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EU IN SEARCH OF A RUSSIA POLICY? MULTIPLE STREAMS FRAMEWORK, DECOLONIZATION, BALTIC ENTREPRENEURS

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The start of the Special Military Operation (SMO) created a conceptual vacuum in the European Union's policy toward Russia. By classifying Moscow as a strategic threat, Brussels curtailed all contacts with it, instead prioritizing sanctions and support for Ukraine. The aim of this article is to examine how decolonization, understood as a socio-political category, has become the ideational foundation of the EU's Russia policy and to highlight the role of Baltic entrepreneurs in shaping this discourse. Theoretically, the analysis is informed by the multiple streams framework; empirically, it draws on EU policy documents and political speeches delivered between 2022 and the present.

Three distinct interpretations of decolonization are identified. The first highlights the previously limited agency of the Baltic States and Poland in shaping EU–Russia policy, which has now given way to Brussels' acceptance of the most uncompromising 'Baltic line' on Russia. The second emphasizes inter-imperiality, understood as both the liberation of post-Soviet Eurasia from Russian influence and the emancipation of states in this region through deeper and more equitable cooperation with the EU. This interpretation underpins the EU's revision of its enlargement policy, the additional legitimation of anti-Russian sanctions, and the creation of a new hierarchy of actors in the post-Soviet space. The third, currently marginal, interpretation focuses on restoring subjectivity to Russia's peoples and regions. While EU policymakers rarely elaborate on this perspective, its very existence reinforces a negative backdrop that constrains the possibility of dialogue between Russia and the EU. The article demonstrates the central role of Baltic entrepreneurs in advancing these interpretations of decolonization and underscores the

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differences in their technical feasibility. In conclusion, the three interpretations are compared and briefly assessed in terms of their implications for the potential restoration of Russia—EU relations.

Keywords:

European Union, multiple streams concept, decolonization, Russia / Russian Federation, Ukraine, Baltic States

Introduction

After February 24, 2022, the European Union (EU) abandoned its previous course in relation to Russia. Having declared Moscow “a major strategic threat”,¹ Brussels concentrated on previously launched policies [1], restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia [2] and support for Ukraine.² This policies’ choice signaled the shortage of ideas about the EU’s long-term relations with Russia.

Recently, however, the EU began to fill this vacuum regarding the concept of its future ties with Russia. A noticeable role in this process is played by decolonization as a socio-political category [3]. In this article, decolonization is understood as a reassessment of conventional perspectives in favour of previously marginalized political and geographical ideas. This process entails revising the hierarchy between actors that once defined the norm and those excluded from it, while restoring agency to the latter. This definition of decolonization aligns with the postcolonial tradition, which has often been criticized for overlooking ‘real’ factors, adopting a postmodern perspective on domination, and giving only peripheral attention to Europe’s role in the colonization of Africa and Asia [4; 5]. However, such an interpretation of decolonization reveals the pluralism of current EU debates regarding possible policy approaches toward Russia.

This article seeks to identify how decolonization, understood as a socio-political category, functions as an ideational basis for the formulation of the EU’s policy toward Russia, and to underscore the role of Baltic entrepreneurs in this process. The analysis is grounded in the multiple streams framework (MSF), with particular attention to the ways in which ideas are reformulated and translated into policies. The focus is on how the notion of decolonization is being adapted to the EU’s prospective Russia policy. The article does not claim that decolonization is the sole concept shaping Baltic or EU approaches to Russia. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the ambiguity of the concept and its growing prominence, as reflected in the increasing number of references in EU documents.

¹ Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030. 2025, *High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Brussels*, 19.3.2025 JOIN(2025)120final, URL: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/30b50d2c-49aa-4250-9ca6-27a0347cf009_en?filename=White%20Paper.pdf (accessed 06.06.2025).

² EU support for Ukraine, *Europa.eu*, URL: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-support-ukraine_en (accessed 06.03.2025).

Empirically, the article is based on the statements of the EU's national and supranational leaders, as well as on the documents of EU institutions from 2022 to the present, processed through discourse analysis. In accordance with it, any conceptualization "should also be grounded in prior interpretations of empirical analyses" and their subsequent verification on a larger dataset [6, p. 14]. Consequently, at the initial stage, in a small number of academic articles, EU documents and media reports, three interpretations of decolonization in the EU's Russia policy were outlined, and their keywords were defined (see Table). At the second stage, the empirical base was broadened through the use of these keywords, resulting in a dataset of approximately 100 texts and video materials. The search was first made on the official EU portal (europa.eu), and then the Google search was used to draw on other resources (primarily mass media outlets). In addition, key EU appointments were taken into account because they potentially contribute to the promotion of the interpretations of decolonization in the EU's Russia policy. Such data selection and their processing correspond to MSF [7, p. 44].

Three interpretations of decolonization in the European Union

Criteria for comparison	Decolonization in the EU	Decolonization in the post-Soviet space	Decolonization of Russia
Keywords in EU documents	Listen, unity, policy-takers vs. policy-makers	Imperialism, empire, neocolonial	Refederalization, indigenous people, national minorities, discrimination
Essence, problem stream	Agency of EU member-states inside the Union	Agency of states of the post-Soviet Eurasia (Ukraine)	Agency of peoples and regions of Russia
Politics stream and policy entrepreneurs	Researchers (mostly from the Baltic States and Poland), politicians — representatives of new EU member states, mass media	Researchers (western, post-Soviet), politicians (from Ukraine, Baltic States, Poland, the West), mass media	Researchers (western, post-Soviet), policy analysis, politicians (from the Baltic States and Poland, Ukraine, a part of the Russian emigration), mass media
Connections with EU policies, policy stream	Implementation of the EU's treaties, including equality among member-states, EU internal policies	Reform of the EU's enlargement policy, sanctions, assistance to Ukraine, EU external policies	Imposition of policies on Russia, the EU's normative power
Results	"Estonization" of the EU, increased influence of the Baltic States in EU institutions	Preservation of sanctions and assistance to Ukraine, reform of the EU's enlargement policy, new hierarchy of EU partners	Search for an alternative vis-à-vis in Russia, complicating any reboot of the dialogue between Brussels and Moscow

From the theoretical point of view, the novelty of the study lies in demonstrating how an idea is interpreted and reframed in the course of policy development, how value acceptability and technical feasibility contribute to the policy development. From a practical point of view, it will be shown how the EU seeks to fill the conceptual vacuum in its policy toward Russia.

At first, the article summarizes the MSF and determines its elements in application to the EU and its Russia policy. Furthermore, three interpretations of decolonization in the EU's Russia policy are described (decolonization of the Baltic countries / new member states¹ in the formulation of the EU's policies; decolonization of the post-Soviet space / Ukraine; decolonization of Russia). In conclusion, three interpretations are briefly compared, their consequences for the reboot of the dialogue between Brussels and Moscow are outlined, and areas of possible future research are highlighted.

Multiple streams framework: history and key elements

The 'garbage can' concept is a forerunner of the MSF. Its authors, Cohen, March and Olsen, concluded that any organization "operates on the basis of a variety of inconsistent and ill-defined preferences", choosing options "through action" rather than acting "on the basis of preferences" [8, p. 1]. To visualize it, scholars used the metaphor of the garbage can where various 'types of waste' mix: politicians arbitrarily combine problems and possible solutions. Participants of any political process can be seen as rational actors, as affected by emotions, or as socialized in some paradigms [9]. In fact, the 'garbage can' concept tried to explain, why and how a decision is made [10, p. 323].

In the MSF J. Kingdon improved the 'garbage can' concept. He clarified the connection between ideas and their implementation, showing why and when the 'time' for an idea comes [11, p. 1]. The MSF distinguishes five elements in the decision-making process.

¹ Hereinafter, 'new EU member states' mean states that joined the Union as of 2004. Despite the fact that more than 20 years have passed since the big-bang enlargement (May 1, 2004), the division into old and new EU members is preserved both in practical policy and in EU studies. This is the result of deep political and economic differences among EU countries. See, for example, EU enlargement, *European Union*, n/d, URL: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en (accessed 07.06.2025) ; The 20th anniversary of the EU enlargement, *Eurostat*, 01.05.2024, URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20240501-1> (accessed 07.06.2025) ; 20 years since the EU welcomed 10 new Member States: what lies ahead for those waiting to join our Union, *European Movement International*, 30 April 2024, URL: https://europeanmovement.eu/policy-focus/20-years-since-the-eu-welcomed-10-new-member_states/ (accessed 07.06.2025).

The problem stream is what needs to be solved. It is defined by various indicators (for example, budget deficit), by focusing events or previously made decisions. Problems contain “perceptive, interpretive element” [11, p. 110], that is, they suggest interpretation by decision-makers.

The politics stream is formed by national culture, pressure groups, the rotation of elected politicians and administrative personnel. In the case of the EU, N. Zahariadis proposes to consider the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the “European mood”, that is, the preferences of citizens [12, p. 518]. In our opinion, analysis of the European Council and European Commission, other key EU institution, is to be added.

The policy stream consists of “a ‘soup’ of ideas that compete to win acceptance” [13, p. 72]. An idea may take the form of a specific political decision, a paradigm or value justification of some actions [14, p. 260]. The viability of ideas depends on their “value acceptability”, “technical feasibility”, as well as on the strength of the political network, lobbying the corresponding decision [13, p. 72].

Political entrepreneurs are actors connecting the problem, politics and policy streams [13, p. 74]. Their power determines access to decision-makers, available resources (financial, ideological, informational, temporal, etc.), as well as applied strategies (they inter alia might take linguistic, emotional, normative forms).

Kingdon also considered policy windows as an opportunity to combine problems and solutions (policies), but this article does not consider them.

Multiple stream framework: the EU, Russia and decolonization

How can MSF be applied to the EU’s Russia policy?

The problem stream. The special military operation (SMO) provoked the EU’s severe critique. The European Council qualified Moscow’s actions as “undermining European and global security and stability”,¹ initiated support for Ukraine and introduced massive restrictive measures against Russia. As a result, most previously existing concepts of EU-Russia relations lost their relevance [15]. Thus, the problem stream consists in the EU’s ideational vacuum regarding how to interact with Russia in the long-run. The SMO constitutes a unique focusing event; but the EU specifies this very problem in a variety of ways, as will be shown below.

The politics stream. EU institutions reacted to the SMO in the same way. EU members (and, consequently, the European Council and the Council of the EU) supported a tough restrictive line against Russia.² The previously existing

¹ European Council conclusions. 24 February 2022, *Europa.eu*, URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/24/european-council-conclusions-24-february-2022/> (accessed 23.01.2025).

² Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government. 10 and 11 March 2022, Versailles Declaration, *Europa.eu*, URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf> (accessed 23.01.2025).

“friendliness to Moscow” gradations of EU member-states disappeared. Despite the periodic challenge from Hungary or Slovakia, EU restrictive measures have been regularly extended, their number has steadily grown, and Ukraine has continued to receive new forms of assistance (most of these decisions require unanimity among EU member states). The European Parliament, known for its normativity, took the most critical position,¹ which the 2024 elections did not shake. The European Commission consistently adheres to the anti-Russian line both discursively and in practice.² Thus, a tough line in relation to Russia is the subject of an inter-institutional consensus in the EU. The opinion of EU citizens about Russia also sharply deteriorated.³

The policy stream. Reflections on decolonization and relevant studies have come a long way [4; 5]. In Europe, they predominantly adopted a postmodern shape [16]. Rethinking of member states’ colonial legacy plays an important role both in theory and EU practice [17]. In Western universities, decolonization as a change in the “way of thinking about the world” [18, p. 2] became an important component of training [19], forming the culture of the politically correct. Thus, decolonization became an integral part of the EU’s normative system.

These circumstances determine value acceptability of decolonization ideas for the European Union in its external activity. This article understands decolonization in line with this perspective as a revision of conventional views in favor of previously marginal (political, geographical) ideas, which entails a revision of the hierarchy between actors who previously determined the norm and other actors, as well as the return of agency to the latter.

In parallel, decolonization ideas were strengthened in the research of Russian literature and history [20—22]. Decolonization ideas in the context of the SMO provided in the West an “ethical turning point for international relations, serving to problematize geopolitical thinking; the analysis of competing interests; and the presumed preference for scholarly detachment” [21, p. 3].

At the same time, technical feasibility of these ideas depends on how innovations are integrated into EU policies. At the moment, three different — although mutually reinforcing — interpretations with varying (potential) policy consequences are proposed in the EU.

¹ For example, Russian aggression against Ukraine. European Parliament resolution of 1 March 2022 on the Russian aggression against Ukraine (2022/2564(RSP), *Europa.eu*, URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:-52022IP0052> (accessed 23.01.2025).

² For example, 2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen. 13.09.2023, *Europa.eu*, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426 (accessed 23.01.2025).

³ For example, The EU’s response to the war in Ukraine. Eurobarometer Report. October–November 2024, *Europa.eu*, URL: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215> (accessed 23.01.2025).

Several categories of *political entrepreneurs* promote decolonization as the basis of the EU's new Russia policy. The first one includes representatives of academia, specifying the decolonization ideas for the region. The second category consists of analysts, who help to technically flesh out certain ideas, to make them applicable in EU policies. The third category includes national and supranational leaders. They introduce ideas into the EU's political process, contribute to their implementation in practice. The last category of entrepreneurs is the mass media that popularize certain concepts. These entrepreneurs are specified below for each decolonization interpretation.

The next section considers in detail the three interpretations that have taken shape in the EU at this stage. We focus on how the decolonization problems in the EU's Russia policy are formulated, what is the proposed (practical) role of the EU, as well as who acts as political entrepreneurs, in particular from the Baltic countries and Poland (see also Table).

Three interpretations of decolonization in the EU

Decolonization of 'new' EU member — states

In the first interpretation of decolonization, the problem of the EU's Russia policy is specified as previously insufficient attention to mostly critical, suspicious views on Russia, promoted by representatives of Poland and the Baltic countries. These views were rather qualified as a result of their historical trauma [23]. This position was even dubbed a "unique version of orientalism", the essence of which, in the perception of representatives of Poland and the Baltic countries, was that they are viewed as "simpletons", "racist", "primitive, yet honourable" [24].

As a result, according to this interpretation of decolonization, expert knowledge of post-Soviet Eurasia (including Russia) within the EU has remained limited to ideas originating in Western Europe [25]. Accordingly, the decolonization in this interpretation consists in the emancipation of the Baltic States and Poland (and wider — all new EU members) within the Union.

Most often, this interpretation is associated with such tropes as 'listening', 'unity' (in the EU's position), and differences between policy-makers and policy-takers. The word *westsplain*¹ plays an important role; it describes representatives of the West, criticizing countries of Central Europe for their distrust to Russia. This category gained real popularity in 2023, when it was defined as "the methodological error of overlaying abstract theories onto unique historical and political contexts" [26, p. 619]. This category emphasises that the paradigms previously applied by the EU to Russia were incomplete, as they disregarded the knowledge of Russia possessed by the Baltic States and other Central European countries as a result of their historical relations with it (and previously the Soviet Union).

¹ It is a combination of the words "west" and "explaining".

Three categories of policy entrepreneurs can be distinguished here. Fundamental researchers (mostly from the Baltic region) developed the specificity of the peripheral, liminal position of the Baltic States [23; 25], the westspaining category [26], the theme of vicarious identification of the Baltic States with Ukraine [27]. These interpretations were supported by the Baltic and Polish politicians.¹ Finally, the mass media played an important role, emphasizing the emancipation of Central European states within the EU.²

From the point of view of practical policy, this interpretation presupposes higher equality among EU member states in the European Council and the Council of the EU. De-jure this is already a part of the EU's law; it just requires better implementation, which ensures value acceptability and technical feasibility of this interpretation. Inability of the EU to foresee the start of the SMO, Brussels' shock from this conflict gave an additional 'moral' weight to the arguments in favor of the increase of the role of new EU member states (traditionally suspicious about Russia) in the EU's decision-making. After 24 February 2022, Baltic politicians have constantly stressed that they had warned about the danger coming from Russia. Western politicians, for their part, acknowledged that they had been wrong in failing to take into account the views of the Baltic States, which were grounded in their historical experience.³

This interpretation led to several results. Firstly, the European Commission and 'old' EU member states admitted that they underestimated the input of the Baltic States and Central Europe, in general, into the EU's Russia policy.⁴ Baltic States and Poland regularly initiated new sanctions against Russia⁵ as well as additional defense measures.⁶ Many of these ideas have then been implemented by the EU. Dynkin aptly characterized these policy results as 'Estonization' of the European Union [28].

The second policy result of this interpretation is the increase in the representation of Baltic States in EU institutions. The most vivid illustration is

¹ East-West divide over von der Leyen's Russia mea culpa. 14.09.2022, *Politico*, URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/von-der-leyens-russia-mea-culpa-gets-kremlinology-treatment/> (accessed 07.03.2024). Politico was included into the Register of mass media, banned in Russia on 25.06.2024.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. See also, for example, President Macron: "Poland was right about Putin's Russia, Angela Merkel and I were wrong". 2025, *BritishPoles.uk*, URL: <https://www.britishpoles.uk/president-macron-poland-was-right-about-putins-russia-angela-merkel-and-i-were-wrong/> (accessed 07.06.2025).

⁵ For example, Poland, the Baltics and Ireland to push for harsher Russia sanctions. 2022, *Euractiv*, URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/poland-the-baltics-and-ireland-to-push-for-harsher-russia-sanctions/> (accessed 07.03.2025).

⁶ For example, Poland, Baltics call for EU defence line on border with Russia, Belarus. 2024, *Reuters*, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-baltics-call-eu-defence-line-border-with-russia-belarus-2024-06-26/> (accessed 07.03.2025).

the appointment of Estonian Kaja Kallas to the position of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in 2024. During the EP hearings, she underlined that her native country “has long told others that Russia’s imperialistic dream never died”.¹ Another noteworthy nomination is that of former Prime Minister of Lithuania, Andrius Kubilius, who became Commissioner for Defence and Space.

In sum, the problem in this interpretation of decolonization is defined as insufficient accounting of the knowledge of new member countries in the EU’s Russia policy, and the need to decolonize them when developing further EU steps. All EU institutions turned out to be open to this interpretation, which was facilitated by the Baltic entrepreneurs, by the value acceptability of a new vision, and by its technical feasibility. This interpretation resulted in the ‘Estonization’ of the EU, as well as in the increased influence of new member states in institutions that develop the EU’s Russia policy.

Decolonization of policy towards the post-Soviet Eurasia

The key problem in the second interpretation of decolonization is to overcome the interimperiality [29] of the post-Soviet Eurasia. On the one hand, it means the historical and cultural influence of Russia on this region. Here, decolonization is a project for the construction of nation states in post-Soviet Eurasia. On the other hand, intrerimperiality is a struggle with a Western vision, in which the post-Soviet Eurasia appears as “a partially modernized but not entirely civilized periphery of Europe” [29, p. 175]. Consequently, here the focus is on the return of agency to the states of post-Soviet Eurasia, as well as on their right to join the West/EU as equal partners [25; 29]. Ukraine became, as of 2022, the quintessence of this interpretation of decolonization in the EU’s Russia policy.

In this context, EU leaders activated the use of ‘empire’ and ‘neocolonialism’ tropes to describe Russian policy [30]. An important academic category in this interpretation is that of “epistemic imperialism”, that is, the desire to apply to the region categories that larger actors formulated [31]. In policy analysis, the category westsplaining played an important role; it was interpreted in a more specific way (compared to the first interpretation), for example, as a criticism of Moscow’s justification of the SMO (ensuring Russia’s security) and its acceptance by some Western politicians [32].

This interpretation of decolonization also had a wide circle of entrepreneurs. Representatives of the academia are noteworthy here, both Western and post-Soviet. The studies of Russian literature gave the first impulse [20; 33]. Another reference point was provided by the conclusion that postcolonial tools can be

¹ Questionnaire to the Commissioner-Designate Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, no date, *Europa.eu*, URL: https://hearings.elections.europa.eu/documents/kallas/kallas_writtenquestionsandanswers_en.pdf (accessed 07.03.2025).

used in historical research of the post-Soviet area [34–36]. Academic works that reinforce this interpretation, as well as policy analysis operationalizing this approach, have grown exponentially since 2022 [22; 29]. These developments were backed up by the demands to decolonize the very studying process of the post-Soviet space [37]. Some politicians, for their part, suggested qualifying the SMO as a colonial war and, at the same time, positioned Ukraine as defending EU values. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen,¹ High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell [30, p. 11, 41], representatives of the Baltic States and Poland [27] resorted to this idea. Ursula von der Leyen went so far as to define Kyiv as “the beating heart of today’s European values”.² The ‘colonial’ interpretation of the SMO also became the norm in the western mass media [21; 29].

In the EU’s practice, this interpretation presupposed at least three policy directions. The first, long-term one, was the EU’s formal decision to incorporate Ukraine as an EU member. Kyiv received the candidate status. Experts also initiated discussions on ways to simplify the accession process, primarily for Kyiv (see, for example, [38; 39]), which is a radical innovation for the EU. In relation to other states of the post-Soviet Eurasia, the EU policies vary from the recognition of enlargement prospects (for Moldova, for example) to the promise to deepen cooperation with countries of Central Asia. The second EU policy direction consists of strengthening the sanction pressure on Russia, while the third one comprises military and financial assistance to Ukraine.

This second interpretation of decolonization forms an additional legitimization of the decisions that the EU has already taken. This approach guarantees both value acceptability and (partial) technical feasibility of this interpretation. The EU’s enlargement, however, remains questionable.³ The candidate status does not mean automatic accession; the preparation process might take years as the case of Turkey illustrates. In addition, the EU in this approach substitutes its Russia’s policy with the policy on Ukraine. Moreover, support by other states of post-Soviet Eurasia for the EU’s policy on Ukraine becomes an essential component of

¹ Putin wants to see empires, autocracies back in Europe, warns von der Leyen in Poland. 2024, *Euractiv*, URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/putin-wants-to-see-empires-autocracies-back-in-europe-warns-von-der-leyen-in-poland/> (accessed 07.03.2025).

² Press statement by President von der Leyen with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. 2023, *Europa.eu*, URL: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-ukrainian-president-zelenskyy-2023-05-09_en (accessed 07.03.2025).

³ See, for example, Germany, France make EU reform pitch ahead of enlargement talks. 2023, *Euractiv*, URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement-neighbourhood/news/germany-france-make-eu-reform-pitch-ahead-of-enlargement-talks/> (accessed 07.03.2025).

their relations with Brussels. As a result, the hierarchy in the post-Soviet Eurasia does not disappear in the EU's policy. Rather, this hierarchy is revised with the centre now being placed in Kyiv (instead of Moscow).

In sum, the problem in the second interpretation of decolonization is inter-imperiality. As a result, decolonization means both the weakening of the dependence of this region on Russia and a fundamental revision of the EU's views on the region. EU institutions were open to this interpretation, whereas academic entrepreneurs supplied the basis for a simplistic stigmatization of Russia, which made its way into speeches of EU (particularly Baltic) politicians and in the mass media. The discourse on Russia's imperialism created a normative legitimization for the decision that the EU had already taken (restrictive measures, support for Ukraine). Yet, the technical feasibility of the enlargement remains questionable. Finally, EU actions formed a new hierarchy of actors in the post-Soviet Eurasia, where Kyiv became central (for Brussels), thus substituting Moscow.

Decolonization of Russia

The third interpretation of decolonization sees the problem in Russia's policy in its own territory. According to this point of view, to improve European security, it is necessary to go through the decolonization of Russia's internal space, that is, relations between its federal centre and regions must be revised. In this interpretation, two versions can be distinguished. The soft one indicates the need to increase the agency of peoples and regions of Russia through its "refederalization". The radical version aims at the disintegration of Russia into smaller states. Consequently, the key tropes for this interpretation in EU documents in addition to "decolonization" are "refederalization", "minorities", "(indigenous) peoples", "discrimination". For the EU, this is the most marginal interpretation, although historically Western countries have already used this thinking against Russia [4; 40].

The spectrum of entrepreneurs promoting this interpretation is wide. The academic basis is formed of the view on the history of Russia as a process of gradual colonization of territories [22; 41]. The requirements of the decolonization of Russia in some cases form a continuation of the second interpretation, that is, the decolonization of post-Soviet Eurasia [29; 42]. The promotion of the third interpretation has become a mission of several EU think tanks. The European Resilience Centre¹ regularly compares the development of Siberia with the experience of Western colonialism. In Lithuania, an Institute for the Research of the Regions of Russia was set up. At the same time, the idea of Russia's decolonization remains marginal among analysts and is even classified by Western experts as "wilder fantasies" [43].

Yet, these ideas are popular among Baltic politicians. Anna Fotyga (former member of the European Parliament) promoted the radical version of the third

¹ The Centre is listed as an undesirable organization in Russia as of 02.07.2025.

interpretation. She popularized this version among her EP colleagues¹ and in the mass media.² Kaja Kallas also hinted at this version when being Prime Minister.³ Andrius Kubilius, then a member of the European Parliament, advanced the soft version.⁴ Ukrainian politicians and activists, as well as some Russian emigrants, positioning themselves as representatives of indigenous people and of some Russian regions, play an important role in promoting this interpretation⁵ [40]. Mass media followed these debates, ensuring the coverage of the most sensational declarations but also providing the arena for debates among supporters and opponents of the decolonization of Russia.⁶

In the EU policy practice, this interpretation has hardly been reflected. As a rule, the EU limits itself to concerns regarding “crackdown” on “activists of ethnic and cultural minorities”.⁷ Josep Borrell underlined that “no one is disputing [Russia’s] borders” [30, p. 41]. Yet, in its 2024 resolution, the European Parliament talked about “changes in the system in the Russian Federation, in particular deimperialization, decolonialization and refederalization”.⁸ Parliamentary documents globally are used to test various ideas, to legitimize marginal paradigms, which

¹ The Imperial Russia: Conquer, Genocide & Colonisation. 2023, ECR, URL: https://ecrgroup.eu/event/the_imperial_russia_conquer_genocide_colonisation (accessed 28.06.2024).

² Fotyga, A. 2023, The dissolution of the Russian Federation is far less dangerous than leaving it ruled by criminals, *Euractiv*, URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-dissolution-of-the-russian-federation-is-a-far-less-dangerous-than-leaving-it-ruled-by-criminals/> (accessed 29.06.2024).

³ ‘Putin’s Russia Will Be Disintegrated Into States’: Kaja Kallas Shocker Ahead of Big EU Post Pick. 2024, *OneIndia*, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/live/1Jw999EuNpM> (accessed 04.07.2024).

⁴ Draft Report on a European Parliament recommendation to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission. 2023, *European Parliament*, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning EU-Russia political relations (2023/2125(INI), Committee on Foreign Affairs, Rapporteur: Andrius Kubilius, URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-753627_EN.pdf (accessed 30.10.2024).

⁵ Most of them are now included in the Register of terrorists and extremists in Russia.

⁶ A curious discussion took place, for example, in 2023 at the website www.politico.eu (this media was banned in the territory of Russia on 25.06.2024).

⁷ *European Parliament*, 2022, Increasing repression in Russia, including the case of Alexei Navalny European Parliament resolution of 7 April 2022 on the increasing repression in Russia, including the case of Alexei Navalny (2022/2622(RSP)), URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0125_EN.pdf (accessed 27.06.2024).

⁸ *European Parliament*, 2024, The murder of Alexei Navalny and the need for EU action in support of political prisoners and oppressed civil society in Russia. European Parliament resolution of 29 February 2024 on the murder of Alexei Navalny and the need for EU action in support of political prisoners and oppressed civil society in Russia (2024/2579(RSP), URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0118_EN.html (accessed 29.06.2024).

might then enter policy practice. Decolonization of new member states in the EU's decision-making and career growth of some of its representatives also facilitates the popularization of the third interpretation of decolonization in the EU.

From the values' point of view, this interpretation is acceptable to the EU as being in line with the concept of normative power Europe [44]. Firstly, decolonization is positioned in academia as a universal process that all 'old' powers should go through. Secondly, the EU's decolonization experience and reflections about its history are believed to be successful and thus valid for other actors. Thirdly, Brussels is used to demanding internal reforms from its partners. Yet this interpretation goes into the heart of Russia's domestic policy and is outside any influence of the EU. Thus, it is technically not feasible. Moreover, the very discussion about this interpretation provokes a highly negative reaction on the part of Moscow as a destructive interference in its internal affairs.¹ As a result, it creates an extremely negative background for any reboot of the dialogue between Moscow and Brussels.

In sum, according to the third interpretation of decolonization, the problem of the EU's policy lies in the historically formed statehood of Russia. In essence, the idea is to change or transform the EU's counterpart on the side of Russia. The network of entrepreneurs for this interpretation includes academic researchers, analysts as well as Baltic politicians. Some influence is also exerted by Ukrainian politicians and activists, as well as by members of the Russian émigré community. None of the EU institutions openly develops this interpretation, although some Baltic politicians promoted these ideas; they were also reflected in the European Parliament documents. Normatively this interpretation might seem attractive to the EU, but it is not technically feasible. Moreover, it complicates any reboot of the dialogue between Moscow and Brussels.

Conclusion

The MSF made it possible to demonstrate how an idea can be reformulated into a new conceptual basis for policy — in this case, for the EU's policy toward Russia. A political vacuum in the EU regarding the paradigm of its future relations with Russia, the popularity of the decolonization concept, and its value acceptability form important preconditions in this case. The focus of this article was on how the idea of decolonization is interpreted when streams of problem, politics and policy are combined. Attention was also paid to Baltic entrepreneurs in this process (see Table).

It was demonstrated that three interpretations differ in how they determine the problem of the EU's Russia policy. In the first case, the main question is

¹ See, for example, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the Government Hour in the State Duma of the Russian Federation, Moscow, February 15, 2023, URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1854365/?lang=en (accessed 12.06.2025).

who is involved in the policy development. The agency is returned to new EU countries (primarily the Baltic States and Poland). In the second interpretation, the main problem is to overcome the interimperiality of the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia, to return the agency to them. Finally, the third interpretation targets Moscow directly, it is focused on the return of the agency to the peoples and regions of Russia and ultimately aims at transforming the EU's counterpart on the Russian side.

Although these interpretations represent all categories of entrepreneurs, they are qualitatively different. The first one is characterized by both academic studies (especially the Baltic one) and close involvement of high-level Baltic politicians. They have the necessary information and managerial resources, whereas their legitimacy stems from their alleged past 'correctness' regarding the true nature of Russia. In the second interpretation academic studies dominate; they are buttressed by the 'moral' pressure from Ukrainian politicians, supported by EU supranational leaders and the Baltic solidarity with Kyiv. Finally, the third interpretation (so far) is patchy and marginal, but it is promoted by some think tanks and individual Baltic politicians. Thus, the role of the Baltic entrepreneurs is clearly expressed in all three interpretations.

In all three interpretations, value acceptability for the EU is ensured. It is achieved through the principles of the EU in the first case, through history and literature research, and pressure of Ukraine in the second interpretation and, finally, through extrapolating the practice of normative power Europe and colonial experience of EU member states in the third interpretation. At the same time, three interpretations are qualitatively different in terms of technical feasibility. The first one is most successful and seems to be long-term because it depends on the implementation of the already adopted EU rules and is linked to its internal policies. The second interpretation is also effective, as it is rooted in the EU's external relations. However, time will tell whether the EU's further enlargement will take place in the post-Soviet territory and whether the 'Ukrainian' hierarchy in the post-Soviet Eurasia will be preserved. Finally, the third interpretation (so far) is most doubtful since its implementation is outside the EU's reach. At the same time, this latter interpretation was incorporated in the European Parliament documents whereas appointment of the Baltic politicians (primarily Kaja Kallas and Andrius Kubilius) to high supranational posts creates possibilities for further dissemination of these ideas.

Three interpretations reinforce each other. The agency of the Baltic States and Poland in the EU facilitate the decolonial conceptualization of the processes in the post-Soviet space. The sustainability of the "decolonization" of Ukraine / post-Soviet Eurasia is discursively linked to changes in Russia.¹

¹ Fotyga, A. 2023, The dissolution of the Russian Federation is far less dangerous than leaving it ruled by criminals, *Euractiv*, URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-dissolution-of-the-russian-federation-is-a-far-less-dangerous-than-leaving-it-ruled-by-criminals/> (accessed 29.06.2024).

Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept presupposes eventual restoration of Moscow's relations with partners in Europe. However, decolonization as a conceptual basis of the EU's Russia policy hardly facilitates this reboot. The first interpretation of decolonization means lopsided harsh actions of the EU vis-à-vis Moscow. The second interpretation in its current form means military escalation, sanctions against Russia and questionable new hierarchy of actors in the post-Soviet Eurasia. The third interpretation means interference in Russia's internal affairs. Consequently, none of the present interpretations of decolonization facilitate restoration of pragmatic contacts between Moscow and Brussels.

Finally, the MSF indicates some directions for future research. Firstly, entrepreneurs who promote the interpretations of decolonization, as well as their strategies, resources and network, deserve a more detailed study. Secondly, how political windows for combining three streams open up in the EU can be explored. Thirdly, the second interpretation of decolonization requires more detail. Today it is focused on Ukraine but it remains unclear how it can be extrapolated to other countries of post-Soviet Eurasia. Finally, the stability and legitimacy of the 'Ukrainian' hierarchy, which the EU currently constructs in the post-Soviet space, deserves attention.

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