EDUCATION

SCHOLARSHIP AND PRESSURES OF LEGACY, POLITICS, AND WAR: EXPERIENCES OF UKRAINIAN HISTORIANS

Ielysaveta Shchepetylnykova

PhD
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
ORCID: 0009-0001-6184-9599, *e-mail:* Shchepet@connect.hku.hk

Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine has combined missile and military assaults with disinformation about Ukrainian history, culture, and traditions. However, scholarship evaded making sense of the challenges faced by Ukrainian historians struggling to overcome the Soviet legacy of ideological indoctrination at a time when their country is fighting for freedom and independence. This study investigated conceptualizations of challenges historians face in their epistemic domains and their roles and responsibilities in the de-Sovietization of their intellectual communities and society at large. Analysis of interviews and documents suggests that the Soviet legacy of dogmatism and binary thinking continues influencing knowledge production among scholars fearful of stepping out of their self-censorship cages even after the door has been open. The abolition of state ideology in independent Ukraine encouraged Soviet-trained scholars to re-orient from Marxism to ethno-national paradigm. Nevertheless, their peers have challenged this binary thinking. Tensions rise between dogma-oriented scholars and their counterparts who strive to speak the truth about history, which is nuanced, unsettling, and never final. This task becomes increasingly challenging in the context of Russia's genocidal war that weaponizes history to justify its crimes. Social pressure encourages scholars to produce counterpropaganda narratives limiting their academic freedom and opportunities for critical inquiry.

Key words: de-Sovietization; higher education; reforms; Ukraine.

Гібридна війна Росії проти України поєднує ракетні та військові атаки з дезінформацією про українську історію, культуру та традиції. Однак наукова думка уникала осмислення викликів, з якими стикаються українські історики, що намагаються подолати радянську спадщину ідеологічної індоктринації в той час, коли їхня країна бореться за свободу і незалежність. У цьому дослідженні вивчалися концептуалізації викликів, з якими стикаються історики у своїх епістемічних сферах, а також їхні ролі та обов'язки у дерадянізації своїх інтелектуальних спільнот і суспільства загалом. Аналіз інтерв'ю та документів свідчить про те, що радянська спадщина догматизму та бінарного мислення продовжує впливати на виробництво знань серед науковців, які бояться вийти з клітки самоцензури навіть після того, як двері були відчинені. Скасування державної ідеології в незалежній Україні спонукало науковців з радянською освітою переорієнтуватися з марксизму на етнонаціональну парадигму. Проте їхні колеги кинули виклик такому бінарному мисленню. Зростає напруженість між догматично орієнтованими науковцями та їхніми колегами, які прагнуть говорити правду про історію, яка є нюансованою, тривожною і ніколи не буває остаточною. Це завдання стає дедалі складнішим у контексті геноцидної війни Росії, яка використовує історію як зброю для виправдання своїх злочинів. Соціальний тиск спонукає науковців до створення контрпропагандистських наративів, які обмежують їхню академічну свободу та можливості для критичного дослідження.

Ключові слова: дерадянізація; вища освіта; реформи; Україна; Україна.

Introduction

Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine has combined missile and military assaults with disinformation about Ukrainian history, culture, and traditions - nevertheless, little remains known about the impact of Russia's disinformation efforts on the Ukrainian academic profession. Prymachenko (2017) argued that as early as 2005, Russia started designing disinformation about Ukraine's history and identity. These efforts aimed to advance Russia's geopolitical goals by promoting the neo-imperial idea of "русский мир" (Russian world) (Kasianov, 2015) unrestricted by national borders and encompassing all those belonging to Russian identity, as defined by the Kremlin. In fact, for centuries, Moscow's interpretation of Russian identity considered Ukrainians as its critical element (Plokhy, 2023). It manifested in Russian efforts to assimilate Ukrainians by prohibiting local language and publications, Russifying the population, resettling Russians to the territory of Ukraine, and spreading disinformation about the 'historical unity' of Russia and Ukraine (Plokhy, 2017; Snyder, 2022; Zayarnyuk & Sereda, 2022). Similarly, the Soviet leadership engaged in mythmaking about Russia and Ukraine as 'brotherly nations', which required the establishment of the 'official' historical narrative (Portnov, 2020). However, existing scholarship has limited insights into the implications of Russian policies on Ukrainian historians, their academic freedom, and knowledge production activities.

Ukrainian historians struggled to overcome the legacy of Sovietization (Yekelchyk, 2011), which utilized scholars to mold Soviet men "oblivious to his or her

original culture, language, or identity" (Oleksiyenko, 2018, p. 24). During the Soviet occupation of Ukraine, thousands of scholars were purged (Chankseliani, 2022; Hladchenko et al., 2020; Oleksiyenko, 2022) while others engaged in the production of ideological knowledge and indoctrination of students with Marxism-Leninism (Portnov, 2020). A participant in the study by Oleksiyenko (2022) recalled ideological pressure on scholars, which manifested through "required references to the sources of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Without Lenin, Marx, Engels, there was no research" (p. 585). Bolsheviks expected scholarship to reinforce Russification so "any references to historical successes of Ukraine were regarded as 'nationalistic'; God forbid if Ukraine was presented as performing any better than Russia; instead, [the authorities] propagated the centuries-long [myth of the] backwardness of Ukraine, which was resolved only through Russian influence" (ibid, p. 585).

Sovietization entailed censorship, collectivization of the academic profession, and isolation of Ukrainian scholars from their colleagues abroad in such institutionalizing inferiority of Ukrainian historians vis-à-vis their Russian counterparts working in the Soviet centers of knowledge production (e.g., Moscow, Leningrad) (Chankseliani, 2022; Kasianov, 1995; Oleksiyenko, 2016; Portnov, 2020). Collectivization impacted scholarly practices and the content of produced knowledge. Portnov (2020) argued that Bolsheviks required "all programmes, synthetic courses, and monographs be emptied as far as possible of all individual rhetoric" (p. 44), and individual scholarly works became increasingly rarer with collective publications becoming dominant by the 1960s. Research topics, evidence, access to scholarship, and publication activities were tightly controlled by censorship (Portnov, 2020; Portnov et al., 2020; Yekelchyk, 2011). Meanwhile, Ukrainian emigree scholars attempted to deconstruct Soviet narratives (Grabowicz, 1995), which became an invaluable resource for post-Soviet Ukrainian academia (Portnov, 2020; Yekelchyk, 2011).

After Ukraine's independence, the government formally abolished ideological control over higher education and research (Antonowicz et al., 2017; Heyneman, 2000; Oleksiyenko, 2013), but political leadership attempted to engage researchers in serving the needs of the re-emerging nation-state (Kremen & Nikolajenko, 2006). Some scholars argued that the new "political purpose" (Chankseliani, 2022, p. 78) of universities encouraged the re-orientation of Ukrainian historians from communism to ethno-national dogmatism (Yekelchyk, 2011), further perpetrating Soviet binary thinking (Chankseliani, 2022) and limiting scholarly capacity to challenge colonial ideology (Oleksiyenko, 2014). Yet, Portnov et al. (2020) suggest that ethno-national tradition has dominated Ukrainian historiography from the pre-Soviet period. It infiltrated Soviet academia by adopting Marxist terminology to present the Ukrainian national movement in Soviet-style terms. In fact, the founder of Ukrainian national historiography, professor Mykhailo Hryshevsky, after returning to Soviet Ukraine, wrote, that "[n]ow, when the work started by the previous generations … has finally been accomplished, crystallized and concentrated in new forms of national life and socialist construction … the centuries-old struggle of the Ukrainian nation for its self-determination has justified itself." (as cited in Portnov et al., 2020, p. 105).

More recently, Russia weaponized history in its genocidal war against Ukraine, encouraging reflection on the role of scholars in society (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021).

Despite three decades of post-Soviet reforms, Ukrainian universities and the National Academy of Sciences have struggled to shake off the Soviet legacy of rigidity and control (Hladchenko et al., 2020; Hladchenko & McNay, 2015). Scholars were urged to burst the boundaries of rigid post-Soviet institutions to engage in critical inquiry and de-Sovietization (Oleksiyenko, 2018). Oleksiyenko (2023a) spotted how "[a]spirations for radical change soared as more Russian missiles and bombs fell on Ukrainian campuses" (p. 53). Horbyk et al. (2019) argued that "the role of historians and role of history as an academic field is transforming" (p. 129), remaking historians into "dynamic, media-savvy, blogger historian who is a public commentator and educator as much as a narrow expert" (p. 130). Indeed, Ukrainian intellectuals have extensive experience in fostering critical inquiry and knowledge production in self-governing scholarly communities (e.g., Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood, Hromada, Shevchenko Scientific Society) because repressive imperial and communist policies alienated them from formal institutions of teaching and research (Rudnytsky, 1987; Zayarnyuk & Sereda, 2022). Thus, the de-Sovietization of the academic profession in Ukraine needs to be thoroughly investigated, and this study contributes to bridging the existing knowledge gap by focusing on the experiences of Ukrainian historians in their efforts to de-Sovietize their epistemic community during the genocidal war Russia wages against Ukraine.

Conceptual framework

This study draws on the de-Sovietization concept to provide critical and nuanced insights into the experiences of Ukrainian historians with knowledge production in the context of Russia's hybrid war. De-Sovietization is a dialectical process (Chankseliani, 2022) of decentering and deconstructing Soviet legacy (Oleksiyenko, 2023b) through opening up to influences of Westernization, marketization, and liberalization (Chankseliani, 2022; Shparaga & Minakov, 2019; Tomusk, 2004) fostering the implementation of context-appropriate reforms (Shen et al., 2022). The collapse of the Soviet Union hindered Moscow's control over higher education and research in Ukraine, which ended almost seven decades of isolation experienced by the Ukrainian scholarly community (Chankseliani, 2022; Shparaga & Minakov, 2019). However, Derrida (1970) argued that even in the instances when the center of reference seizes to exist, discourse may continue maintaining the structurality of the system through practices and institutions. Indeed, Tomusk (2004) found that old Soviet elites and institutions used the dissolution of communism to maintain control over approaches to interpreting and judging the USSR's legacy. Soviet-era administrators and faculty who collaborated with the Bolsheviks preserved their positions in higher education and research institutions. These legacy-holders promoted a discourse of unmatched Soviet achievements in education and research (Oleksiyenko, 2023a). Nevertheless, discourse has a limited capacity to impose totality on the system (Derrida, 1970). Thus, the emergence of the market and opening up to the international academic community (Chankseliani, 2022; Tomusk, 2004) encouraged decentering in Ukrainian higher education and research.

Ukrainian higher education actors emerged divided between three new centers

of reference in tension with each other because of their competing priorities (Oleksiyenko, 2023a). Soviet legacy-holders often opposed educational change (Heyneman, 1998) to maintain their academic privileges and influence over national higher education and research (Hladchenko et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Western-oriented reformers strived to transform higher education after independence by introducing Western values, practices, and institutions (Hladchenko, 2016). The government supported Westernization rhetoric because it allowed it to attract EU funding (Tomusk, 2004) and decrease state appropriations to higher education and research by arguing for diversification of university income through knowledge transfer (Antonowicz et al., 2017). Yet, this rationale for reforms limited their effectiveness as "[i]nadequate funding does not allow the undertaking of reforms that reach beyond the cosmetic" (Tomusk, 2004, p. 76). For instance, Yekelchyk (2011) observed how ideological liberalization in history resulted in changes in the departments' names and the emergence of some new research areas. However, the disciplinary community has failed to challenge Soviet-style dogmatism. Instead, scholars re-oriented from the promotion of Marxism-Leninism to national mythmaking. As such, actors focused on rejuvenating the Ukrainian national project have feared globalization's ability to undermine their efforts. For example, the expansion of the English language application in academia has been perceived as a challenge in the context of re-introducing Ukrainian as the medium of instruction and research. However, nationally oriented actors occasionally collaborate with reformers to challenge the Soviet legacy, which perpetrates Russification (Oleksiyenko, 2023a).

Interactions between three new centers of reference are necessary for Ukraine's de-Sovietization efforts. Discourse maintained by the Soviet legacy holders is organized around values, practices, and institutions, which need to be deconstructed to critically analyze the past while "making sense of it … to understand and critically engage with the present and for imagining the future" (Chankseliani, 2022, p. 141). Ukrainian concept of 'переосмислення' (reenvisioning) arguably best embodies the tri-part temporal orientation of de-Sovietization advocated by Chankseliani. It enabled deconstruction to question, critically examine, and unpeel layer-by-layer inconsistencies in concepts and logic of past and present values, practices, and institutions. Deconstruction requires wondering "about any improbability" (Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 51) in such, for example, revealing seemingly doubtful similarities between communist and nationalist knowledge production, which perpetrates ideological interpretations of history and rejection of diverse perspectives on knowledge production in the discipline (Portnov et al., 2020; Yekelchyk, 2011).

Since Soviet principles of one-man management, uniformity, and administrativism in higher education (Kuraev, 2016) deprived individuals, their collectives, and institutions of agency, de-Sovietization requires re-claiming agency to intentionally engage in reenvisioning values, practices, and institutions (Shchepetylnykova, 2023). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as "self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity" (p. 962). They elaborate on the temporal orientation of agency, which enables the tri-part temporal orientation of the de-Sovietization process. The agency is "informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a

capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Agency manifests as individuals exercise it on behalf of themselves but also when they represent others by exercising proxi agency or in a group effort to engage collective agency (Mills et al., 2009). Ukrainian academics have particularly interesting experiences in exercising collective agency. Drahomanov (1937) argued that collective agency allows to overcome the atomization of individuals in a society while challenging centralized control of a state. In fact, Ukrainian universities exercised collective agency for de-Sovietization when several of them came together to pilot university autonomy reforms (Kvit, 2020). However, little is known about the manifestations of agency for the de-Sovietization of disciplinary communities.

Methodology

This study draws on constructivism and qualitative research tradition to investigate the de-Sovietization of knowledge production in Ukrainian history at a time when scholars and Ukrainian society overall face a major challenge of protecting their freedom and independence. I employ constructivism as the ontological perspective in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to grasp the plurality of interpretations of scholarly experiences with knowledge production. The choice of qualitative methodology allows capturing experiences and interpretations of Ukrainian intellectuals affiliated with various institutions (e.g., public and private higher education institutions, science academies, universities abroad) to build an understanding of knowledge production in increasingly diverse academic environments grappling with the de-Sovietization. The case study design allows to investigate transformations in history as a discipline holistically. By approaching it as a bounded system where values and norms inform practices of knowledge production, I follow the argument of Becher and Trowler (2001) that "the way in which particular groups of academics organize their professional lives are related in important ways to the intellectual tasks on which they are engaged" (ibid, p. 23). The research question guiding this study focused on the conceptualizations of challenges faced by historians in their epistemic domains and their roles and responsibilities in the de-Sovietization of their intellectual communities and society at large.

In this study, I have embraced changing researcher positionality by leveraging my insider knowledge of the Ukrainian academic context while acknowledging my limited familiarity with traditions and practices of knowledge production specific to history. As discussed by Berger (2015), an insider positionality allows scholars to gain easier access to research participants, leverage prior knowledge of the topic, and insights about participants' reactions. Therefore, I utilized my social and cultural capital to identify and recruit study participants through universities, professional associations, and personal friends in Ukrainian academia. Several participants articulated prior to interviews that they were eager to participate in the study because they were aware of my work in Ukraine. Thus, my practitioner experience assisted in building trust with the scholars informing this research. Meanwhile, I employed my

outsider positionality to avoid insider biases and critically engage with the data during the analysis. As a scholar trained in social sciences tradition, I was mindful of my limited understanding of values and norms practiced by historians. I provided study participants with interview transcripts to ensure the trustworthiness of the data included in the analysis (Birt et al., 2016). Follow-up questions and journal reflections allowed me to maintain clarity and reflexivity during data collection and analysis. Overall, I found maintaining insider/outside positionality suitable for encouraging knowledge co-creation with the study participants and providing a space for critical reflection.

Interviews with a reasonably prestigious group of scholars and document analysis informed this case study by providing rich contextualized interpretations of experiences and perceptions of reality that shape knowledge production practices among Ukrainian historians. Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), I recruited six reasonably prestigious scholars with substantial contributions to knowledge production, academic service, and public engagement. Study participants represented two generations of researchers, including scholars in the last Soviet generation as conceptualized by Yurchak (2006) and researchers who socialized into the academic profession in the independent Ukraine representing the first post-Soviet generation of intellectuals. Study participants are affiliated with a diverse set of institutions, including public and private universities, the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and universities abroad. These experiences made study participants well-positioned to discuss changes in knowledge production in their discipline from varying perspectives, allowing this study to achieve dense conceptualizations, as discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1968). Documents included in the data analysis comprised scholarly publications, along with media interviews delivered by historians, public lectures, books, book chapters, essays, op-eds, vlogs, and podcasts.

Data analysis has been conducted along with data collection in line with practices employed in qualitative research tradition. Documents analyzed prior to the interviews informed interview questions, which were tailored according to the experiences of each of the study participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Ukrainian, which was the language of the interviews. Only quotes selected for reporting of the findings were translated to English by the author. Data coding was conducted in two cycles. First, I employed elemental and affective coding (Saldaña, 2016) to each document and interview transcript in the data set. The second round of coding relied on identifying topics and patterns across the documents included in the case study. The trustworthiness of this study's findings has been ensured through the rigorous application of established research methods and ethical practices (Shenton, 2004). Particularly, the diversity of study participants and documents included in the analysis allowed to ensure triangulation of data informing the research findings. Study participants had no incentives to provide untrue information because their key professional value is academic integrity, and no compensation was offered for their participation in this research. Also, the study participants' personal identifiers remain confidential, minimizing any possible harm they could experience after their contribution to this study. Thus, data extracted from the interviews will be further reported without references to the personal identifiers of the study participants.

Findings

De-Sovietization of knowledge production in history has been intertwined with local political transformations. Similarly to observations discussed by Yekelchyk (2011), scholars interviewed for this study have argued that Ukraine's independence allowed significantly more freedom to choose research topics and access archives. A participant from the first post-Soviet generation argued: "this multiplicity appeared and, accordingly, there was an understanding that they are not historians just to support some state version of this narrative. Because the historian in the Soviet period, yes, these were people who were in the service of the state". Yet, some researchers found it challenging to embrace newly acquired freedom. Sudden denunciation of indoctrination in the independent Ukraine confused scholars trained to serve rigid state ideology. Researchers had limited skills and courage to engage in critical inquiry. Some historians sought guidance from the state authorities, which previously held them hostage. A participant recalls: "there was no state ideology, then there was already a problem that everyone was trying to somehow understand what this state ideology is, based on their own reasoning".

Epistemologically, the community of Ukrainian historians got caught in tensions between Soviet dogmatism and a growing number of new perspectives on the nature of knowledge and research production. Soviet binary thinking encouraged some scholars to embrace the ethno-national paradigm as an alternative to the Marxist class-focused interpretation of historical progress.

> *A person who in 1988 year published a book called "Socialist Way of Life of the Ukrainian Soviet Peasantry" and wrote that in the 1932 and 1933 academic year 96 percent of peasants and peasant children went to school as an achievement. Yes, the 1932 - 1933 year winter. And this same person writes three years later… about the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people. And to some extent, this is a normal adaptation (Interview).*

However, other researchers emerged critical of this re-orientation. They argued that focusing on the national historiographic tradition maintains the Soviet approach to history as an inevitable progression of events guided by a single principle. An experienced researcher discussed the focus on ethno-national paradigm, as not much different from Soviet practices because it excludes diverse perspectives on interpreting historical events. Political context reinforced ethno-national orientation, especially after the 2004 Orange Revolution. For instance, president Yushchenko focused on "glorifying the nationalist movement and resistance of the 1930s–50s" (Kasianov, 2015, p. 152). Scholars suggested that this discourse further challenged the transition away from the Soviet legacy, leaving many researchers unable to burst the boundaries of dominant discourse "to liberate themselves, to have this emancipation from the power of discourse." Study participants argued for acknowledgment that knowing true history is likely impossible, but scholars should continue efforts to tell the truth about history to advance existing knowledge.

Memory politics encouraged societal interest in history, hindering scholars'

ability to engage in critical inquiry. Ukrainian nationally oriented actors and the pro-Russian public actively engage in online and media discussions of history, spurring tensions about interpretations of historical events and evidence. Often, nuanced scholarly knowledge is unwelcome in such a context. A study participant explained:

> *Very often, society wants to hear easy and simple answers when there are often none. [For example], often a person wants to hear if Ivan Sirko is a hero... However, [historians] say to him that, in principle, from the perspective of a successful Cossack chieftain, yes, he is a hero. However, if you consider that due to his campaigns and his support for Moscow politics, he has instead deepened the ruin even more. He buried any state-building efforts of the other hetmans, and no matter how he conducted the policy, it benefited Moscow. Nevertheless, the people who grew up in the village or in the town where Ivan Sirko was born to them he is a hero, and when an academic historian comes … a dilemma arises. Do you tell them that Ivan Sirko is a very ambiguous figure? Well, it may not quite work out, but on the other hand, how do you then explain to people how things happen? (Interview)*

Scholars observed regional narratives that dominate public discourse in parts of Ukraine, making critical inquiry into these topics challenging for local scholars. For instance, a study participant argued that in Lviv, post-Soviet researchers were eager to study liberation movement and various Ukrainian nationalistic organizations (e.g., the West Ukrainian People's Republic, the Ukrainian People's Republic, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) but "there was a society that put it in the canon, so you could not consider it critically. That is, you had to heroicize it".

Scholars engaged in projects that focused on the decommunization of public spaces faced challenges of navigating conflicting public opinions. Researchers engage with not-for-profit organizations and local authorities to assist in decommunizing public spaces through changing names and urban designs. For example, a young scholar engaged in re-designing a public square in one of the Ukrainian regional centers shared: "I like public engagement. It is interesting to me because it is an opportunity to reach people… to learn how to speak with them". The scholar contributed to identifying the names of people who lived in the area surrounding the city square in the 19th and 20th centuries, including Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. New urban design became very popular with locals and tourist, often featured on Instagram. Yet, when it comes to the name of the square, public opinion has split. Some nationally oriented citizens insist on retaining the current name while it serves as a constant reminder of the terror experienced by Jews that used to inhabit the area. While researchers may have limited capacity to resolve public debates, they see their work with the public in encouraging reenvisioning. A study participant argued:

> *I understand it is very important that this Yiddish, for example, has returned to [the city] in [the names of the inhabitants]. It is the language that is no longer spoken in [the city], its speakers have been eradicated, but [the language] has returned. People, youngsters, and teenagers who make those Instagram photos, as they look at those inscriptions, they will reenvision this square (Interview).*

Public pressure on scholars appears to intensify after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, making scholars increasingly vulnerable to cancel culture and public scrutiny. With the proliferation of Russian propaganda about Ukraine's history (Snyder, 2022), some researchers chose to engage in debunking Russian narratives. For example, a group of scholars established a project *"Likbez. Historical Front"*[1] to share their perspective on Ukrainian history through popular books, lectures, videos, youth competitions, etc. This project demonstrates how researchers leveraged their collective agency to influence public opinion. However, some scholars engaged in this study critically reflected on such efforts. Among some representatives of the last Soviet generation of researchers, scholars' agential engagement in the Likbez project has been interpreted as counterpropaganda efforts. Although these scholars do not oppose collective agency, they have argued that agency should be directed at maintaining values and norms governing their epistemic community. For instance, scholars supported collective action to challenge academically dishonest practices.

Overall, public engagement is the 'invisible' work of scholars because it is not reflected in excellence and performance evaluation measures, leading government and international academic community to perceive scholars engaged in public debates and debunking Russian propaganda as 'academically unproductive'. As argued by Oleksiyenko (2023a), after the failure of policy interventions that aimed to support the development of research universities in Ukraine, state and institutional policies focused on regulating knowledge production and communication practices of individual scholars. Faculty retention and promotion policies increasingly focus on research productivity as measured by the number of articles published in pre-defined databases (Antonowicz et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2012). Public engagement of researchers does not contribute to career advancement, making it particularly burdensome for young researchers to advance their careers while engaging with society. Experienced researchers established in their academic institutions appear to be better positioned to support broader de-Sovietization efforts. For instance, a scholar from the last Soviet generation participating in the study shared that he is more interested in publishing his work on media platforms that reach a wide readership (e.g., New Yorker) rather than in academic journals because he has already reached the peak of his academic career and no longer feels concerned about it. The misalignment of interpretations of excellence with societal expectations put Ukrainian historians in a precarious position.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This study demonstrates that the Soviet legacy and political and public discourses continue influencing Ukrainian scholars in history, hindering their de-Sovietization efforts and fueling tensions within the epistemic community. The findings align with prior research (Yekelchyk, 2011) that suggested that political discourse has guided scholarly self-censorship efforts despite the formal rejection of state ideology. In addition, this research highlights that public opinion plays an increasingly influential role in discouraging critical inquiry. As Oleksiyenko et al.

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[1] Likbez - a Soviet abbreviation referring to the efforts to eliminate illiteracy in the USSR.

(2023) discussed, the Soviet tradition of creating 'iron cages' for self-protection persists among Ukrainian scholars, perpetrating binary thinking and Soviet-style dogmatism.

However, some researchers managed to re-claim their agency through collective efforts to challenge Russian propaganda and uphold academic values and integrity. These experiences allow scholars to step out of their 'ivory towers' to engage with the broader community, which struggles to shed off Soviet legacy at the time of Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine. In this context, the role of historians is changing. They become increasingly connected with their local and national communities, allowing them to tell the truth about history not just to academic audiences but to Ukrainian society at large. Despite challenges experienced by historians who bring a nuanced understanding of past events and evidence, their efforts appear to be crucial for further social transformations and rejection of Soviet dogmatism and binary thinking.

The existing incentive structure of faculty retention and promotion overfocuses on performative knowledge production indicators at the expense of public interest in engaged scholarship. Since 'excellence' is defined as publications in journals indexed in scholarly databases (Antonowicz et al., 2017), researchers engaged in de-Sovietization efforts outside of academia face precarity. Their work remains inconsequential to their careers. Considering increasing interest in de-Sovietization (Oleksiyenko, 2023a) and the crisis of unattractiveness of the Ukrainian academic profession (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020), future research could further our understanding of the implications arising from misalignment of incentive structures with social needs in the war-torn Ukraine.

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