

BEYOND WESTERN COLONIALISM

REEVALUATING DECOLONISATION
IN THE WAKE OF THE RUSSIAN
WAR ON UKRAINE

Conference report

DECOLONISING INITIATIVE

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IN SOLIDARITY WITH NATIONS, COMMUNITIES, GROUPS
AND INDIVIDUALS OPPRESSED AROUND THE WORLD BY
IMPERIAL POWERS

Florence, 30 September 2024
European University Institute

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“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

AUDRE LORDE

On 27-28 May 2024 the Decolonising Initiative and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies organised a roundtable at the European University Institute, titled *Beyond Western Colonialism*, with participants presenting a diverse group of scholars and activists.

The following is a summary of the outcomes of these critical discussions.

KEY FIGURES

2 DAYS OF DISCUSSIONS

3 PANELS

11 SPEAKERS

30+ REGISTERED PARTICIPANTS



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INTRODUCTION:

The Russian-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian wars have shone a light on (neo/post)colonial struggles involving protagonists not directly associated with Western imperialism. It poses the question of whether these conflicts – and non-Western actors generally – engage in colonialism differently than those traditionally studied by decolonial approaches in Western academia.

Our two-day conference addressed the role of imperialism and identity by analysing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the colonial practices of non-Western countries like China and Turkey in Africa and Asia. We discussed these and related questions through the lenses of history, political science, and international relations.



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PANEL 1

IMPERIALISM AND IDENTITY

Speakers:

Mykola Riabchuk | Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

John Narayan | King's College London

Anton Drobovych | Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance

In the first panel, the speakers discussed connections between imperialism, identity, and colonialism.

Mykola Riabchuk stressed the differences in the meaning of imperialism in Russia compared to the West. He found that in the West, **imperialism has transformed from the idea of direct control to indirect control over others** (*neo-imperialism*) and has become increasingly disassociated from the core identities of Western nation-states.

In Russia, imperialism was paradoxically considered a purely Western phenomenon. Yet, the supposedly anti-imperialist Soviet historiography considered **“the Empire” a core part of what it means to be Russian**, as Russian nationhood was reconstructed in the 1990s.



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Anton Drobovych, in turn, scrutinised the relationship between genocidal behaviour and colonialism, arguing that colonial conflict is articulated differently and usually based on the self-identities of the colonisers.

Whereas much of Western neocolonial practices are about the exploitation of people and resources for economic profit, he finds that **Russia fit into the pattern of “traditional” colonialism.**

In Russia’s case, this is built on the idea of Russian ‘expansionism’ defined by Mikhail Lomonosov and refined until the present day, which places land (rather than people) at the core of the nation’s identity. This self-understanding explains the hybrid nature of Russian genocidal actions in Ukraine, reflected in **the claim that Ukraine is a part of Russia.**

The practices like coercive assimilation of children, forced passportisation and displacement, the destruction of cultural artefacts and the infrastructure necessary for the survival of local populations, and, finally, massacres like those in Bucha, all embodied the discursive perception of Ukrainians as *an unacceptable identity.*

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John Narayan took a more self-reflexive perspective highlighting the connection between the decolonising movements and changing global order. He stressed how Western and non-Western states have mobilised the discourse of decolonisation for their own benefit, uncoupling it from the collective emancipatory goals of the non-aligned movement.

This instrumentalisation of decolonisation is underpinned by the decline of the Western-led neoliberal order. **Neoliberalism unmoored decolonisation** by making manufacturing an imperial mechanism of uneven exchange. In effect, it maintained colonial relations between the centre and periphery without direct political control. As Russia and China have gained more influence they want to avoid a system where the West can use political institutions and economic relations to punish them and have consequently started developing their own ordering practices.

In this context, **decolonisation has become a selective instrument** used to promote the geopolitical interests of different poles. This is most evident in the Western double standards in relation to their attitudes on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts, as well as in the differences in attitudes of countries like South Africa towards Ukraine and Gaza.

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The inadequacy of the current decolonisation movement is therefore a lack of transnational solidarity which is likely to be exacerbated as polarisation in the global order increases. Within this context, **global academia should rethink the task of decolonisation** and refocus it on its core mission.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE:

Bryant, Joseph M. "The West and the rest revisited: Debating capitalist origins, European colonialism, and the advent of modernity." *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* (2006): 403-444.

Kołodziejczyk, Dorota, and Cristina Şandru. 2012. "Introduction: On Colonialism, Communism and East-Central Europe – Some Reflections." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48 (2): 113–16.

Kumar, Krishan. "Colony and empire, colonialism and imperialism: A meaningful distinction?." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, no. 2 (2021): 280-309.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. "Why decoloniality in the 21st century." *The thinker* 48, no. 10 (2013).

Táiwò, Olúfẹ̀mi. *Against decolonisation: Taking African agency seriously*. Hurst Publishers, 2022.



PANEL 2

RUSSIAN WAR WITH UKRAINE – A GATE CRASHER OF THE COLONIAL AND DECOLONIAL DISCOURSES

Speakers:

Tetyana Filevska | Ukrainian Institute

Nadiia Koval | Kyiv School of Economics & Ukrainian Institute

Radjana Dugar-Deponte | Buryad-Mongol Erkhетен

Dmytro Mamonov | Board PJSC 'Centrenergo'

In the second panel, the speakers specifically focused on the Russo-Ukrainian War. **Tetyana Filevska** explained why Ukrainian heritage is so unknown and Ukrainian context has often been subsumed under Russian studies. She emphasized **the need to decolonize Russian studies** and shift away from the historical and cultural perspectives of the Russian establishment when framing debates about East-Central Europe, particularly Ukraine.

The absence of work on Ukrainian heritage is largely due to **the systematic destruction of Ukrainian cultural materials** dating back to the Russian Empire (1721-1917) and then repeated under Soviet rule where Ukrainian works were censored and libraries destroyed.

Today Russia also conducts strikes on the Ukrainian publishing industry. Along with the killing of representatives of Ukrainian culture and the looting of museums, this is an integral part of its occupation of Ukrainian territory.



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A cultural and academic community can do a lot to **overcome this colonial legacy and bring back epistemic justice** (as suggested by Vitaliy Chernetsky). The knowledge regarding the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, Russian Federation and about cultures that Russia shadowed can and must be revised.

Nadiia Koval also addressed the necessity of decolonizing the knowledge order in Ukrainian/Eastern European Studies, which reflects **the structural inequality of knowledge production in Ukraine's postcolonial situation**. This inequality results in the domination of Russia-originated interpretations and narratives about the history, culture, and politics of Ukraine and the whole region.

Russo-centred interpretations and narratives define the perception and knowledge of modern-day Ukraine, including the interpretation of war and its causes, and **often influence political decisions**. For instance, her research conducted on the main narratives about the 2014-2019 period of the Russia-Ukraine war in Western academia and think tanks reveals that they **seriously downplay or misconstrue Russian actions**. This explains why a considerable part of the Western intellectual community was surprised by the Russian invasion in 2022.

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However, decolonizing that knowledge order and decentering Russia in regional studies reflects **the difficulty of fitting Ukraine into a field that has traditionally focused on Western colonialism**, often equating decolonization with *de-westernization*. Thus it resists analysing Russian policies in terms of colonialism altogether.

Radjana Dugar-Deponte shifted the discussion to the relationship between Russia's other colonized peoples and the Russo-Ukrainian war, focusing specifically on the Buryat people. She highlighted the parallels between their oppression and that of the Ukrainians, showcasing Russia's practised “art” of colonialism. **The Buryat-Mongol Republic lost its autonomy in 2008 through a rigged referendum**, leading to systematic repression of the Buryat language and culture by Russian authorities.

Russian Siberian *pioneerism*, often portrayed as peaceful in comparison to the US expansion, involved the strategic relocation of Russians into indigenous territories, resulting in significant cultural and demographic changes. In a typical colonial fashion, Buryats today face disproportionate risks in the war ongoing in Ukraine, being seven times more likely to die than ethnic Russians and often scapegoated for war crimes.

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However, Buryat anti-colonial resistance has grown since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. **The Free Nations League** was formed in response to the war and **condemns Russian actions in Ukraine**. The League represents various ethnic groups within Russia and connects the enduring struggle for autonomy and cultural preservation among Russia's indigenous populations to its broader imperial foreign policy.

Dmytro Mamonov addressed the role of energy in the Russia-Ukraine war. He highlighted how **Ukraine was a crucial part of the Soviet energy grid** and an important beneficiary of Siberian gas. Now, however, with Ukraine being increasingly integrated into the EU, Russia has begun to deliberately target Ukrainian energy infrastructure, especially during the winter, to harm the civilian population.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE:

Boychuk, Yuliana, Rory Dumelier, Yevheniya Fau, Khrystyna Mysiv, Anastasiya Sereda, Alison Toews, and Courage White. "The effect of Russian colonialism on Ukrainian cultural identity." (2023).

Chernetsky, Vitaly. "Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine." *Ulbandus Review* 7 (2003): 32-62.

Durand, Olivia Irena. "'New Russia' and the Legacies of Settler Colonialism in Southern Ukraine." *Journal of Applied History* 4, no. 1-2 (2022): 58-75.

Riabchuk, Mykola. "Ukrainian Culture after Communism: Between Post-Colonial Liberation and Neo-Colonial Subjugation." In *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, pp. 335-355. Brill, 2015.

Velychenko, Stephen. "Post-colonialism and Ukrainian history." *Ab Imperio* no. 1 (2004): 391-404.

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PANEL 3

EASTERN COLONIALISM?

Speakers:

Isa Blumi | Stockholm University

Talin Suciyan | Ludwig-Maximilian University

Mark Langan | King's College London

Selbi Durdiyeva | Philipps-University Marburg

The third panel shifted the focus to non-Western actors beyond Russia. **Isa Blumi** stressed the material dimension of colonialism, particularly highlighting the relationship between forced migration and resources in the emergence of the Turkish state. He illustrated how **economic interests, especially petroleum extraction, influenced Turkish policies towards local populations** and shaped territorial claims in Mosul and Southeast Anatolia during the First World War and the Turkish War of Independence. These dynamics underscored that negotiations over economic interests were the primary determinants of demarcating the territorial borders of the modern Turkish Republic.



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Talin Suciyan continued the discussion on Turkey by examining the relationship between genocide and history. She argued that **a key characteristic of colonial genocide is the discontinuity in the histories of the colonised and the colonisers.**

Usually, colonisers acquire extensive information about the persecuted, as well as seize their cultural artefacts in order to eliminate and extract their autochthonous heritage. In that fashion, **the destruction of Armenian books and libraries in the early republican era was part of a broader Turkish state policy aimed at eliminating and extracting Armenian culture.** With local authorities and populations targeting Armenians with annihilative practices, genocidal policies continued well into the 20th century.

This dynamic is evident in modern studies of the Armenian genocide and Turkish history, where **surviving Armenians and their sources are hardly ever utilized in history writing.** Turkish studies, especially outside Turkey, often utilise the Turkish historical narrative which asserts the republic's founding was a clean break from the Ottoman past, disregarding the historical context of the genocide.

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Mark Langan explored the contemporary colonial relations of Turkey and China in Africa. He demonstrated how both nations leverage the legacy of colonialism to distinguish their relationships with African states from those of the West. However, the profit motive remains a key driver of their actions.

Yet, Langan cautioned against falling into racist tropes that often permeate Western public discourse about non-Western actors, especially China, in Africa. In Turkey's case, the discourse of **neo-Ottomanism is used to present an anti-Western narrative**, emphasising a history of mutual respect between Turkey and Africa in contrast to Western colonialism. Turkish actors frame Turkey as a country guided not only by its interests but also by Islamic values and shared imperial history, which portrays Turkish policy as culturally focused and underpinned by fair economics.

Such political discourse extends into civil society, contrasting it with **the interest-driven approaches of the US or the conditionality of the EU**. Regarding the Gaza conflict, Turkey and China have intensified their rhetorical attacks on the West in Africa, finding a receptive audience among Africans, particularly in the context of human rights discussions during political cooperation agreements (e.g. the new Samoa Agreement) with the EU.

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Selbi Durdiyeva concluded the panel and the conference by taking a broader view, emphasising the importance of distinguishing between *coloniality*, *colonialism*, *decolonisation*, and *postcolonialism*, particularly in the context of Central Asia. She argued that **coloniality**, which pertains to culture and intersubjective relations, can persist even after the formal end of **colonialism**.

Decoloniality, with its strong activist and liberatory thrust, contrasts with **postcoloniality** by focusing on practical actions, such as the return of land, and rejecting the metaphorical use of decolonisation. She highlighted how such metaphorical use is often tied into collective myths, which produce things like the melancholic attachment of Russia to its imperial past.

In reality, these collective myths are unsubstantiated. For example, the claim that women were emancipated by the Soviet Union in Central Asia is proven to be coerced, and it did not concern the needs and best interests of women who were also viewed through an Orientalist gaze. These myths also underpin **the selective morality of nations like Russia, China, and Turkey** in recognizing certain historical crimes but not others.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE:

Antwi-Boateng, Osman. "New World Order Neo-Colonialism: A Contextual Comparison of Contemporary China and European Colonization in Africa." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017).

Arneil, Barbara. "Colonialism versus imperialism." *Political Theory* 52, no. 1 (2024): 146-176.

Busbridge, Rachel. "Israel-Palestine and the settler colonial 'turn': From interpretation to decolonization." *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 91-115.

Çapan, Zeynep Gülşah, and Ayşe Zarakol. "Postcolonial colonialism?: The case of Turkey." In *Against international relations norms*, pp. 193-210. Routledge, 2017.

Langan, Mark, and Mark Langan. "Emerging powers and neo-colonialism in Africa." *Neo-Colonialism and the Poverty of Development in Africa* (2018): 89-117.

Lloyd, David. "Settler colonialism and the state of exception: The example of Palestine/Israel." *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 59-80.

Lumumba-Kasongo, Tukumbi. "China-Africa relations: A neo-imperialism or a neo-colonialism? A reflection." *African and Asian studies* 10, no. 2-3 (2011): 234-266.

Taylor, Ian. *China's new role in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009.

Zeydanlioğlu, Welat. "The white Turkish man's burden: Orientalism, Kemalism and the Kurds in Turkey." *Neo-colonial mentalities in contemporary Europe* 4, no. 2 (2008): 155-174.



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DISCUSSIONS:

Each panel concluded with discussions among panellists and the audience, covering a wide range of topics. These included, but were not limited to, the productivity of **comparing non-Western and Western forms of colonialism**, the functionality of international organizations and nation-states in the context of decolonization and the **relationship between imperialism and colonialism**. While it is impossible to summarize everything, we provide an overview of the key points.

There was some divergence among the panellists regarding **the primary causes of colonialism**. Some argued that it is driven mainly by material factors, while others believed it stems from identity-building processes. Additionally, there was a debate about whether the formal freedoms granted to citizens in the West lead to substantial differences in how those countries engage in (neo)colonial activities.





Despite these differences, there was consensus on the idea that **all forms of colonialism involve silencing certain narratives**, whether through the destruction of cultural heritage, forced assimilation, displacement, or outright killing. Colonialism amplifies specific voices to the detriment of others. The panellists also agreed that **decolonization is an ongoing process, including academia**, where questioning established discourses and highlighting the material underpinnings of colonialism are crucial.

Overall, the panellists discussed colonialism at various levels of analysis. At the superstructural or international level, we examined **the material factors reflected in imperial relations**, including land ownership, natural resources, and global production dynamics. On the social level, we discussed **the impact of colonialism on identity**, focusing on both the colonizers and the colonized. The identity of the colonizers often predominates even outside their nominal control areas, while the identity of the colonized is suppressed.

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Finally, at the discursive level, the participants engaged in a reflexive exercise about **the role and function of postcolonial studies**. We considered how this field can both perpetuate colonial dynamics and, hopefully, undermine colonial discourse by highlighting the resistance and agency of the colonized.

While it is difficult to generalize the character of non-Western colonialisms due to the varying articulations at different levels, this discussion can be seen as a starting point. Particularly concerning knowledge production, we need to **continue examining and challenging the narratives** that have shaped our understanding of colonialism and decolonization.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ⇒ The Russian invasion of Ukraine offered new outlooks on colonialism – the possibility of discussing Russian imperialism but also to (re)think of those aspects of colonialism that are not Western.
- ⇒ Russian, Turkish or Chinese neocolonial practices are different from the West. They use their neocolonial influences as an alternative to the “broken West”, but they are still imperialist themselves.
- ⇒ The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been presented as *de-westernization*, attempting to ally with a decolonial movement.
- ⇒ Western academics can criticise Western colonialism without consequences (and rightfully do so), but it is not possible for scholars in Russia, China or Turkey, so academia lacks this particular local scrutiny.
- ⇒ Decolonisation lost its historical focus, explained by Franz Fanon in the notion of “bread, peace and justice”.
- ⇒ International Organisations are problematic. The UN was originally not meant for so many states. The dysfunction of the Security Council is reflected today regarding Ukraine and Gaza.
- ⇒ The ongoing conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine should not be compared, but how the international community responded to them should – as it is all about (competing) imperialisms.

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FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ✿ Is Russia part of “the West” or the so-called Global South? What about Turkey or China?
- ✿ Can the UN be fixed?
- ✿ Does the West’s hypocrisy “make things harder” for Ukraine? Is the ICC making things better or worse?
- ✿ What is the role of the Ukrainian Jewish community in the Ukrainian position on Gaza?
- ✿ Can imperial identity be undone? Do we need a new term?
- ✿ Is Europe over? Is the situation in Gaza a breaking point?
- ✿ Can peace be a *tabula rasa*, or should it be always grounded in the past?
- ✿ Who should lead the decolonial struggle? The state or the people?

FINAL REMARKS

We would like to thank the EUI Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies for co-organising the conference, as well as supporting it financially and administratively.

We also extend deep gratitude to the moderators of the panels: Gozde Yilmaz (EUI), and Tetyana Filevska (Ukrainian Institute). We also appreciate Alina Soloviova's support in inviting the speakers and developing the conference programme.

We are grateful to everyone who attended the conference both online and in person and participated in the discussions, offering valuable input to critical thinking about the issues of decoloniality.

Finally, we are beyond thankful to all invited speakers, who dedicated their precious time and came to Italy, also from war-torn Ukraine. This would not be possible without your contributions. We hope the conversations started in May 2024 will lead to novel analytical approaches and the betterment of global, *decolonised* academia.

Zuzanna, Olena and Ediz
on behalf of the Decolonising Initiative



LINKS:

DECOLONISING INITIATIVE:

www.eui.eu/en/projects/decolonising-initiative

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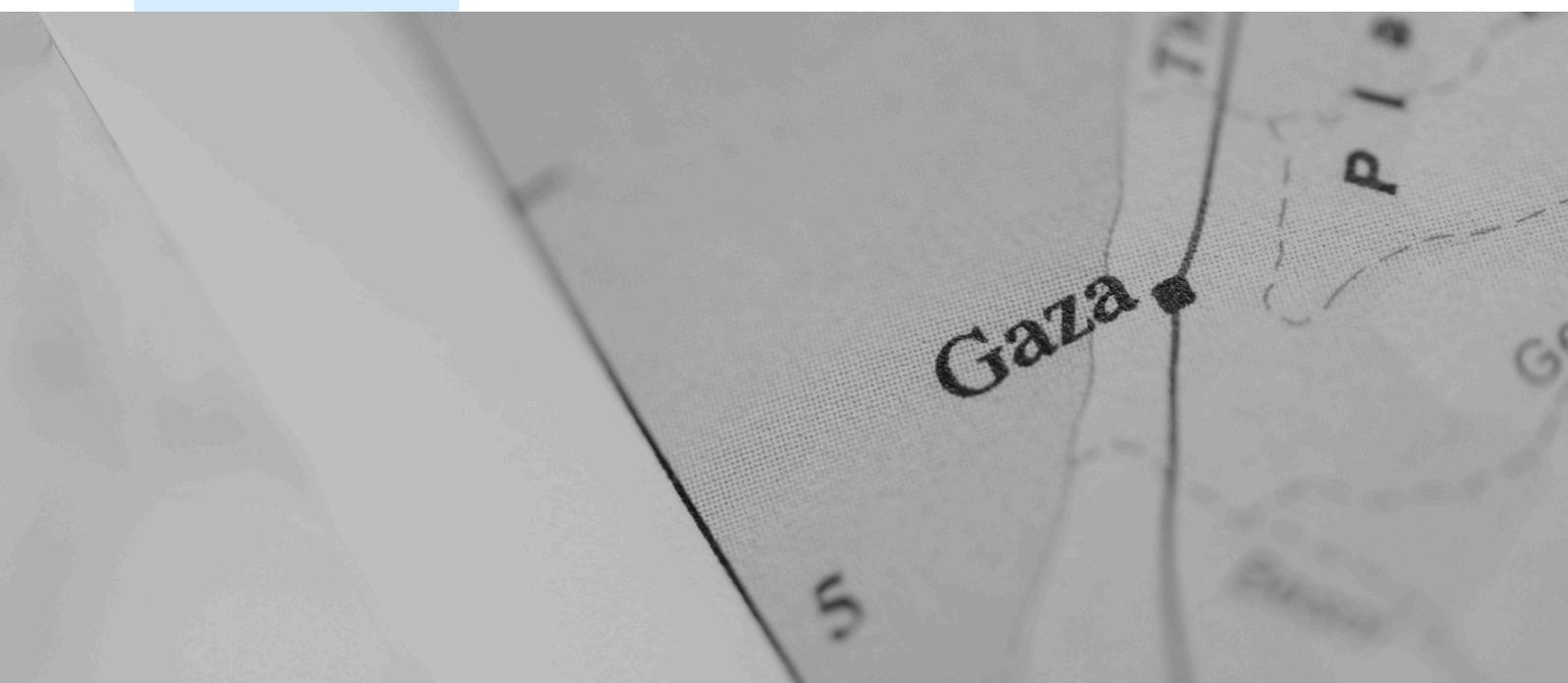
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Pictures illustrating the report were obtained from public domains: Pexels and Unsplash, and correspond with the ongoing anti-colonial struggles against Russia, Israel, China, and Turkey. The majority present recent destructions in Ukraine and Palestine.



Gaza