a review nature, and its foundation is the synthesis and interpretation of extant theoretical constructs and expert opinions. A methodological approach grounded in comparative epistemology is utilised. The methodology employed provides a comprehensive picture of the research progress.

3.1. Theoretical framework: comparative epistemology

The primary methodological approach that has been selected for this study is the transnational comparative approach. The selection of this method was made with the strategic intention of positioning the Ukrainian experience, which is currently defined by the trauma of war and colonisation, within a global framework of postcolonial studies. This approach fulfils a critical intellectual function by circumventing the analytical isolation that frequently ensues from the “syndrome of unique suffering”. Instead, it employs the Ukrainian struggle as a pivotal lens to establish connections with and glean insights from diverse decolonial experiences worldwide, thereby ensuring “connections between the different experiences of colonial and postcolonial studies” (Starkova et al., 2025).

The methodology involves the creation of a theoretical model for reform that is future-oriented and practically engaged, rather than solely focused on the historical grievances of the past.

3.2. Expert dialogue and source material

The study draws upon the personal reflections and professional insights of the co-authors, Hanna Starkova, Letizia Chiappini, and Stephen Albert Mrozowski. The core material comprises:

- Conceptual analysis. A thorough examination of the concepts of decolonisation, deconstruction and digitalisation is imperative, particularly in the context of global social media platforms.

- Synthesis of published works. A critical analysis of publications by the authors and external scholars concerning academic integrity, educational reform, and digital media has been undertaken (Bilyk et al., 2024; Ivanova et al., 2022; Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020; Trigg & Mrozowski, 2024).

- Moreover, the methodology integrates comparative insights drawn from the experiences of other 2024–2025 NIAS fellows, as follows:

Critique of institutionalised history. In her study, Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem examined the repatriation of cultural artefacts from European museums to Iraq, offering a framework for evaluating the colonial histories embedded within Ukrainian museums and archives (2024). This research emphasises the political imperative for revising cultural ownership narratives.

Voicing silences and war crimes. Emir Suljagić calls for research into war crimes against Bosnian Muslims that have received scant attention (2024). He asserts that the struggle against aggressor narratives is inextricably linked to the imperative of documenting genocidal acts and giving voice to the “silences” imposed by aggressor states.

The subtlety of colonialism. In his research on the integration of colonial commodities into Dutch households (2024), James Symonds proposes a theoretical framework for analysing the persistent and subtle influences of post-Soviet practices on the intellectual and academic norms of daily life in Ukraine.

These comparative insights serve as methodological tools to broaden the analytical scope, moving the study beyond national exceptionalism towards a universal critique of imperial control.

4. Results and discussion

The tripartite framework of decolonisation, deconstruction, and digitalisation (global platforms) is proposed as a roadmap for the systemic transformation of Ukrainian academia, addressing both the intellectual inheritance of colonialism and the war's current physical and digital challenges and risks.

4.1. Decolonisation: a comparative imperative against “prehistory”

The Russian imperialist war against Ukraine must be academically understood as a fundamental continuation of colonialism (*Oleksiyenko, 2022*). This perspective is informed by the work of Stephen Mrozowski, who views colonialism as a phenomenon that is “still lived every day” by Indigenous communities in North America. His work highlights that academic research must be practically engaged and focused on the future, transforming its output into a tool for political struggle and societal intervention (*Starkova et al., 2025*).

This comparative lens is built on two key concepts:

- **The critique of “prehistory”.** Professor Mrozowski stresses that academic research must be practically engaged and focused on the future, challenging colonial concepts like “prehistory”, an idea that’s deeply embedded in a part of settler colonialism that takes away their future (*Schmidt & Mrozowski, 2013*). Russia’s rejection of Ukrainian statehood and history can be interpreted as an intellectual act of “prehistory”, signifying an endeavour to repudiate its political future. In this context, the decolonisation of Ukrainian science must similarly look towards the future.

- **Challenging epistemic violence.** It is imperative that research actively counteracts the Russian epistemic violence that seeks to erase Ukrainian history and intellectual achievement.

- **Future-focused intervention.** Academic output must evolve beyond the confines of historical documentation to become a catalyst for political intervention, such as the documentation of war crimes (Suljagić’s context) and the formulation of strategies for cultural reconstruction. The focus must shift towards the active construction of a postcolonial future, as opposed to a passive contemplation of the colonial past.

Consequently, the successful decolonisation of Ukrainian scholarship is contingent upon its capacity to establish connections between its experience and these diverse global colonial struggles, thereby ensuring its research is a practically engaged force for sovereignty.

- **Moral ecologies of dominion.** This analysis extends to the environmental and relational impacts of colonialism. Trigg and Mrozowski (2024) explore the manner in which European colonisers' relationships with land and resources were informed by their “moral ecologies”, which endowed actions with a “sense of right and wrong” derived from ontologies. It is

asserted that the colonial model, predicated on “dominion and improvement”, fundamentally conflicts with Indigenous ontologies (Trigg & Mrozowski, 2024). Within the Ukrainian context, the destruction of infrastructure and ecocide caused by the war must be conceptualised as a confrontation of moral ecologies: the Russian imperial ontology of dominion versus the Ukrainian ontology of resilience and self-determination. The work on “Recognizing Indigenous persistence by dating extensive low-density Indigenous occupations across the AD 1480–1630 radio-carbon plateau in Wellfleet, Massachusetts” (Beranek et al., 2025) offers a model for Ukrainian scholars to document and assert the nation’s historical continuity despite imperial disruption.

4.2. Deconstruction: targeting institutional and digital coloniality

The process of decolonisation necessitates the deliberate deconstruction of prevailing structures that perpetuate the colonial legacy. Letizia Chiappini identifies three central theoretical angles for this essential decolonial transformation. Each of these angles points to a specific institutional realm in which the post-Soviet structure must be challenged.

- **Institutional spaces and cultural practices.** The deconstruction of colonial histories must commence with their integration within museums, archives and cultural practices. As Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem’s work on cultural heritage return suggests, this is a necessary space to initiate a shift in discourses concerning “who owns what” (Starkova et al., 2025). In Ukraine, this process entails a systematic deconstruction of Soviet-era narratives within historical institutions, accompanied by a recognition of the systemic underfunding and lack of autonomy that have contributed to the stagnation of these institutions.

- **Spatial dynamics, migration, and frontiers.** Chiappini calls for a critical examination of the concepts of migration, mobility, borders and frontiers as sites of intervention where “existing structures” can be altered (Starkova et al., 2025). The war has profoundly reshaped Ukraine’s spatial dynamics, necessitating an academic response that engages with internal displacement, the preservation of cultural heritage in occupied territories, and the re-imagining of national borders within a European context. The conventional national-centric curriculum must be deconstructed to embrace these fluid, transnational realities.

- **Ecology and inequality as colonial exploitation.** This area is of critical importance with regard to further development. Chiappini posits that the concepts of ecology and sustainability (including digitalisation) must be deconstructed in war zones, where existing inequalities are “even more now exploited” (Starkova et al., 2025). The environmental crisis and destruction (eco-cide) caused by the war must be explicitly framed as an act of colonial exploitation, from the destruction of the Kakhovka dam to the mining of agricultural land. This framework must also encompass the exploitation of the digital sphere, where new content and information literacy are crucial for resisting dominant narratives and challenging Russian epistemic violence (Ivanova et al., 2022). The question of climate change becomes meaningless without first addressing the primary violence of war and the underlying colonial arrangements that facilitate the destruction of land and resources. Deconstruction demands that Ukrainian academia integrate environmental studies into a decolonial framework, challenging the notion that these topics are separate from political and military conflict.

This deconstruction phase directly challenges the “pseudo-privileged” structures of the post-Soviet landscape by demanding that the absence of genuine academic freedom and the inadequate focus on global research be directly addressed as the “existing structures” that must be dismantled. This challenge necessitates the integration of non-traditional research objects, such as internet memes, which have emerged as key tools for students to communicate, build resilience, and articulate political commentary against the backdrop of information warfare (Ivanova et al., 2022).

Concurrently, researchers have called for moderation in the implementation of neoliberalism as promised by global digital platforms. Törnberg and Chiappini's analysis of Airbnb illustrates this point: "Discourse analysis demonstrates how Airbnb's white proprietors utilise racial stereotypes to appeal to white guests, exoticising difference, accentuating foreignness, and conceptualising communities as consumable experiences for an external group. In turn, white visitors consume these cultural symbols to decorate their own identities, incorporating colonial tropes of brave white adventurers exploring uncharted territories. However, these conquests are no longer over gold and ivory, but rather over a sandwich at a local bodega" (Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020, p. 566). It is evident that this observation is notable even in the context of the similarity in skin colour.

The following aspects can be regarded as equally significant for the Ukrainian Academy:

- **Deconstructing institutional control.** The struggle for autonomy is a process of political deconstruction. Nalyvaiko emphasises the discrepancy between de jure and de facto independence, and the necessity for reforms that address "contradictory legal norms, excessive bureaucratic regulation, and the absence of effective safeguards against political interference" (Nalyvaiko, 2025, p. 105). This deconstruction must target financial control. An analysis of the regional media sector demonstrated that the quality of journalism skills in the regional media is frequently nullified by "economic and political factors, the biased editorial policy" (Starkova, 2022, p. 262).

- **Deconstruction of academic objects: the role of Internet memes.** The imperative of decolonisation, resilience, and adaptation to global platforms demands a rethinking of academic objects, particularly concerning media content. The present study focuses on internet memes as a tool for media consumption and a mechanism for socio-cultural communication and resilience. Starkova posits that internet memes in Ukraine are fundamentally about trying to "understand what's happening in the world and what to expect" (Starkova et al., 2025). They function as an instrument of digital resilience and ironic engagement with trauma.

- **Deconstructing digital coloniality.** The deconstruction mandate extends into the digital realm, the focus of Chiappini's work. She emphasises that, although global digital platforms facilitate connectivity, they can also perpetuate colonial structures. In the study referenced above, Törnberg and Chiappini (2020) demonstrated that such platforms encourage entrepreneurs to pursue the extraction of value from a global symbolic economy. These entrepreneurs market the urban frontier to a transnational middle class, thereby responding to questions of class, gender and ethnicity, and potentially driving cultural displacement. This research provides a crucial theoretical warning. In the context of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and integration into the global digital economy, it is imperative to proactively deconstruct the colonial discourse embedded in international platforms. This is essential to prevent the intellectual and cultural displacement that has characterised historical periods of global expansion and domination.

4.3. Global platforms: new methodologies for narrative reclaiming

The third core area is the strategic use of global platforms to develop new, resilient methodologies. Chiappini identifies memes, semiotics and discourse as "interesting angles" that could be used to present an alternative narrative. The empirical reality of the information war validates this approach.

- **Grassroots resistance and agency.** Using memes is a practical, grassroots way of resisting dominant narratives, which are often Russian. This focus on the "precarious and contingent nature of infrastructures" challenges the need for rigid, formal methodologies (Starkova et al., 2025).

• **Civic platforms and digital resilience.** This flexibility has an institutional counterpart in civic crowdfunding, which Chiappini and de Vries (2022) studied as urban digital platforms (UDPs). They found that UDPs can bypass corporate gatekeeping by supporting “civic and grassroots initiatives in areas where local state agencies play a significant role in shaping urban development patterns,” demonstrating their capacity to fundamentally transform urban political processes (Chiappini & de Vries, 2022). This offers a vital model: Ukrainian academic and civic institutions can use decentralised digital platforms to secure funding, mobilise solidarity and bypass compromised bureaucratic structures, thereby strengthening resilience.

• **Media mission and future orientation.** Future media professionals must embrace digital platforms. Research on Ukrainian media students confirmed that “the media industry, which is constantly in the midst of a powerful information war and is currently at war, sees new content and information literacy as important tools for engaging audiences in the practice of active public position and understanding of the news” (Ivanova et al., 2022, p. 18), signalling a generational shift towards digital expertise and a heightened sense of professional purpose that is inherently future-oriented.

This grassroots resistance approach is powerfully supported by empirical research into the worldview and media habits of Ukrainian students. An analysis of surveys conducted among S. Kuznets KhNUE students in 2021–2022 demonstrated that:

- Students are highly interested in social networks and electronic media as indispensable tools for professional activity.
- Around 75% of respondents actively use TikTok, the News Feed and Instagram Stories.
- The professional qualities prioritised were expertise and personal independence, forming the basis for the journalist's role in information warfare (Ivanova et al., 2022).

The focus on digital platforms and independence shows that the younger generation is already using “precarious and contingent infrastructures” to challenge dominant narratives. Digitalisation provides a methodology for epistemic justice, enabling marginalised voices to be documented outside of rigid institutional channels.

5. Conclusions

The integrated imperative of decolonisation, deconstruction, and engagement with Global Platforms must drive the rethinking of Ukrainian academia.

The research demonstrates that the challenges faced by Ukrainian science can be used as a critical lens through which to view and learn from global postcolonial and decolonial experiences, particularly those that highlight the persistence of Indigenous peoples (Beranek et al., 2025) in the face of imperial narratives. This perspective highlights the need to deconstruct post-Soviet institutional practices by fully and unconditionally implementing genuine academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The absence of these is the primary threat to the system's quality and resilience (Nalyvaiko, 2025). Finally, the strategic use of global platforms – both in deconstructing their embedded colonial biases (Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020) and harnessing their capacity for civic and grassroots resilience (Chiappini & de Vries, 2022) – provides the methodology for fostering a future-oriented academic environment.

Prospects for further research. Future work should focus on developing concrete, comparative methodologies for the decolonial digitisation of academic knowledge. Specifically, the effectiveness of decentralised Urban Digital Platforms (UDPs) in countering Russian disinformation and fostering epistemic justice should be explored. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the specific institutional reforms required to grant genuine financial and staffing

autonomy in the Ukrainian higher education system is warranted, including the development of quantifiable indices of academic freedom and anti-corruption compliance.

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