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# Reframing Reflexivity

*Collaborative Ethics, Collective Responsibility, and Learnings from Researching Russia's War against Ukraine*

ABSTRACT This article critically examines the role of reflexivity in the study of wars, conflicts, and authoritarianism, drawing on insights gained from researching Russia's war against Ukraine. While reflecting on our positionalities when researching socially and politically sensitive topics is important both ethically and methodologically, we argue that it increasingly proves insufficient. The conventional, individualized understanding of reflexivity falls short in dismantling the epistemic hierarchies and broader structures of power that neglect the agency of our research stakeholders and subordinate the knowledge of already marginalized communities in academia and global politics. Ukraine's resistance against Russia's aggression has particularly brought to light previously excluded political and academic subjectivities, underscoring the need for a reframing of reflexivity that challenges the dominance of Russian- and Western-centric perspectives in analyses of the region. This article accordingly contends that reflexivity should be approached as a collaborative practice grounded in the ethic of reciprocity and collective epistemic responsibility, rather than simply a process of personal introspection. Reconceptualizing reflexivity in this way recenters the perspectives and experiences of affected communities, fostering more ethical and equitable knowledge production in political science.
KEYWORDS reflexivity, Russia-Ukraine war, knowledge production, ethics, collective responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

Terms such as "reflexivity" and "positionality" have become commonplace among post-positivist and critical intellectual traditions in political science, and especially in the subfield of international relations. As scholars within these traditions, we are regularly encouraged to critically examine our positionalities and (un)conscious biases through the process of reflexivity—"the act of reflecting on practice"—to understand how they may influence the knowledge we produce (Malthouse, Roffey-Barentsen, and Watts 2014, 599). By locating oneself in a structural picture, reflexivity helps researchers recognize that what they see is influenced by their own ways of seeing (Fook 1999), particularly that their narratives, identities, previous experiences, relationships, and knowledge shape their approaches, and thus, their research designs, methods, processes, and findings (May and Perry 2011). Put differently: reflexivity signifies a refusal to efface ourselves from the

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research process, where we, instead, openly grapple with our own subjectivities and the ways they are manifested in the inevitably partial stories we tell through our research.

The need for reflexivity is especially acute in investigations about sensitive and dynamic topics like war, conflict, and authoritarianism. A major push for greater reflexivity in research about war in particular has recently come from the critical literature on Russia's war against Ukraine. This body of literature has arisen as a counterforce to the proliferating unreflexive Russia- and West-centric studies that neglect the voices and agency of Ukrainians (see, for example, Axyonova and Lozka 2023; Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023; Hendl et al. 2024; Kurylo 2023). An important contribution to this discussion is the December 2023 special issue in the *Journal of International Relations and Development* on knowledge production in the Russia-Ukraine war (see Burlyuk and Musliu 2023) and, within it, the piece by Vera Axyonova and Katsiaryna Lozka (2023), which demonstrates how individual researchers can practice reflexivity by illustrating the ways that the authors actively negotiated their own positionalities, power relations, and emotions in their research on expert knowledge production in post-2022 Ukraine. This piece, like the others in the special issue, accordingly underscores that greater reflexivity is crucial in both theoretical and empirical research about Russia's war against Ukraine for ensuring transparency and a high standard of ethics in knowledge production.

But while this emerging literature has made commendable strides, it is not entirely clear what a commitment to reflexivity entails in the study of those at the receiving end of Russia's violence. As Olga Burlyuk and Vjosa Musliu (2023) point out, the proliferation of Ukraine-focused research since February 2022 has often reproduced existing power hierarchies, even while attempting to be more inclusive. While reflexivity is important, the limitations of the conventional understanding of reflexivity as primarily an individual exercise of self-awareness and positionality negotiation inherited from the broader reflexivist scholarship in political science (Hamati-Ataya 2013) are hence increasingly evident within the context of the war. Most crucially, individualized understandings of reflexivity fall short of effectively challenging and dismantling the deeply entrenched epistemic conditions that have historically marginalized Ukrainian voices. The question therefore remains: (How) can reflexivity be reconceptualized to center and amplify the perspectives and experiences of communities most affected by the sociopolitical phenomena we study?

Using the case of Russia's war against Ukraine, this article advocates for a fundamental reframing of reflexivity that moves beyond individual self-reflection to actively challenge and transform the structures of power that shape knowledge production in political science. What is needed, we contend, is a more comprehensive understanding of reflexivity as a multifaceted and reciprocal effort involving researchers' relationships with themselves, their research participants, and the larger intellectual communities in which they are embedded. While prior research has documented the challenges of conducting research during wartimes and critiqued those who produce(d) knowledge about the Russia-Ukraine war (for example, Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Howlett and Lazarenko 2023), this article makes a distinct theoretical contribution by reconceptualizing reflexivity through two key moves: reframing it as a collaborative ethic of reciprocity between

researchers and research participants, and positioning it as a practice of collective responsibility within scholarly communities. Approaching reflexivity as a practice grounded in the ethic of collaboration and collective responsibility, we argue, can aid in dismantling the asymmetries of power that perpetuate the marginalization of certain voices.

The article begins by outlining the ongoing debates about the limitations of reflexivity as an individualized practice by engaging with the reflexivist scholarship in political science and critical voices from the region since February 24, 2022. We then use the Russia-Ukraine war to illustrate the importance of framing reflexivity as a collaborative ethic of reciprocity to foster more reflexive engagements between researchers and research stakeholders. The article further argues that broadening our present conception of reflexivity to encompass our collective scholarly responsibility to combat epistemic injustices is equally paramount for ethical knowledge production—within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and also about other socially and politically sensitive topics and contexts.

As this article centers on positionality and reflexivity, it would be remiss not to note that both authors understand themselves to be "insiders" when researching the Russia-Ukraine war. Both have personal and familial ties to Ukraine and have conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative research in the country prior to and since Russia's 2022 invasion. As such, they are deeply cognizant of how their positionalities and lived experiences motivate and shape this discussion.

## LIMITS OF (INDIVIDUALIZED) REFLEXIVITY

Scholars of politics and international relations are regularly encouraged to examine the role of their positionalities in the research process through the practice of reflexivity. Although several authors define and discuss reflexivity in different ways (for example, Fook 1999; Malthouse, Roffey-Barentsen, and Watts 2014; May and Perry 2011; Myers 2010; Noh 2019; Rennie 2004), positionality in research can be addressed through "endogenous reflexivity" and "referential reflexivity." Of these, endogenous reflexivity refers to the ways that the "self" (habitus) is constructed and positioned, including how scholars' former experiences and preconceptions influence their approaches to certain topics, environments, and research more generally (Bourdieu 1993; May and Perry 2011; Noh 2019). Referential reflexivity further interrogates the interplay between researchers and the situations they study; namely, how the self is perceived by others, how the environment encourages or restrains certain actions, and how the environment is shaped by these actions (May and Perry 2011; Myers 2010; Noh 2019). Together, endogenous and referential reflexivities encourage researchers to investigate their own positionalities.

Despite the critical importance of reflexivity, there is a growing critique in the academy of its limitations. Concerns have been raised that reflexivity has been diminished over time to a mere formality (Bilotta 2021; Finlay 2002) or, even worse, to what Bourdieu (1997, 49) terms "self-indulgent narcissism." In this sense, reflexivity risks becoming, and may even already be viewed by some researchers as, an end in itself, pursued solely for its own sake, thereby devolving into a form of "self-absorbed navel-gazing" (Lal 1996, 207). In focusing solely on their personal subjectivities, scholars hence

risk overshadowing and elevating themselves above those they claim to represent. In fact, even academics working within feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial bodies of literature sometimes fail to subject themselves to the same degree of critical scrutiny that they apply to their participants (Hendl et al. 2024; Kurylo 2023). At its extreme, the self-congratulatory belief in one's own reflexivity coupled with the assumption that scholars inherently possess superior critical abilities can reinforce the problematic view of knowledge as produced within an elitist vacuum (Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019).

The mainstream focus on reflexivity as "individualized reflection" is additionally harmful because it risks perpetuating the systemic power hierarchies that shape the academic production and dissemination of knowledge, especially the existing power imbalances between researchers and their research stakeholders (Maton 2003, 56). This issue is exceptionally acute in fieldwork, where reflexivity has often been used as a "means of constructing architectures of knowledge about the West's many 'Others'" in social science scholarship (Cueva et al. 2024, 4). Yet, it can be seen in other ways within the academy as well. Most striking is when, under the guise of "granting voice" to other (usually marginalized) groups, researchers assume the role of "saviors" who are seemingly entitled to speak for the researched communities and/or control the extent to which (and also often *how*) certain populations are heard. Indeed, such actions are not necessarily ill-intended and, in fact, are sometimes genuine efforts by scholars to decenter themselves within their research. Nevertheless, researchers' (hyper-)focus on self-reflection can easily obscure the relational nature of research, which is most often *not* a solitary endeavor in political science. This problematically limits the building of equitable and reciprocal relationships with all participants in our studies. It can, moreover, reproduce the narratives and epistemic hierarchies that reflexivity aims to deconstruct by forcing subjectivities onto different participants and creating acceptable "scripts"' for what they are allowed to say, do, or be in order to be taken seriously (Kapur 2002). Although still crucial, conventional understandings of reflexivity can, nevertheless, fall short in critically examining, as well as in fully realizing, the broader epistemic conditions in which knowledge is produced.

The limitations of reflexivity are especially acute against the backdrop of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While there existed a long-standing denial of Ukrainian subjectivity in both mainstream political discourses and academic research before February 2022 (Kurylo 2023), a certain script has often been imposed on Ukrainians since Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine, casting them as helpless victims of geopolitical power struggles and disregarding their agency. The hierarchy of "objective" knowledge over Ukrainians' lived experiences "of suffering" is highlighted by Darya Tsymbalyuk (2023), for instance, when explaining how the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Agnès Callamard, pushed back against Ukrainians' disapproval of the organization's war crime reporting in Ukraine on grounds of "impartiality." Several scholars from Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe have also detailed how they have been increasingly perceived as "emotional non-experts" about the war at academic conferences and events (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023) and told more frequently than Western experts—and sometimes also *non-experts*—to declare their positionalities when studying the region

(Hendl et al. 2024; Stavrevska et al. 2023). In this way, reflexivity has been used in research about the war as a means of policing and subjugating certain researchers, requiring them to "confess" their subjectivities and vulnerabilities in order to legitimize themselves as knowers within the discipline.

Other scholars from the region have also described their feelings of tokenization and the signification of their bodies since February 2022, wherein their scholarly contributions have been artificially separated from, and minimized vis-à-vis, their personal experiences and subjectivities (Tsymbalyuk 2023). In reflecting on her own experience as a scholar of and from Ukraine in Western academia since February 2022, Tsymbalyuk (2023, 705) starkly queried: "Is my body being tokenized in an attempt for the institutions to remain relevant without embracing structural changes and addressing their own complacency in constructing and maintaining Russian hegemony?" In addition to tokenizing Ukrainians within institutional structures since February 24, 2022, including in both academic and policy events and discussions, the demand for reflexivity from researchers closely connected to the region—but not equally from scholars *not from* the region—has thus reinforced the perception that they are inherently biased, less objective, and not as knowledgeable about certain phenomena as their counterparts. This has effectively silenced and discredited their knowledge and elevated the authority of Western (non-)experts. Fundamentally, it has also served to maintain the dominance of certain (read: Western) epistemologies, methodologies, and processes of knowledge production in research about Russia's war against Ukraine.

Some scholars from Eastern Europe have particularly highlighted these epistemic hierarchies in disclosing their uncomfortable experiences with "Westsplaining" since Russia's 2022 invasion. Ukrainian historian, Olesya Khromeychuk (2022), for example, details how Western media, who "despite possessing little relevant expertise, were recognized as authoritative" following February 24, 2022, and have repeatedly "Westsplained" Russia's version of Ukraine's history to Ukrainians. Others, too, have articulated their own treatment as objects rather than subjects of history within the context of the war by media, the academy, and policymakers (e.g., Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023; Kurylo 2023; Sonevytsky 2022). The "Russplaining" and "Westsplaining" following Russia's full-scale invasion was felt so deeply by Ukrainian academics in particular that the Kyiv School of Economics—one of Ukraine's highest-ranked universities—even made an overt appeal to Western academia to respect Ukrainian agency and intellectual sovereignty (KSE 2022). Crucially, these forced subjectivities risk (re)producing (and have indeed reproduced) certain narratives about Ukraine and Ukrainians, which do not necessarily reflect their lived realities. They have likewise added to the violence that vulnerable communities already face—those in Ukraine as well as others around the world who have also confronted Russia's imperialism.

Although many academic events, panel discussions, and public-facing forums have sought to amplify the voices of Ukrainians amid the escalation of Russian aggression, reflexivity has evidently not proven sufficient for deconstructing the epistemic power structures that have invisibilized the Ukrainian subject, like other nations and communities affected by Russian colonialism, in academia and global politics for decades. A fuller

understanding of reflexivity as a research practice is therefore needed to reckon with the broader structures of power that shape, and are simultaneously shaped by, the relationships, positionalities, and subjectivities involved in our research, as well as the research itself. In the two subsequent sections, we attempt to address this problem by rethinking the role of reflexivity in light of the perpetuated (and perpetuating) power dynamics in academia and global politics. To do so, we argue that reflexivity needs to be reframed as a multifaceted and collaborative ethic of reciprocity and collective epistemic responsibility for the production of knowledge about sensitive and dynamic political contexts.

## COLLABORATIVE ETHIC OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Due to the shortcomings of the individualized understanding of, and approach to, reflexivity, we advocate for a reframing of the concept, especially in cases where the objective of research is to uncover and recognize the once-marginalized knowledge of communities affected by war, conflict, and authoritarianism. We specifically champion a move away from the view that reflexivity is merely an individual self-reflective effort or a form of "personal therapy" (Wedeen 2010, 267). Instead, we argue that reflexivity should be comprehensively approached as a collaborative practice grounded in the ethic of reciprocity.

At the heart of this radical and democratizing shift is the recognition that knowledge production is a collective exercise. While power dynamics in research are often described as "reciprocal, asymmetrical, or exploitative" (England 1994, 243), the "irretrievably plural, contestable, and political dimensions of knowledge claims" are co-constituted through negotiations between a multitude of agents (Hutchings 2023, 826). We fundamentally cannot think, know, or write about marginalized societies' struggles for self-determination without involving or working "*with* them" (Cueva et al. 2024, 10). Failing to acknowledge that knowledge production is a process of co-cultivation also constitutes a failure to account for the complex relationships involved in our research—between the people we engage with but also the communities and spaces in which we are embedded. Moreover, it denies the agency of our research participants and subordinates the knowledge of already disempowered communities in academia and global politics more widely.

To deconstruct the broad epistemic conditions in which knowledge is produced, reflexivity must accordingly be approached as "an active appreciation of companionship" (Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019, 5) throughout the entire research process. This requires an overt recognition that research participants are knowing collaborators in their own right. Rather than passive sources of information or objects of study, they are active partners in, and contributors to, our inquiries. This recognition foregrounds the situated perspectives of all research stakeholders, particularly those with experiences of living the sociopolitical phenomena we study. In the case of Russia's war against Ukraine, this includes all societies who have directly experienced Russia's brutal aggression. At the same time, understanding reflexivity as a collaborative practice requires scholars to fully reflect on their own subjectivities, including the power of their voice and also of their silence

(Howlett and Lazarenko 2023). Furthermore, it involves acknowledging their own limits and gaps in knowledge, especially about topics that they, sometimes, will never be able to acquire. Lived experiences of Russia's colonial violence are but one example here, particularly for many scholars at Western academic institutions.

When elevating and, even more importantly, *centering* local voices and experiences in knowledge production, a collaborative practice of reflexivity likewise involves overtly recognizing the diversity among local communities. As individuals' varied lived experiences create multiple and sometimes competing narratives, even within the same communities, these must be examined in their plurality so as not to construct or reinforce an artificial notion of a homogeneous or indivisible "local" perspective. In the case of Ukraine amid Russia's war, diverging experiences range, for instance, from those fighting on the frontlines, to internally displaced persons, to those under constant shelling, to those who fled abroad but maintain deep connections to home, to those living under Russian occupation, among others. These varying circumstances naturally shape different views on contentious topics like potential peace negotiations. Recent polling by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2024) demonstrates these developing cleavages within Ukrainian society: while up to 87% of Ukrainians opposed any territorial concessions between May 2022 and May 2023, this opposition dropped to 55% by May 2024, with support for potential concessions rising from roughly 8% to 32%. Practicing reflexivity as a collaborative ethic consequently means creating space for these multiple and often contradictory perspectives to emerge, coexist, and interact. By doing so, we can realize both the shared aspects of individuals' experiences that unite them and the situational circumstances that create divergent viewpoints. In challenging the notion of a "unified local," this approach, moreover, prompts us to critically reflect on whether, when, and how the (largely artificial) binary between the "local" and "foreign" is a useful categorization and/or problematically simplifies the complex sociopolitical realities of interest to us.

As research into sensitive and politically charged topics is ultimately about community-building and solidarity with the struggles of its survivors, friendship or, at least, a conscious embracement of companionship, can foster openness and emancipate alternative and contextual ways of knowing (Fine 1994; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Smith et al. 2009). While scholars from positivist paradigms discourage researcher involvement with the belief that it will "bias" the research process, disturb the natural setting, and contaminate the results (Douglas and Carless 2012), building relationships is essential for in-depth "emic" understandings, which are easily overlooked in "etic" accounts. As a way to balance these seemingly competing demands, friendship as a method can provide a rich resource for getting "to know" local communities in meaningful and sustained ways typically founded on common interests, mutual emotional affiliations, and a sense of alliance (Fine 1994; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann-Healy 2003). Engaging in interactive partnerships with diverse actors both within and outside of academia—including local scholars, policymakers, activists, civil society groups, security professionals, and ordinary citizens—can equally aid in establishing dialogical and symmetrical relationships (Lacy 2023).

Practicing reflexivity as a collaborative exercise grounded in reciprocity may sometimes also require working "with" the actors responsible for committing various kinds of violence. As this article is dedicated to centering voices most affected by war and violence, a broader discussion on what reflexivity could entail in the study of the oppressor(s) merits separate attention, not least because the latter's perspectives have historically dominated and thus do not need further amplification. But to gain a comprehensive understanding of these complex sociopolitical phenomena, we inevitably need to find ways to engage with agents of harm while thoroughly scrutinizing the political-normative consequences of their views and actions. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, this could involve studying the discourses coming from Russia, but approaching them with critical scrutiny rather than feigned neutrality to avoid "both-sideism" and false equivalencies. Still, when researching both the victims and perpetrators of violence and oppression as active agents shaping the contexts we study, we must meticulously consider whose voices we center to ensure we do not inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances or epistemic injustices.

Similarly, approaching reflexivity as more than an individualized process, but a collaborative one, serves to dismantle the assumed boundaries between researchers and the many actors involved in our inquiries. In challenging the artificial dichotomy between academic and everyday ways of knowing—and the conventional notion of the scholar as a solitary knowledge-producer responsible for the entire process of creating knowledge—such a rethinking prompts us to change our stance toward those we study (Cooper 1998), as well as those we must inevitably engage with. It also ensures that our research better reflects the lived realities, and attends to the needs and challenges, of those most affected by the topics and contexts of interest to us. In this way, reflexivity integrally becomes an ethic of reciprocity.

## COLLECTIVE EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

While a reciprocal understanding of reflexivity is a valuable step toward addressing the limitations of its individualized conception, it is not by itself sufficient to dismantle the entrenched epistemic imperialism and coloniality of knowledge production. We therefore argue that scholars must not only engage more robustly with reflexivity in knowledge production as a collaborative process but also use it to critically interrogate the broader structures of power and privilege within academia and global politics. This involves examining the positionalities of individual researchers and their relations with research participants, and also the systemic inequalities and institutional barriers that shape the production and dissemination of knowledge.

An important prerequisite for a fundamental restructuring of the "credibility economy" within academia (Hutchings 2023, 825) is a critical examination of the institutional and structural factors that have resulted in the erasures of certain (read: non-Western) people and their subjectivities. This marginalization has been repeatedly manifested through funding priorities, publication and citation practices, and disciplinary norms and biases. It is also evident in the inaccessibility of certain associations, events,

and even publications to scholars from non-Western countries, especially those who are not native English speakers or require visas for travel. These economic, political, and epistemic ramifications are the consequence of the prioritization of Western-centric perspectives in political science, as well as in academia more largely.

The privileging of Western perspectives over East European ones was evident in Western academic responses to Russia's re-invasion, even among those purporting offers of solidarity. A glaring example was the emergence of feminist "anti-war" manifestos that, while claiming to support Ukraine, imposed demands that fundamentally disregarded the voices, needs, and agency of Ukrainian women, whose lives are most profoundly impacted by the war's brutality (for more, see Hendl 2022). This troubling trend persists, as is evidenced by recent open letters opposing Ukraine's potential NATO accession and calling for Ukraine to cede territories to Russia, such as the one published by *The Guardian* on July 8, 2024.[1] These instances underscore a broader pattern of epistemic marginalization, where external voices presume to dictate outcomes for Ukrainians without adequately considering their perspectives and lived experiences.

In confronting these epistemic injustices in academic and public discourses, reflexivity emerges as a critical tool. Specifically, approaching reflexivity as a collective epistemic responsibility can aid in dismantling the entrenched structures of power that have long privileged certain voices. Yet, doing so requires an openness to and acceptance of other forms of knowledge that have historically been excluded from scholarly analyses. This, indeed, includes placing greater value on local or "native" experiences and subjectivities (Howlett and Lazarenko 2023), but especially incorporating "embodied and uncomfortable knowledge" (Tsymbalyuk 2022) that both we and our research stakeholders hold. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, several scholars from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have begun paving the way for a fundamental overhaul of the politics around knowledge production by elevating the situated knowledge of Ukrainians and other communities in the region above dominant Russian- and Western-centric perspectives (see Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Hendl et al. 2024; Sereda and Mikheieva 2025; Shevtsova 2024). While small in number, these works are critical illustrations that much more can, and must, be done for epistemic democratization, especially for topics connected to war, conflict, and authoritarianism.

It must also be recognized that being reflexive means holding ourselves as scholars and as the academy accountable and willing to own up to our collective responsibility to cease the dismissal of subjugated communities and experiences as credible sources of knowledge. This means thinking about the messages conveyed and power dynamics reinforced when we conceptualize, investigate, and speak about the communities we study, such as by problematically simplifying an immensely diverse geographical area to the "post-Soviet space." Inherently, too, this may mean relinquishing a degree of control over the research process and embracing a more empathetic, compassionate, and emotionally attuned attitude to findings that are unexpected, contradictory, or even discomforting by way

1. See, for example: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/08/nato-alliance-ukraine-member (accessed February 26, 2025).

of unsettling our own preconceptions and subjectivities. As was previously mentioned, this may likewise involve a consideration of the views and perspectives of actors we have historically ignored, diminished, and/or categorically disagree with.

Indeed, this is a challenging undertaking, as for some of us, it may mean acknowledging our own complicity in validating and perpetuating disciplinary structures of power and oppression. This process may likewise require relinquishing some of the privileges and benefits acquired through our involvement in these structures, events, associations, and institutions. At the same time, deconstructing the existing structures of knowledge production creates opportunities for new collaborations, co-authorships, and partnerships driven by the lived experiences of people connected to the phenomena we study. Being truly reflexive when studying contexts characterized by acute insecurity, vulnerability, and violence, then, fundamentally requires assuming a shared ethico-political responsibility to redistribute epistemic value in ways that center multifaceted ways of knowing.

Restructuring the politics around knowledge production likewise entails building new scholarly infrastructures. Rather than working only within the confines of our current structures, academic collaborations of scholars from marginalized communities have shown effective collective action in times of emergencies and crises. For instance, new networks formed since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have begun challenging the entrenched power imbalances that have long characterized studies of the region by creating platforms for local voices to be heard and valued on their own terms. One illustration is the RUTA Association for Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asia Studies in Global Conversation established with the explicit goal of transforming "the regions' positions from objects of study to active and visible epistemic agents" (Skubil 2023). RUTA's aim to strengthen connections and build solidarity networks between scholars and institutions from and beyond the region is tangibly evidenced by the organization of their inaugural conference with over 150 researchers from around the world in Ukraine in 2024 (where it will be held again in 2025) to allow the participation of Ukrainian researchers, including male scholars whose mobility is restricted in wartime, as well as those from the broader region who mostly do not need a visa to enter Ukraine. The 2024 conference's program around themes concerning the region(s), such as decolonizing knowledge production and challenging perpetuated colonial and imperial legacies, also illustrates RUTA's aim to center and build on the knowledges, expertise, scholarly traditions, and experiences of people from the region to challenge Russian dominated discourses and stimulate social responsibility. By seeking to foster "awareness and engagement with concerns of diversity, equity and justice in academia and research" (RUTA 2023), RUTA hence concretely illustrates how collective practices of reflexivity, rather than only individualized efforts, are needed for epistemic reparations and restitution.

The YugoslaWomen+ Collective—a group of six women scholars from the former Yugoslav space—is an additional demonstration of a collaborative, inclusive, and anti-individualist initiative "rooted in friendship, equity and solidarity" (YugoslaWomen+ Collective 2021). Their example shows the potential for scholarly collaboration in

post-conflict contexts where sufficient temporal distance from violence exists. Indeed, much can be learned from the YugoslavWomen+ Collective for collaborative initiatives in CEE; however, Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine fundamentally presents challenges to doing so, particularly as any attempt to foster academic dialogue between scholars from aggressor and victim states during active conflict risks false equivalence and ethical compromise. The war accordingly underscores a crucial consideration for collective knowledge production: while collaboration can be transformative, it must be anchored in ethical principles that prioritize accountability, moral responsibility, and justice. The growing number of co-authored papers, joint projects, and collaborative events with scholars from or closely connected to the region since February 24, 2022 demonstrate that this is possible; examples include the piece by Hendl et al. (2024), which brings together Czech, Ukrainian, and Qazaq researchers, and also this article itself.

At the same time, grounding the practice of reflexivity in collaboration and collective responsibility may not address all the layers of structural "complicity" and conditioning within dominant power positions and interests in academic knowledge production. We must thus realize that collaboration is not only about a collection (or even a dismantling) of structures, but also of selves. By coalescing, these selves accordingly forge an entity greater than the sum of its parts, one that is capable of challenging the "methodological individualism" that inflicts much of political science. Juliet Johnson underscored this in her 2023 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Presidential Address when highlighting that dismantling knowledge hierarchies also involves actions by individuals to change collective dynamics, which could include but are not limited to persuading and educating academic colleagues who do not work on the region, serving in university administration roles to promote equitable knowledge production, and organizing events on topics related to war, conflict, and authoritarianism in the CEE region at general disciplinary conferences, such as those of the American Anthropological Association or the American Political Science Association (for more, see Johnson 2024). While these initiatives require new ways of thinking and doing, as Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine shows: the imperative to interrogate and challenge the power-laden relations in knowledge production is too significant to be disregarded.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Moving forward, we advocate for the academy to more explicitly and intentionally contemplate the meaning and scope of reflexivity in research, especially when investigating phenomena connected to war, conflict, and authoritarianism. Although knowledge production is often treated as an individualized process in political science scholarship, knowledge does not emerge in a vacuum; it is co-created through intricate relationships, negotiations, and exchanges between researchers (and with themselves), local communities, and broader intellectual fields. It is therefore vital that we begin to think about the positionalities of all research stakeholders in ways that critically locate them in the complex web of power relations in which they are entwined.

This is not to say that reflexivity in the form of self-reflection is unimportant. Conventional understandings of reflexivity remain vital for us, as scholars, to recognize the roles we play in our research. Yet, as has been seen since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, failing to acknowledge and move beyond the limits of individualized reflexivity falsely elevates our importance. Indeed, we are the ones collecting and presenting data, but it is our participants who have *lived* or are *living* the sociopolitical realities we study. These individuals ultimately shape how our research is produced, presented, consumed, and eventually reproduced by others. Moving away from individualized, hierarchical modes of inquiry toward a view of knowledge generation as a communal endeavor is thus essential for building transnational forms of epistemic solidarity through our research.

Most critically, reframing reflexivity as a collaborative practice grounded in the ethic of reciprocity illuminates our collective scholarly responsibility to work toward epistemic justice in knowledge production and exchange. Some degree of unlearning or, at least, *reframing* of how we understand reflexivity is necessary to undo the marginalization inherent to traditional approaches. This is, unquestionably, not limited to studies of the region, but includes those in other contexts involving war, conflict, and other sensitive issues. Doing so will fundamentally aid in fostering more equitable, conscientious, and ethically grounded scholarship. ■


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